

## IARC-Gate? Are Europe's anti-chemical enviros conspiring to suppress conflict-of-interest scandal?

There is an ideological battle going on in Europe now about how pesticides should be regulated, and several of the main actors have recently taken the gloves off over glyphosate, the principle herbicide used today in such products like Monsanto's Roundup, but available in generic form.

EFSA, the European Food Safety Authority (Europe's FDA), is responsible for conducting risk assessments and advising the EU on food safety issues, including pesticides. It gathers all of the scientific evidence and determines if and how to manage the risks (for consumers, users, producers). If there are data gaps, they request more information from industry, the academe, researchers and then make a decision. On glyphosate, they have taken account of the 1000s of studies and concluded that the herbicide is safe.

On the other side is the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), which doesn't do risk management but decides whether a substance can be considered as a carcinogen (they do hazard assessments)—a cancer causing agent. In 2015, IARC held a working group to reevaluate glyphosate. There have been more than 800 studies on glyphosate; IARC set aside the findings of the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR)—which does risk assessments for the European Commission. BfR had done a formal [risk assessment](#) of glyphosate for the European Commission, concluding: “the available data do not show carcinogenic or mutagenic properties of glyphosate nor that glyphosate is toxic to fertility, reproduction or embryonal/fetal development in laboratory animals.”

IARC threw out all but 8 papers (claiming industry was involved in generating some of the data in some of the others) and relied on questionable results from three publications, [reclassifying](#) glyphosate as a “probable carcinogen.

Limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans for non-Hodgkin lymphoma. The evidence in humans is from studies of exposures, mostly agricultural, in the USA, Canada, and Sweden published since 2001. In addition, there is convincing evidence that glyphosate also can cause cancer in laboratory animals.

The mainstream scientific community, including the German BfR, European Food Safety Committee and the lead author of one of the studies used by IARC to draw their conclusions, criticized IARC for using poor methodology, confusing hazard with risk and selectively choosing studies to reach its conclusion. But the NGOs and organic industry lobby jumped on this WHO agency publication to call for a ban of the most widely used herbicide in the world (also used in combination with certain GMO crops).

David Zaruk, who writes a science policy blog under the name of the Risk-Monger, found in his research something more sinister going on. The IARC glyphosate revisions appeared to reflect the views of Christopher Portier, a statistician employed by the US Environmental Defense Fund. Although not a toxicologist, he was the technical adviser for the glyphosate working group. On two important influential points between 2014-15, IARC intentionally did not disclose Portier's conflict of interest in working for the anti-pesticide NGO. Since the IARC publication, Portier has been leading a global campaign to ban

glyphosate ... with IARC's support. Things boiled over in late 2015 after the European Food Safety Authority issued its [analysis of the IARC evaluation](#) at the request of the European Commission.

EFSA concluded that glyphosate is unlikely to pose a carcinogenic hazard to humans and the evidence does not support classification with regard to its carcinogenic potential

IARC fired back, accusing EFSA of having a conflict of interest. The head of EFSA responded in the European Parliament that IARC and Portier were taking a "Facebook Age of Science" approach to the serious job of evaluating hazardous chemicals. Since then the two agencies have refused to interact with each other.

This whole brouhaha now goes by the term IARC-gate, because of the hints of conflicts of interest, cover-ups and potential scandal. Around Easter, after a French translation of a blog by David Zaruk, whose Risk-Monger blog is hosted by EurActiv, all hell broke loose. IARC recruited an anti-industry journalist to write a long article in Le Monde that responded to Zaruk's accusations and further attacked the EFSA.

Zaruk responded to the article's inaccuracies and questioned whether IARC should be using attack journalists to try to destroy another science institution's reputation. At this point, Le Monde's legal department intervened, forcing EurActiv to take down the blog, citing defamation. Zaruk stood by the blog's facts (more than 75 citations over three articles: 1) on the value and science behind glyphosate; 2) on an update of IARC-gate and Portier and 3) on the social/moral worth that herbicides have brought to society), and after three days of pressure (and an agreement to change a few expressions), Le Monde agreed to drop its hold on the article. The blog, printed below, went back online on April 6.

