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The GMO Biotech Sector's Contempt For Democracy: Don't Be Fooled By The Propaganda

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Theme: Biotechnology and GMO, Media Disinformation

The majority of the British public who hold a view on genetically modified (GM) crops are against them (1). Yet the push to get them into the country and onto plates is in full swing. Strategically placed politicians like Secretary of State for Rural and Environmental Affairs Owen Paterson and scientists such as Professor Jim Dunwell and Sir David Baulcombe are conveying the message that GM food is both safe and necessary.

Although such politicians and scientists have links to the GM sector (2), which highlights serious conflicts of interest, certain news outlets report their views uncritically (3). And it doesn't help matters that part of the pro-GM public relations assault on the British public is also being facilitated under the guise of 'objectivity' by the Science Media Centre (SMC). As with politicians and scientists who give the impression of being independent, the SMC veneer of independence serves to mask where its real interests lie.

The PRWatch website provides some interesting details about the SMC. It was conceived in 2002 and enjoys close links with the British government. It is now based at the Wellcome Trust, one of the world's largest non-profit foundations. The Trust was founded on the fortune of American-born pharmaceutical magnate Sir Henry Wellcome, whose drug company has since evolved to become GlaxoSmithKline. The Wellcome Trust gives the SMC more than the five percent of annual income at which other institutional funding is capped.

PRWatch goes on to state that the SMC received 34 percent of its nearly £600,000 in funding from corporations and trade groups for the fiscal year that ended March 2013. These figures are based on information provided the SMC's own website. Its current funders include BASF, Bayer, and Syngenta, three of the world's biggest pesticide and GMO corporations, as well as a number of agrichemical trade groups like CropLife International.

Given these powerful backers, should we be surprised that the SMC spearheaded attacks on French scientist Gilles-Éric Séralini in 2012 after his research team found serious health problems in rats fed Roundup Ready Monsanto GM corn, as well as in rats fed low doses of the herbicide Roundup itself without the GMO corn (4)? His findings struck at the heart of the GM sector.

According to PRWatch, the SMC fed journalists quotes from other scientists attacking the study. Its director Fiona Fox told Times Higher Education that she was proud that SMC's emphatic thumbs down had largely been acknowledged throughout UK newsrooms. A PR job well done! The publishing journal eventually retracted the study, and a Reuters article on the retraction used two quotes from an SMC 'expert reaction.'

Later, however, over 150 scientists sent a letter to the journal calling the retraction an "attack on scientific integrity."

According to Connie St. Louis, the president of the Association of British Science Writers, since the SMC's opening in 2002, the SMC

> "… has cast biased press briefings such as one on GMOs, funded by Monsanto and invited unwitting and time-starved journalists… The quality of science reporting and the integrity of information available to the public have both suffered, distorting the ability of the public to make decisions about risk. The result is a diet of unbalanced cheerleading and the production of science information as entertainment." (5)

Sociologist David Miller, co-founder of Public Interest Investigations/Spinwatch and editor of Powerbase, says:

> "The problem is that SMC pretends it's promoting the best science, but in fact it promotes a certain kind of science; those kinds of science that corporations and governments stand by in the area of science policy and want to see developed in terms of markets, like cloning, GMOs and to some extent pharmaceuticals as well. These are areas where there's a huge amount of potential profit to be made. Once it steps from supporting science to supporting science policy, SMC becomes political, even though it pretends not to be." (6)

Claire Robinson, co-editor of GMWatch has called the SMC

> "Extremely dangerous because it manages to convince the public and the mainstream media that it is an independent voice of science, whereas actually it is a small selection of industry-friendly scientists who are hand-picked." (6)

Jack Heinemann from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand noted that various SMCs in different countries do not publish conflicts of interest, listing scientists' public university positions but not their industry ties. For example, an SMC criticism of a peer-reviewed study he published quoted Professor Peter Langridge, a University of Melbourne senior lecturer in food technology and microbiology. It did not note what local newspaper The Press later found out: that his research centre receives significant funding from global GM product developer DuPont, amounting to between A$3 million (NZ$3.66 million) and A$5 million a year. (6)

Heinemann goes on to state that scientists know they have conflicts of interest when they receive large monetary gifts or research contracts from developing technology or have an entrepreneurial stake in technology. He said that if various SMCs can't find scientists who don't have conflicts of interest, what is their point, apart from being some kind of propaganda channel?

Through the SMC, the Agricultural Biotechnology Council and strategically placed scientists or officials whose pro-GM comments fly in the face of research findings (like those of Owen Paterson and Anne Glover, Chief Scientific Advisor of the European Commission (7)), the GM sector is attempting to control 'news' by attempting to confuse commercial self-interest with

scientific fact in the minds of the population and to distort the nature of scientific discourse in the both public and academic realms.

Colonising strategic sectors by setting up seemingly 'neutral' institutions or funding existing bodies and co-opting figures to do the bidding of powerful corporations is a well-worn strategy used to achieve cultural hegemony and secure material outcomes. This has been true within the area of agriculture (8,9) and throughout all other areas of society too (10).

While mouthing platitudes about democracy and democratic institutions, this type of corporate colonisation demonstrates a sneering contempt for democracy and by implication for ordinary people.

Don't be fooled – be informed and take action:

http://www.stopthecrop.org/

http://corporateeurope.org/

http://www.genewatch.org/

http://www.gmwatch.org/

http://indiagminfo.org/?page_id=175

Notes

1) http://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/02/21/many-britain-remain-sceptical-gm-foods/

2) http://www.globalresearch.ca/bio-tech-propaganda-gmo-food-is-good-for-your-health-killing-the-world-by-feeding-the-world/5373943

3) http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-26554969

4) http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/expert-reaction-to-gm-maize-causing-tumours-in-rats/

5) http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/science_media_centers_the_pres.php?page=all

6) http://www.prwatch.org/news/2014/04/12442/science-media-centre-spins-pro-gmo-line

7) http://gmwatch.eu/index.php/news/archive/2014/15308-eu-chief-science-adviser-s-gmo-safety-claims-are-a-lie

8) http://www.globalresearch.ca/doomsday-seed-vault-in-the-arctic-2/23503

9) http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/nip-this-in-the-bud/article5012989.ece#comments

10) http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/graham-peebles/corporate-colonisation-of-new-india

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