

A Stinking, Pathetic Double Standard at the Heart of Scientific Journals



By Alex Berezow — September 4, 2018

Scientific journals discriminate against industry scientists, unless, that is, they happen to work for the environmental or organic industries. Those scientists don't have to follow the same rules governing the disclosure of conflicts of interest that everybody else does.



Credit: Storyblocks [1]

There is a stinking, pathetic double standard at the heart of scientific publishing, as well as science communication in general:

Any person who is affiliated with industry in any capacity whatsoever -- ranging from the substantial (e.g., research collaboration) to the utterly trivial (e.g., once having said something nice about Monsanto) -- is considered unreliable at best and a paid, filthy liar at worst.

Unless, of course, that person works for the environmental or organic industry. Those people are saints.

This isn't an exaggeration. Science journals have very clear standards for conflict of interest disclosures. If a scientist, for example, publishes a paper about a new drug -- and also holds stock in a company that makes that drug -- the scientist has to disclose that. Period. It doesn't mean the research is incorrect or biased; it is simply a courtesy to the reader to know that the scientist has a financial interest in a particular outcome.

But that standard is not applied equally to all scientists. Environmental scientists, for example, many of whom actually make money on the side through consulting (often for the government), are rarely required to disclose it. A recent [opinion](#) [2] published in the journal *Science* serves as a case-in-point.

PERSPECTIVE | CHEMISTRY

Regulate to reduce chemical mixture risk

Andreas Kortenkamp¹, Michael Faust²

¹*Institute of Environment, Health and Societies, Brunel University London, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, UK.*

²*Faust & Backhaus Environmental Consulting, Fahrenheitstrasse, Bremen, Germany.*

Email: andreas.kortenkamp@brunel.ac.uk

- Hide authors and affiliations

Science 20 Jul 2018:

Vol. 361, Issue 6399, pp. 224-226

DOI: 10.1126/science.aat9219

The paper, titled "Regulate to reduce chemical mixture risk," was co-authored by Michael Faust, who operates a consultancy (Faust & Backhaus Environmental Consulting). What does his consultancy do? Well, it makes money by advising the government on what sort of chemicals need to be regulated.

F & B as Scientific partners

We carry out and participate in research and development projects that focus on the risk assessment of chemicals in a broad sense. We specialise in

- development of regulatory options for specific groups of chemicals and/or exposure situations
- development of adequate policy options
- analysis and conceptualisation of the toxicology and ecotoxicology of chemical mixtures
- design of toxicological and ecotoxicological experiments, data analysis

Right now we are involved in the EU projects **SOLUTIONS** (FP7, co-ordinated by Dr. Werner Brack, UFZ Centre for Environmental Research, Leipzig), **NanoFATE** (FP7, co-ordinated by Dr. Claus Svendsen, CEH, UK) and **HEROIC** (FP7, co-ordinated by Prof. Martin Wilks, the Swiss Centre for Applied Human Toxicology (SCAHT)).

Additionally, we participate in two R&D projects by the German Federal Environmental Agency on (i) the development of approaches for the comparative assessment of pesticides, (ii) the development of approaches for cost-benefit analysis of veterinary pharmaceuticals.

In other words, Dr. Faust makes money on a topic that *Science* let him write about. That needs to be plainly stated as a financial conflict of interest. It was not.

To complicate matters, Dr. Faust's business partner, Dr. Thomas Backhaus, has a long record of publishing papers without disclosing his financial conflict of interest. (When I pointed that out on Twitter, Dr. Backhaus deleted his consultancy's website, sometime around June 14, 2018. This saga will be featured in an upcoming article.)

 www.fb-envico.com/contact.html



Error

This domain name has just been registered.

[Why is this page displayed?](#)

Search Ads

Related Links

As a result of all this, I submitted a letter to the editor of *Science*. It is copied below in its entirety:

Dear Editor,

Your recent publication of a Perspective titled “Regulate to reduce chemical mixture risk” is deeply troubling.

One of the authors, Dr. Michael Faust, operates a consulting firm called Faust & Backhaus. According to the firm’s website (fb-envico.com) – which was deleted around June 14, 2018 – Dr. Faust “provides consulting services... in the field of chemical hazard, risk assessment and regulation.” In other words, Dr. Faust makes money by providing his expertise to others.

That is perfectly fine work – and I would likely do the same if I were in his place – but it indubitably constitutes a disclosable financial conflict of interest. Yet, there is no COI disclosure in the published article, which is in direct violation of Science’s stated [policy on conflicts of interest](#) [3].

“All Science Journals require manuscripts to be accompanied by clear disclosures from all authors of any past and present affiliations, funding sources, and financial or management relationships related to the reported research that might raise questions about possible sources of bias.”

The reason this is deeply troubling is because there is a clear double standard in scientific publishing. It is simply unfathomable that a Monsanto scientist could get away with publishing an article without a clear COI disclosure, assuming he or she was allowed to publish at all.

The unfortunate reality is that industry science is deemed to be “tainted,” but only if it is of the pharmaceutical, biotech, agricultural, or chemical variety. The consulting industry, particularly environmental consulting, is not subject to the same scrutiny. It’s almost as if some sort of “health halo” surrounds environmental consultants, exempting them from the norms and standards that we expect from all other scientists.

In future, I would request that Science applies its conflict of interest standards equally to all parties.

Science declined to publish the letter. On the upside, the rejection notice indicated that my complaint was serious enough to notify other editors that they totally blew it: "Although we are not planning to publish it, we have forwarded a copy of it to the appropriate editors for their information."

At least that's something, I suppose.

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/09/04/stinking-pathetic-double-standard-heart-scientific-journals-13377>

Links

[1] <https://www.storyblocks.com/stock-image/science-concept-sqk6lzvmdwj6gsa4xs>

[2] <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/361/6399/224>

[3] <http://www.sciencemag.org/authors/science-journals-editorial-policies#conflict-of-interest>