The information on the unprofessional behaviour in IARC is important. In the next month, the WHO meets to decide whether to accept or retract their glyphosate monograph and the European Commission will decide whether to extend the authorization of the world's most widely used herbicide. Ultimately it is a question of if and how policymakers can use science.

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Here is Zaruk's blog on IARC and Portier that had been removed temporarily from the Eur-Activ site:

Read the [French translation](#)

IARC (the International Agency for Research on Cancer) has fallen to a new low on any scale of research integrity. Yesterday it used an anti-industry, anti-pesticides journalist to defend its position on the glyphosate monograph against claims made by scientists, institutions, governments and the media (including this blog).

The day after the release of the [French translation of my IARC blog](#) requesting that the glyphosate monograph be retracted, a long article appeared in [Le Monde defending the IARC position](#). A reminder of my earlier claims:

- IARC rejected the 800 studies / 3000 documents that gave glyphosate a positive safety result, basing their decision of “probably carcinogenic” on eight studies, only three having results that were themselves arguably insignificant.
- IARC was captured by an activist from the Washington-based anti-pesticide NGO: Environmental Defense Fund, Christopher Portier. He had been involved in previous IARC studies, worked as a visiting scholar and was clearly a personal friend of certain members of the IARC monograph team.
- Portier chaired the Advisory Committee in 2014 that proposed a study on glyphosate and served as the technical adviser to the 2015 glyphosate monograph team. In both cases, IARC did not disclose his affiliation with the Environmental Defense Fund (although in 2015, Portier corrected his affiliation during the WG meeting).
- In the year since the IARC publication, Portier has been campaigning at high levels to ban glyphosate, claiming to be a co-author of the monograph. Rather than distancing itself from Portier when he had clearly provoked EFSA with unfounded claims, IARC wrote a testy letter to EFSA defending the activist.
- The mainstream scientific community (including EFSA, the German BfR and the lead author of one of the studies used by IARC to draw their conclusions) has panned IARC for using a poor methodology and inadequate research.
- IARC has chosen to attack these institutions for having conflicts of interest (in using data provided by industry). Their scientists have gone on the offensive against government research bodies, making a disgraceful mockery of the traditional risk assessment process and intentionally leaving the policy arena in an unnecessarily polarised quagmire.

If you were in a situation like this, wouldn't you think it prudent to take a step back or dial it down just a bit? Apparently not!

### **The best defence is a good offence!**

The Communications team at IARC has now pushed their story on an anti-industry, anti-pesticide journalist, Stéphane Foucart, to represent the IARC position in Le Monde. This move cements the widely-held sentiment that IARC is not an agency that engages openly with all stakeholders and harbours a certain anti-industry bias at its heart.

Foucart is best known for his 2013 book: *La fabrique du mensonge: Comment les industriels manipulent la science et nous mettent en danger* (Manufacturing lies: How Industry Manipulates Science and puts us at Risk). He has published [many articles](#) in Le Monde against industry and pesticides ... so I suppose it was thought he was someone who would be attracted towards pushing the IARC anti-industry position. But is it a good idea for the IARC communications machine to use such a person to defend the agency when its credibility and scientific integrity is already in free-fall? Look at some of the arguments Foucart relayed and ask whether IARC is not trying to further poison the well by aligning itself with a well-known anti-industry individual.

How does an investigative journalist get into the h-index?

Foucart's first argument is that IARC scientists were all credible because, in using the “h-index” (a “bibliometric” tool named after Jorge Hirsch) and its series of complex equations related to the scientific

productivity, knowledge in their field and frequency of citations ... one can easily see that the IARC Working Group members scored an impressive 30.5.

I know ... you must be glaze-eyed at this ... so am I. Why would a journalist who earns his coin uncovering industry corruption and conflicts of interest spend two paragraphs at the beginning of his exposé working on some erudite calculations of some obscure physicist? I suspect because some num-nut in IARC force-fed Foucart this number and told him it was important. Do you seriously think the journalist spent the time to calculate an h-index???

