

Kevin Folta on winning Borlaug Ag Comm Award, year of attacks from anti-GMO activists

The news that I was the recipient of the 2016 CAST Borlaug Agricultural Communications Award added a new extreme to the wild emotional dynamics of the past twelve months. Celebrate, suffer; dance, cry; hurt, heal. Quit, start, refresh, retreat. Lather, rinse repeat.

Back in August and September 2015 I read in disbelief that I was part of Monsanto's "inner circle", one of their "strategic advisors" with "close ties" that "took money to lie about science" and "used undisclosed funds to thwart labeling efforts." I read the websites, I read the articles. The person I was reading about was not the person in the mirror.

But in the day of the internet, the person in the mirror is forced to take the yoke that the most devious person installs. You become, in perception, who they decide you are. You lose control of your own persona—that is left to those that want to destroy you.

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There is nothing you can do if you are a mostly unknown public scientist that has a minor social media presence. The opponents have money, agenda, personnel, and a mission— as well as access to some of the nation's loudest media megaphones.

It does not matter what is true. If you read Google's top 100 entries when you search my name, you won't read about Kevin Folta, 29 years in public, academic laboratories, research funded almost 100% by public sources. You won't read much about the guy that minted a dozen Ph.D. graduates and gave lab experiences to over 120 undergraduates. You won't read about the work in strawberry genomics and how specific light wavelengths can improve plant nutrition.

Instead you'll be treated to the story that US-RTK, Gary Ruskin, Paul Thacker, Mike Adams, Charles Seife, Eric Lipton, Vani Hari, Brooke Borel, Joe Mercola, Allison Vuchnich, and many others wanted told—that Kevin Folta is a "corporate lobbyist" and "Monsanto apologist", that is, when he's not conspiring with PR firms to bully 15 year-old girls. These words were written in prominent places only to be gleefully grabbed and propagated by activist organizations sworn to at least destroy my credibility, or at most, end my career in science.

Activist organizations like *Natural News*, *GMO Free USA*, and *GM Watch* danced with joy as reputable writers spun these tales from carefully-chosen words from my emails, willingly released under public records laws. Words and sentences pulled from context, plucked and reassembled into weapons. They took the manufactured narratives of legitimate journalists and twisted them to impart maximal damage.

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Gary Ruskin of USRTK gave it a whole 12 minutes before trying to put his stink on this recognition. He posts a link to the hit-piece he commissioned when he sent my emails to Eric Lipton at the NYT with a story

for him to tell. We're eight months out and everyone sees that it was a cheap shot at harming a public scientist.

Trolls on the internet, and even professionals like Dr. Ena Valikov reviewed my every online interaction, and took every opportunity to trash my sentiments with vicious interpretations. I've saved every one, and there are well over one thousand.

I remember last September, I was in tears sitting with Brooke Borel, a writer I once really appreciated, begging her not to hyperbolize a comedy parody podcast mocking *Coast to Coast AM*. I told her that the internet would punish me hard. She was unswayed. The article ran with the catchy "Confessions of a Monsanto Apologist" headline, that later was changed perhaps when a moral calculus, or a legal adviser, finally weighed in. She is one person I will never forgive. I hope it was a big check.

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The title of the BuzzFeed article was pure hyperbole, designed explicitly to harm the reputation of a scientist. It was soon after changed to "Seed Money" after the defamatory clickbait title did its intended job.

The damage was done. The internet's slander machine kicked into high gear, leading to days of articles shared tens of thousands of times, claiming I was a "psychotic", that I was "mentally deranged" and "should never be teaching in a public university."

Those intent on my demise posted my home address and phone numbers. My office phone had to be changed, and messages were re-routed to the police and Domestic Terrorism Task Force. My email accounts experienced numerous cases of "excessive logins". I had to scroll through thousands of pages on Craigslist to find, and have removed, the postings in my community that inspired violence against me, listing my home address and phone number.

Once my normally-closed office door was open, and police were called to check for bombs and booby traps. I just must have left it open. A package showed up with no return address, and it sat outside,

unopened for weeks, until I found out that a friend just sent me a book. Your life becomes living in terror.

This is what USRTK and their cadre of complicit journalists inspired— their constructed narratives fueled defamation of a lifelong public scientist, along with threats and harassment. It provided dangerous fodder for an emotionally-motivated movement that has a history of burning down laboratories and threatening scientists. I still watch my back.

