

Kevin Folta responds to anti-GMO FOIA fiasco: PLoS bungled post misrepresents smoking gun email

How could you destroy someone with their own words, if their words present no evidence of wrongdoing? It actually is amazingly simple, and illustrates the danger of limitless access to personal emails through public records requests. In this post I will show how two writers for a *PLoS One Blog** blatantly misrepresent content obtained through such a request. This is how scandals are manufactured from nothing. They fail to fact-check information with a non-opaque effort to harm the reputation of a public scientist.

I know, because that scientist is me, Kevin Folta. Here's the story.

[Note: This blog originally appeared [here](#) in Science 2.0, and has been reproduced here in its entirety with permission. The PLoS One Blog that Dr. Folta refers to was a follow-up to an August 6, 2015 [Nature article](#) by Keith Kloor detailing the use of state-by-state Freedom of Information Acts to target more than 40 scientists and science educators, including Jon Entine of the Genetic Literacy Project, for independently supporting science and genetic literacy.]

Back in February I received a Public Records Request from a California activist group that demanded my emails back to 2012. This was the first time I ever heard of such things. After 27 years in public science I'd never thought that my emails were anyone's property other than my own. I had to comply, and did. The story has been covered [here](#) and [here](#).

My central fear was not revealing incriminating or proprietary information, as the activities of a Professor in a Horticultural Sciences Department aren't terribly exciting. I was comfortable with university I.T. pulling three years of email from university servers. However, I had one suspicious fear—that this venture was nothing more than a way for activists to spin my statements, and manufacture devious and defamatory narratives, a suspicion that would come true.

Why would they target me? I am well trained in transgenic technology, familiarly, "GMOs". [I teach science communication to farmers and scientists](#), and explain to them how to discuss issues in biotechnology, the risks and benefits, strengths and limitations, with concerned public audiences — something they historically have not done well.

My desire to synthesize and teach the scientific literature has drawn the ire of anti-GMO activists, that feel a scientist speaking about science, must be some puppet of an agricultural conspiracy. That is why my emails were requested by the group US Right to Know.



One of many visual memes propagated by anti-GMO groups working closely with organic activists and USRTK to discredit independent science advocates. This from GMWatch website.

My fears of context manipulation blossomed last week. An entry at *PLoS* Biology Blogs*, written by Paul D. Thacker and Charles Seife, shows the danger of releasing public records to individuals set to attack professors because they dare to teach a facts in a subject steeped in emotional angst.

In a smear campaign not unlike Cilmategate, Thacker and Seife make assumptions, bend the truth, or are ignorant of information lacing an email they **somehow** obtained.

This email was provided from the activist group USRTK) targeting me, and it smacks of journalists asking the activists for a little something to satisfy some ideological agenda. Why else would US-RTK furnish these coveted resources?

In a breach of journalistic ethics, this author team published false and misleading information. While Thacker contacted me about other information regarding this FOIA request, neither author contacted me for clarification about this email prior to this vicious blindsiding.

A fail of Journalism 101. So what did they say? Here are some of the words from the *PLoS Biology Blog* (I'll address the omitted portions next time):

[On August 6], Nature reported that the University of Florida had provided them with emails that U.S. Right to Know had FOIA'd on one of their researchers.(citation) ... the story noted that the researcher has received money from Monsanto to fund expenses incurred while giving educational talks on GMOs.... The article does not report that the scientist has repeatedly denied having a financial relationship with Monsanto. (citation) The article also does not report on an email titled "CONFIDENTIAL: Coalition Update" from the researcher to Monsanto in which the scientist advised Monsanto on ways to defeat a political campaign in California to require labeling of GMO products (citation).

Sounds pretty devious! First, it has never been a secret that [my science communication outreach program](#) is sponsored by numerous individuals, companies and associations, including the Monsanto Company. Private funding covers the costs of site rental, portions of my travel and coffee, donuts, subs for participants that attend this half-day science communication workshop. No salary is furnished, for me, or anyone. I still don't consider a donation to an outreach program a "financial relationship" any more than my donation to my local NPR station a financial relationship. Monsanto does not fund my research or salary, and they have no influence on workshop content.

However, the last line of Thacker and Seife's bogus interpretation is the most damaging. Here two journalists deliberately ignore facts and disregard reality to take a hatchet to a public scientist they don't want teaching science. Again, a cyber lynching Climategate proponents would be proud of.

I never had any role as an advisor for Monsanto's policies and I had no idea where they could have possibly got such ideas. I would never start an email with "CONFIDENTIAL", so it seemed fishy. I asked them to provide the email they reference, which they kindly did:

This is the email where the authors claim that I "advised Monsanto on ways to defeat a political campaign in California to require labeling of GMO products" The redactions are mine, as I do not feel it is my place to share email addresses of those corresponding.