EFSA and the BfR did not receive the same h-index rigour (I suppose it was not supplied) but rather, Foucart went to the tried and tested claims that these scientific institutions were using data supplied by industry. While this is the criticism I had noted IARC's lead glyphosate author, Kathryn Guyton, was making to anyone who would listen (and demonstrating her complete lack of understanding of the risk assessment process in dealing with data gaps), Foucart's fruit fell closer to the tree. He cited a Corporate Europe Observatory attack on EFSA – this is not uncommon – more than half of Foucart's recent articles were based on CEO campaigns and publications.

Foucart claims that Christopher Portier only played a small part and was not part of the IARC monograph working group because he was affiliated with the Environmental Defense Fund. Well, ... no! Portier's role was as the Working Group technical adviser (meaning: he was the expert in the room). The journalist should not have overlooked the point that IARC did not list Portier's activist NGO affiliations in the programme Foucart had himself linked to (observers noted that Portier had personally declared his interests during the introductions to the monograph sessions – hence the footnote added later). Also, Foucart referred to Portier as a toxicologist. Well, ... no again! If Foucart had read the CV that IARC had furnished him with, he would have noticed that Portier is a statistician and, while he did work for several agencies with the word "toxicology" in them, has no technical expertise for such a monograph. Frankly I would have expected more from a Le Monde journalist. At least to have carefully read the links that IARC had provided him with.

### **Failure of journalism ... again!**

Foucart was clearly not only an apologist for IARC, but he also systematically reaffirmed this UN agency's attacks on EFSA and the BfR without questioning IARC itself. After saying that Portier did not matter in the process, he cited Portier's publication showing how the two processes differed, but failed to cite EFSA's fiery response to it (and the famous Facebook Age of Science reference). Foucart also did not notice that this publication he had cited had Portier defending IARC but [not declaring his Environmental Defense Fund affiliation](#). It seems that Foucart's sole objective was to use information from IARC to attack EFSA and Monsanto.

If Foucart were legitimately concerned about all conflicts of interest, he would have looked into this and not simply and blindly published what IARC told him. This is one more example of the pathetic state of mainstream journalism today. Here is Le Monde with a chance to hold IARC's feet to the fire, but instead, chose not to dig into the evidence, but take their bait and use it to burn EFSA. Foucart did not examine the evidence (even on the links he was provided with) and check his bias, but embraced his subjective preconceptions with the delight of having any argument at all to swing at Monsanto, EFSA and farmers who use herbicides. That is not the journalism I was taught in the 1980s ... that is not journalism at all.

What a pity.

IARC has chosen to sling mud and get dirty

### **If you want to wrestle a pig, prepare to get muddy**

But here is the point: What business does IARC have getting itself muddy with an anti-industry, biased attack journalist? Is this UN organisation trying to protect itself from this scandal or attempting to further hurt the reputation of EFSA (to take the heat off of their own outrageous behaviour)? So they get in bed with groups like Corporate Europe Observatory, feeding more false claims of conflicts of interest and diminishing public trust of public science institutions.

Such behaviour is disgraceful when anarchist groups like Corporate Europe Observatory and Foucart spread such half-truths, but when a WHO institution like IARC is engaging in such misleading stories and reputation destruction, the only word I can come up with is: **Editor's note – the Risk-Monger was requested to not use this word as it was considered offensive ... he can't find any better word so he would like to leave this point to your imagination.** These are public officials representing a United Nations body and instead they are behaving like some punks out to mud-sling. There is not a single spot of clean anywhere on IARC now – they have lost all integrity.

### **Retract the monograph and restore credibility**

This episode only reinforces my previous claim: IARC must retract its monograph 112 on glyphosate given its unprofessional and unethical behaviour; distance itself from Portier's activist campaigning; and fire the two meddling scientists behind this EFSA/BfR credibility mess: Straif and Guyton. I would add to that dismissing the head of IARC's communications department, Nicolas Gaudin, for getting down in the mud with such a group and continuing to attack other science institutions. This would be a wise decision in order to clean up the cancer within this agency – otherwise, shut IARC down (nobody seems to know what they do in any case).

As for Le Monde, I think they should stop calling Stéphane Foucart their science journalist (science implies some minimum amount of objectivity). He had so many opportunities to get at some scandalous facts ... instead he chose to feed his bias!

**This post was originally posted and censored on the EurActiv blog [here](#).**

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