Let Them Eat Kale: Bittman Bids Farewell to The New York Times

By Hank Campbell — September 14, 2015

When Paul Krugman, the famous liberal economist who gained enduring cultural prominence writing editorials for the New York Times, used to put his philosophical beliefs to practical use it was to help companies like Enron. In the post-Enron world, if an executive at a public company mistakenly signs the wrong piece of paper he goes to jail, so now Dr. Krugman wisely sticks to polemics about Republicans.

Mark Bittman, food writer and vegan advocate, who up until this week also pontificated for the New York Times, has decided to show the world he is more than just talk by joining a food start-up. He's probably excited to try out his opinions in the corporate sector, confident in the belief that veganism has not taken over the world simply because a diet book author hasn't shown everyone how to sell vegan food.

But his perspective about American food culture might be as wrong as it has been about food science. For example, he wrote in his farewell column "when I began, nearly five years ago, food was not generally considered as serious a topic as it is now." Now, if like me, you are among the 97.5 percent of Americans who live beyond the Hudson River, this statement will confuse you. You instead probably realize that food has been a "serious" topic since we became sentient, whether the New York Times took it seriously or not. At the American Council on Science and Health, food has been a serious topic for 38 years, precisely because undermining science about food has been a huge money-maker for anti-science groups like Natural Resources Defense Council (which buys full-page ads in the Times to criticize food science that apparently Bittman never saw before five years ago) and Greenpeace, and all the others that promote fear and doubt about agriculture and feeding poor people.

And Bittman was, more often than not, right in there with those science deniers. He declared sugar was a toxin when it was cool to do so before he declared butter was safe when it was also cool. If you have a normal diet, he was actually right in taking both stances -- but he also would have been just as right saying the opposite, as we here at the Council said all along.
He may have less success doing work in the food business rather than writing about it because the free market is not in the bag for his ideology -- they want more than him opining after reading the abstract of a meta-analysis. His inclinations to impersonate an expert [5] may work for a while in the vegan core market, but they are already believers, and identification-based companies have often flopped when they believed their circle of friends could be extrapolated out to the real world.

Still, though we have been critical of his claims in the past [6], the American Council on Science and Health wishes him well. The country is better off with him trying to sell eggs that contain no eggs [7] than having him trying to use his opinions to shape food policy.

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