How to Make Money by Spreading Anti-GMO Propaganda

By Alex Berezow, PhD — December 3, 2019

Anti-GMO activists routinely label scientists and biotech supporters "shills for Monsanto." However, a new study suggests that those who spread GMO disinformation are the ones who are actually motivated by money.

The anti-GMO movement is bizarre in so many ways. The topic is essentially non-controversial in the scientific community, with 92% of Ph.D.-holding biomedical scientists agreeing that GMOs are safe to eat.

Yet, GMOs have become a perverse obsession among food and environmental activists, some of whom have gone so far as to accuse biotech scientists of committing "crimes against nature and humanity." Why? What's in it for them?

A new paper published by Dr. Cami Ryan and her colleagues in the European Management Journal examined this issue. They came to the conclusion that many of us had already suspected: It's all about the Benjamins, baby.

The Monetization of Disinformation: The Case of GMOs

The authors, who work for Bayer (which acquired Monsanto), begin by explaining the attention economy. Like most everything else, from money to coffee beans, human attention can be thought
of in strictly economic terms. Attention is a scarce commodity; there is only so much of it to go around. Entire businesses, like social media, have developed a revenue model that relies on capturing as much of your attention as possible. In various ways, that attention can be monetized.

To quantify the attention that the topic of GMOs receives, the authors utilized BuzzSumo, a website that aggregates article engagement from all the major social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. The authors identified 94,993 unique articles from 2009 to 2019, and then whittled down the list to include only those domains that published at least 48 articles on GMOs (which is an average of one per month for four years). Thus, the researchers identified 263 unique websites.
And now, the depressing results. By far, the most shared articles on GMOs came from conspiracy, pseudoscience, and/or activist websites. The image on the right depicts the top 25 websites based on median article shares. Of these, only two -- The Guardian and NPR (highlighted green) -- are widely considered to be mainstream news outlets. (It should be pointed out, however, that The Guardian is often not a reliable source of information on science, technology, and public health.)

It isn't a coincidence that many of these same websites also peddle snake oil. Mercola.com, for
instance, is a website that sells everything from hydrogen-infused water to krill oil supplements for your pet. The website publishes anti-GMO and anti-vaccine articles, as well as a whole host of other fake health news, in order to drive traffic to itself. Then it sells the reader phony medicine.

If you're wondering how Mercola.com gets away with this, here's how: (1) It's not illegal to lie, and (2) It's not illegal to sell phony medicine, provided that there is a tiny disclaimer somewhere on the website admitting that the FDA hasn't evaluated any of the health claims. Here's Mercola's:

*These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. These products are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.*

Perhaps Dr. Ryan's next research project should be how to put Mercola.com and its ilk out of business.


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