

# Stop the Cyberbullying of Scientists



By Alex Berezow — March 15, 2018



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

Stephan Neidenbach is a middle school technology teacher. To counter the barrage of misinformation about biotechnology on the internet, he began a Facebook page called We Love GMOs and Vaccines. He quickly gained prominence among science communicators.

Anti-biotechnology activists – especially those who are on an ideological bender against genetically engineered crops – are trying to destroy the careers of scientists who work on or publicly advocate for GMOs. Their favored tactic is to target academic scientists with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, then fishing through e-mails for any evidence that the scientists are “corporate shills.” Finding none, activists pull quotes out of context, fabricate conspiracies, and cyberbully scientists online. University of Florida plant geneticist Kevin Folta was ruthlessly harassed in this way for years. Ultimately, the goal is to destroy scientists professionally or personally, preferably both.

Fed up with their antics, Mr. Neidenbach decided to fight fire with fire. He submitted FOIA requests against scientists he suspected of collaborating with the organic food industry. That gained him notoriety among the anti-biotech activists, who turned their ire against him.

Their first coordinated campaign against Mr. Neidenbach targeted his Facebook page. [Facebook capitulated](#) [2], temporarily blocking his page and banning Mr. Neidenbach – for the “crime” of promoting biotechnology. His page was soon reinstated, but their success only served to embolden the activists.

Their most recent tactic is to try to get Mr. Neidenbach fired from his school, so they have accused him of [stealing from his students](#) [3] and [mocking people with intellectual disabilities](#) [4]. Of course, neither of these are true, but that hardly matters. As a “public figure” – a middle school teacher

with a blog – people can say whatever they want about him with no consequence. That’s why [Medium blogger Ena Valikov](#) [5] is allowed to call him “Walmart trash” and a Nazi.

Then, the trolls took it to another level: They targeted his family. That’s when Mr. Neidenbach decided to call it quits. Nothing was worth risking the happiness and safety of his family. To appease his critics, he unpublished his Facebook page. But it didn’t work. The cyberbullies told him they would continue their attempt to destroy him, so he republished it. He’s a brave man.

Amazingly, Mr. Neidenbach’s experience is hardly unique. The reputation of the aforementioned Dr. Kevin Folta was so thoroughly tarnished online, that the *New York Times* [repeated the allegations](#) [6] against him, insinuating that he was working as a public relations agent on behalf of biotechnology firms. In response, Dr. Folta filed a [defamation suit](#) [7] against the author, Eric Lipton, and the *New York Times*.

Most other science communicators, however, do not have the resources to launch such a counteroffensive. I have received veiled death threats on Twitter – including a photograph of a person with a bullet hole in his head – and, aside from complaining to Twitter, there is very little I can do. Being cyberbullied online is simply considered a routine hazard of the job.

But that’s outrageous. While criticism is healthy and vital to scientific debate and our democracy as a whole, there is no place for unsubstantiated smears and intimidation. Cyberbullying has real-world consequences, from damaging a person’s professional aspirations to harming his mental and physical well-being.

If a person stood on a street corner and shouted obscenities and made defamatory comments about people walking by, he would be arrested for disturbing the peace. But if the same person goes online, he’s welcomed as a useful contributor to the national dialogue. This needs to change.

The United Kingdom takes cyberbullying seriously. [Posting humiliating, manipulated images or inciting people to harass others](#) [8] – what they call “virtual mobbing” – are offenses that can now result in prosecution. The U.S. should consider implementing similar laws.

Until then, science communicators will need to keep fighting. Giving up only emboldens the trolls.

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[2] <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/08/facebook-censors-science-journalism-removes-pro-gmo-page/>

[3] <https://medium.com/the-method/why-we-love-gmos-and-vaccines-was-unpublished-today-671d9ec57b80>

[4] <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2016/08/04/facebook-bows-anti-science-activists-shuts-love-gmos-vaccines/>

[5] <https://medium.com/@ena1101961/dear-stephan-b244edcf4bfa>

[6] <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/06/us/food-industry-enlisted-academics-in-gmo-lobbying-war-emails-show.html>

[7] <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8isa1VMgowMYnFWS1NIU1ZzTWc/view>

[8] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37601431>