

Conflict of interest? Mother Jones' Tom Philpott's connections to organic industry raise concerns

Is it appropriate for a Mother Jones columnist to write glowing columns about industry-funded research while appearing at pro-industry events?

On March 9, 2017, the Organic Center held their 14th annual fundraising gala. A project of the Organic Trade Association, The Organic Center's goal is to "strengthen and expand organic practices and commodities".

Sponsors and donors include Whole Foods, Annie's, Horizon Organic, Nature's Path, Organic Valley, Stonyfield, and Clif Bar.

Tom Philpott is a reporter for Mother Jones. His blog there won an award for [best food blog](#) by the Association of Food Journalists in 2014. In 2015 he [won](#) the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism for his story [exposing major concerns](#) with almond farming in California.

On December 1, 2013, Charles Benbrook, [who works closely with the organic industry](#) for public relations, [cited Tom Philpott](#) as part of a group that can be counted on to:

help out with strategic Tweets, comments to media, etc. Can be asked upfront to take defined actions at key time, and play certain roles in specific communities.

The "A" Team of Commentators, Strategists, Influencers

People who are likely to help out with strategic Tweets, comments to media, etc.
Can be asked upfront to take defined actions at key time, and play certain roles in specific communities.

Michael Pollan (Chuck, DONE)

Ken Cook (Chuck, DONE)

Melinda Hemmelgarn (Elizabeth/Theresa, initial contact)

Tom Philpott, Mother Earth News (Chuck, DONE)

On December 13, 2013, Mother Jones published an article by Tom Philpott, titled "[Organic Milk Proves Higher in Healthy Fats](#)". The research was conducted by Benbrook with a grant from Organic Center sponsor Organic Valley.

On March 9, 2017, Tom Philpott was a keynote speaker at the Organic Center's fundraising dinner. According to the Organic Center's [press release](#) about the event, Tom Philpott "dined on center stage with Dr. Shade". Dr. Jessica Shade is the Director of Science Programs at the Organic Center.

While the Benbrook study was criticized by many independent scientists as [“rife with methodological problems and questionable scientific assumptions”](#), none of this criticism appeared in Philpott’s article.

Often critical of [what he sees as](#) “industry defenders” using “industry talking points”, Philpott himself was “fully briefed” and was asked to make sure the released research and “outreach effort is broad and on-message.”

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How much money has Philpott received from organic industry interests? Ben Bradlee, former Executive Editor at the Washington Post [once wrote](#), “If the Insurance Institute of America, if there is such a thing, pays you \$10,000 to make a speech, don’t tell me you haven’t been corrupted. You can say you haven’t and you can say you will attack insurance issues in the same way, but you won’t. You can’t.” A concept known as “buckraking”.

In order for people to consider buying organic, the industry must convince them of two things. One is that conventional food is more dangerous, and the other is that organic food is in some way healthier. There is no credible evidence either is the case. Instead, the organic industry is relying on public relation firms, their agents, and those journalists who are in their pockets.

A version of this article appeared on Medium as “Organic industry ‘A Team’ journalist Tom Philpott ‘dines on center stage’ at sponsored event” and has been republished here with permission from the author.

Stephan Neidenbach is a middle school teacher in Annapolis, Maryland. He holds a BS in business administration from Salisbury University and an MS in Instructional Technology from the University of Maryland. He started and runs the Facebook group [We Love GMOs and Vaccines](#) . Follow him on twitter [@welovegv](#).