My good work remains in space, unquestioned and still recognized as important by the scientific community. But awards for mentoring students, caring for postdocs, publishing work to advance science, and giving endless service, seven days a week, all day, every day, is just not as public-interest-exciting as the story of the shill lobbyist traitor with an alter ego, who takes money from companies to lie about science and bully high school girls.

Through all of this, through all the criticism, it was all attacks on me, the person. There was not one shred of wrongdoing, and absolutely no evidence of scientific misconduct, despite what some of the authors imply. Not one hint.

I learned of many things that I could have done better. I took actions to be beyond aggressively transparent. I've tried hard to de-snarkify and be a better leader in communicating contentious issues with grace. I still have a long way to go.

But living as me, knowing that the *perception* of who I am is in control of horrible people that want to destroy my career, and using the media to destroy me personally — nobody could handle that.

I didn't handle it. It changed me. I suffered with gyrations between overwhelming runaway anxiety and devastating depression. I neglected myself, quit my almost religious gym habits and interest in exercise. I didn't care anymore, and still am not completely back to where I was before this all happened.

I don't know that I ever will be.

One day in September I sat in a plane on my way to another something out of town, and I remember thinking to myself, "If this plane were to crash, I would be okay with that."

I would break down all the time. If I gave a talk about my work, I'd get choked up when I'd describe our clever experiment, and I'd have to stop and lose tears when I put up a picture of the scientists in my lab, sweet, dedicated professionals that I am so blessed to share my days with. I would have quit if it was not for them, for the faculty I work with, and for a bigger mission serving the agricultural interests of my state and nation.

It all changed me. My hair started going grey and I aged a decade in the last year. My breathing is slow and shallow, I don't sleep well. I'm forgetful. The toll has been harsh. My eyes swell with tears when I even think about what I have been through.

But I wear a convincing mask. The whole time I haven't missed a beat at work. We're doing good research, we're publishing, I'm speaking all over the country about research and science communication.

I'm taking care of business as the Chair of a leading department in our discipline.

I answer almost every email from every high school or college student that is doing a report. I answer the emails from concerned moms. I read and try to respond to every comment on my public Facebook page and on Twitter.

I survived, but I'm dragging an anchor. I can feel it.

Others say, "Screw 'em, who cares what they think," and I get that. But to know that there are still wicked people laying landmines in my path and trashing my reputation, that's hard to live with.

Then over the last month or so my university turned over another huge set of my emails to US-RTK and the Food Babe, Vani Hari. I went through them, nothing exciting there. However, I sit waiting to see the news explode across social media of my evils and indiscretions, more manufactured stories that simply are not true, but now become part of my story, as told by the internet.

Throughout this ordeal there have been some rays of sunshine. I get endless support from an online community of science enthusiasts that are fast to reach out and offer their thoughts. I've seen scientists like Dr. Allison Van Eenennaam and my colleagues here at the University of Florida step up and admonish the relentless *ad hominem*s I endure. Drs. Steven Novella, David Kroll, and David Gorski have written brilliant rebuttals and supportive entries. I'm grateful to Dr. Maria Trainer for assembling the packet leading to this recognition. If it was not for the support of colleagues I would not be in science today.

This is why being recognized with the Borlaug Agricultural Communications Award is so amazing. It is a reminder that I am doing the right thing. It helps me rebuild that record of who I really am, to put a different story in social space to contrast the cyber-slander of Food Babes and Health Rangers.

That is why this recognition means so much.

When the sun sets on this mess everything will be okay. Time will be kind. Today's announcement is a continuation of that redefining process. I have to go above and beyond to be more effective, more transparent, more prolific. I need to find a new level of service, both in the scientific community and in the public eye. That's all happening.

I believe that in a strange way the invasive and libelous activist attacks are a gift. They have provided me a visibility and platform that this marginally-relevant plant scientist would never have had otherwise. Now the challenge is to use that momentum to do what Dr. Norman Borlaug would do— advance science that can help people. That is the mission of this recognition, to use science, and science communication, to honor his legacy by ensuring that all people, especially those in need, have access to our best agricultural innovations.

This article originally appeared on his blog [here](#) and was reposted with permission from the author.

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. He is on twitter [@kevinfolta](#)