In September, a front page, New York Times story tried to describe the tactics of two feuding groups over the decision to label GMOs. According to the article's author Eric Lipton, both sides had enlisted scientists to cite as experts in order to validate their respective beliefs. The article even cites email correspondents and other documents between industry leaders of both sides. However, a skeptical eye could easily catch the slant Lipton was displaying.

The piece pitted the battle as being centered around two scientists, one for each side, Dr. Kevin Folta and Dr. Charles Benbrook. But framing the debate this way is false equivalence. The safety of GMOs is supported by almost 9 out of 10 scientists, who are backed by almost 2,000 studies. Benbrook is an economist while Folta is an expert in biology.

Lipton tries to cast shadows on Dr. Folta by saying he received $25,000 in travel funds from industry. He notes there is a connection between Benbrook and the organic industry, but this is a gross understatement. In fact as all of Benbrook's funding at Washington State University--hundreds of thousands of dollars--was from the industry. On the other hand the $25,000 was actually given to the University of Florida for travel expenses and has since been donated to charity.

This article is just one prominent example of how the organic food industry has been able to win so much public favor through the use of creative media tactics. To their credit, the Times also released two sets (thus far) of documents and emails from Charles Benbrook that they obtained via the Freedom of Information Act. Thanks to this, there is now a much clearer picture as to the extent at which the organic food industry has used specific, ideologically aligned members of the media as PR.

Below is an instance which shows how intimately industry leaders like David Bronner (of Dr.
Bronner’s Magic Soap) work with seemingly independent journalists, like Tom Philpott of Mother Jones, to advance the agenda of the organic food industry.

On Sep 29, 2014, at 9:04 PM, David Bronner <allone@drbronner.com> wrote:

Hi Chuck,

FYI after thorough review of our options including talking to Michael Pollan we realize we can’t trust most mainstream editorial boards not to bury this story egretty when even with a friendly reporter like Stephanie Strom

We are going to break this out 20th same day New Yorker and scientific American ad drop with Tom philpott and our own pr pushing hard. We will definitely blow up on Oregon media and expect not get national gray too

Nature by the way after praying foosie with us trying to get us to run an ad in their biotech journal also declined

But see below re getting after quantifying the soil insecticides I sent to ray seider but looks like mine gray is in the best position to estimate and quantify … Actually if there right that half of Bt corn acres will also use a soil insecticide than we can do some simple math application rates of leading soil insecticides

I’ll get on that looking at all sales sheets for recommended soil insecticides

And check out how science itself is so misleading definitely

Dems

David

Another correspondence describes the industry’s “A-Team”, composed of Philpott, foodie author Michael Pollan, Melinda Hemmelgarn, who goes by the moniker Food Sleuth, and Ken Cook of the activist entity Environmental Working Group. They earned their place on this elite team for their willingness to not only promote the industry’s version of science, but to defend it in the press and in social media.

Over on Genetic Literacy Project, ACSH friend Jon Entine and our own Nicholas Staropoli expertly dissect the emails and documents. Their article contrasts the behavior of scientists like Dr. Folta with the behavior of Benbrook, the A-Team that attacked scientists at his request, and the industry as a whole. Their analysis provides a clear answer as to who in this debate really has the conflict of interest.
environmental-media

Links