

# The Breathtaking Hypocrisy of Undark



By Alex Berezow — February 14, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

Can honest people work for industry? No, the only honest people are journalists.

That's a laughable statement, especially considering that the [American public ranks](#) [2] journalists below chiropractors and bankers and just above lawyers in terms of honesty. Yet, such self-serving naïveté appears to be the creed at the website Undark -- an outlet that [claims](#) [3], apparently with a straight face, to be interested only in "true journalistic coverage of the sciences."

[Right](#) [4].

Once again, they have run a truly head-scratching piece, this time criticizing [Leaps Magazine](#) [5], an editorially independent publication subsidized by Bayer. By extension, Undark has taken a slap at science writers and communicators everywhere.

The new article is headlined, "[If a Pharmaceutical Company Publishes a Magazine, Is it Journalism?](#)" [6] As one would expect, the tone of the article is premised upon the ridiculous notion that anyone who is paid by industry is, by definition, biased at best and dishonest at worst. Therefore, it's the job of editor-in-chief Kira Peikoff to explain why she isn't biased or dishonest. That's an unfair and, quite frankly, disgusting premise. Undark is simply handing ammunition to anti-GMO and anti-vaxx activists who claim that Big Ag and Big Pharma are liars who are poisoning us all.

Furthermore, the not-so-subtle implication is that *real* journalists -- the sort that only exist in the minds of Plato and other staff members at Undark -- would never, ever take money from a corporation, let alone Big Pharma. But, this too, is nonsense.

As I've explained before, [everybody is paid by somebody](#) [7]. Nobody prints their own money.

That's true for independent science bloggers who get paid from website ads, science writers who work in university press offices, and science communicators who work in corporate public relations. It's true even for science journalists, many of whom work for newspapers or media outlets that are tiny cogs in gigantic media conglomerates.

And it's even true for the staff members at Undark, who are paid by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Undark must answer to that foundation. If the Knight Foundation ever becomes displeased with the work that Undark does, it's funding will get pulled. That's why the attitude that, "I'm more honest than you because of who signs my paycheck," is utter rubbish. Either the science reporting is accurate or it's not.

What's particularly galling is that the high-minded folks at Undark don't have a problem with publishing articles written by actual propagandists. Carey Gillam, who is paid by organic food activists to lie about GMOs and glyphosate, was allowed to write a [dishonest op-ed for Undark](#) [8]. When I challenged Deborah Blum, Undark's publisher, about why she would allow a well-known anti-GMO activist to write for them, [she told me to get lost](#) [9].

So much for pure, sweet, objective journalism.

I was approached to write an [article](#) [10] for Leaps Magazine, which was just published. I'm proud of it because it allowed me the opportunity to write about science for an audience who may not have considered my perspective on a particular topic. The author of the recent Undark hit piece on Leaps, however, turned down the same opportunity. Why? Because corporations.

"After learning about the Bayer connection, I chose not to accept the assignment, concerned that taking money from Bayer, even indirectly, would compromise my ability to report on the company."

Wrong. What actually compromises his ability to be a science journalist is the [ideological conflict of interest](#) [11] that he has: The notion that he's more honest than everybody else because of who signs his paychecks.

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- [3] <https://undark.org/who-is-undark/>
- [4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37OWL7AzvHo>
- [5] <https://leapsmag.com/>
- [6] <https://undark.org/article/leapsmag-bayer-journalism-unbiased/>
- [7] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/09/08/argumentum-ad-aurum-follow-money-fallacy-10133>
- [8] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/11/29/undark-joins-dark-side-gmos-12217>
- [9] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/11/30/death-science-journalism-12221>
- [10] <https://leapsmag.com/regulation-often-shackles-hands-innovators/>
- [11] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/05/30/ideological-conflicts-interest-are-worse-financial-ones-11355>