Now it was crystal clear. The original email was not written by me, despite what Thacker and Seife imply. I did not write "CONFIDENTIAL : Coalition Update". The note was sent from someone in the [No On 105](#) camp to Lisa Drake, a government affairs person for Monsanto, ***which the email clearly reveals!***

It was clear that this was a hit piece. There is no way that any of this shows this email to be my work, and my paragraph in there ***was critical of Monsanto***, hardly "advising".

In September of 2014, Farmers north of Denver had questions about GM technology, safety, and the labeling bill. They didn't want to hear company led discussion. So Ms. Drake reached out to me, to come speak to the farm group at a private dinner as an independent scientist that knows the topic. She forwarded this "CONFIDENTIAL" email to me, unsolicited.

It was confidential because the dinner and discussion were by invite only. And how confidential was it if it was forwarded to me, someone outside of the intended recipients?

To address Thacker and Seife's claims of collusion, it was not a case where "the scientist advised Monsanto on ways to defeat a political campaign in California." First of all, it was Colorado.

Nice job, guys. Even the softball facts seem to be a problem.

Second, do you really think that my notes to a Monsanto employee are "advising" the company?

In any opinion I've written on labeling, I have been disgusted by the lies, distortions and fear mongering promoted by the pro-labeling efforts. However, I have always also been highly critical of the anti-labeling

(Monsanto's side) use of fear (higher prices, etc) in associated media to scare people into voting against labeling initiatives. I even wrote about that [here in Science 2.0](#).

This is my point my message to Ms. Drake — I want the discussion pro- or anti- to be science-based, and perhaps that message would resonate (in the last year I've adjusted that dumb thought, as I now understand that facts don't matter).

This email **was my criticism** of the anti-labeling rhetoric with a person that works for Monsanto. It was hardly me providing strategic campaign advice to defeat labeling as the authors state.

So Thacker and Seife fail to ask questions, and instead manufacture a false interpretation that paints me as some sort of confidential-email spin meister with a master plan on defeating a bill that had been voted on two years before this email string took place. They also cite the date as 2011, prior to the California vote, when it was clearly dated 2014. Agenda, gentlemen?

[Editor's note: Two breaking responses to the numerous misrepresentations in the Thacker-Seife blog:

- **Keith Kloor, the author of the [original Nature article](#) breaking the details of Folta's emails, responded sharply here to what he believed were numerous misrepresentations.**
- **Aaron Huertas, Science Communications Officer, at the Union of Concerned Scientists, responds to the Thacker and Seife post here, describing some errors in their post as well as some missing context.]**

Wrong author of the email, misrepresented content, wrong date, wrong state, and portraying me as a stooge of the company, when I was criticizing the company. Did they get anything right? Why would they do that?

Because truth would not reinforce the rest of their article. They had to destroy the truth to fit their thesis.

And there is the intent to destroy the reputation of a public scientist. In the age of the internet, the truth does not matter. The message you want to propagate can be told, and it will spread like wildfire. And spread it did.

The next day [Colleen Flaherty reported in Inside Higher Ed](#):

"One email from Folta reportedly was entitled "CONFIDENTIAL: Coalition Update," and contained advice from Folta to Monsanto on ways to defeat a political campaign in California requiring the labeling of GMO products."

The false statements now were oozing from their primary factually bankrupt cesspool and now were becoming part of others' research, assuming that Thacker and Seife's smear article was based on actual facts.

My alleged monkeywrenching of the California GMO labeling initiative as a Monsanto secret PR agent has

now spread Twitter and is now installed as a permanent part of the “can’t trust scientists, can’t trust Folta” narrative. It promotes irresponsible, unethical, hack journalism that Thacker and Seife should be ashamed of. They were able to get my emails from activists, so clearly they have a relationship there, and this speaks volumes about their justification.

Now their distortion and lack of diligence becomes my history, as told by the internet.

In a broader sense, it illuminates the danger of these unencumbered public records requests. This is only one email of thousands, and I am the just the first person compliant of forty subjected to this invasive sweep.

In conclusion, what good is it to have a mechanism to uncover the truth, if the truth is twisted into a lie, and unabashedly used to damage the credibility, reputation, and careers of scientists that simply defend science and teach inconvenient facts? When scientists are guilty until proven innocent, and written realities are manipulated to create false narratives from public records, how do we stand a chance?

** I contacted PLoS and requested equal space to refute Thacker and Seife’s false statements. PLoS refused to provide equal space. Their representative said, “Respond in the comments section”.*

I have published in PLoS journals. I reviewed for PLoS journals. and have a paper in review there now that I’m strongly considering pulling. While PLoS blogs has a disclaimer that they do not control content, they do offer a visible, reputable brand to host this fact-challenged attack on a public scientist. Researchers should consider this event when deliberating publication or reviewing with PLoS journals.

Kevin Folta is professor and chairman of the Horticultural Sciences Department at the University of Florida, Gainesville. Dr. Folta researches the functional genomics of small fruit crops, the plant transformation, the genetic basis of flavors, and studies at photomorphogenesis and flowering. He has also written many publications and edited books, most recently was the 2011 Genetics, Genomics, and Breeding of Berries.