

Herbicide-tainted Ben & Jerry's ice cream? NY Times falls for anti-science group's dubious attack on glyphosate

[Editor's note: Kevin Folta is professor and chairman of the Horticultural Sciences Department at the University of Florida.]

There was a time that newspapers published verifiable information, checked facts, and didn't simply post the intellectually bankrupt messages of activist groups. The *New York Times* now double dips to a new low, confirming their war on food, war on farmers, war on science, and war on reason. If you ever wondered if they were lying to you, this is all you need to read.

Punch line: The story of glyphosate, a relatively benign herbicide, being found in Ben and Jerry's ice cream is bad science, bad journalism, and says a lot about what passes for news at the *New York Times*.

[Editor's note: Read the GLP's summary of the New York Times article [here](#).]

There also was a time before the manufactured clickbait news era when scientific information had to pass peer review *before* a reporter would write the piece. Replicated information would be presented by researchers with complete materials and methods, proper controls and statistical rigor. The information would be reviewed by peers for its veracity, and if it passed this challenging process it would find a home in a legitimate scholarly journal.

Only then would it grace the pages of premier news outlets.

But those days of gold standards have melted away under the hot fudge of nonsense. Today anyone with an ax to grind against agriculture and a couple of pints of ice cream can commission a *seemingly* legit operation to measure molecules present on the edge of nothingness. Analytical chemistry is pretty amazing these days, and if you do it right, the sensitivity is astounding.

The article by Stephanie Strom claims to find traces of the much-maligned herbicide glyphosate in Ben and Jerry's ice cream. The amounts claimed to be found in ten of eleven flavors tested are always below a part per billion (a second in 32 years) except for one case. The one that came up negative is Cherry Garcia, ironic because the flavor's namesake is associated with weed, and this flavor purportedly has no detectable weed killer.

ben cohen jerry greenfield zoom bcc bc f e b b b
Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, co-founders of Ben & Jerry's.

Are these results reliable? Certainly those levels could be detected using the proper techniques. But the article didn't present what techniques they used. A number of non-peer-reviewed reports and websites have used a commercial kit improperly to perform this detection, and then report false-positive noise. My guess is that's what happened here too.

What are the "tells" that show this is not legitimate news, but an activist-inspired facsimile for actual news? There are so many problems with this that it is mind boggling. Here are a few:

1. Technical. The extraction from the "matrix". Ice cream is complex stuff, and each type of ice cream will have to be treated individually to understand the baseline for the matrix, as well as other interfering molecules. There is no evidence that they did this.

2. Technical. There is no mention of the extraction method, let alone from different flavors of ice cream. This kind of work can take weeks, months. It is not trivial to do it correctly.

3. Reporting. A legitimate report would use independent replicates, would provide statistics of how the target compound was detected versus controls. What is a 'no glyphosate' control of the same ice cream if they claim to detect it in everything? How do they know it is not just noise in the assay?

4. Reporting. The report does not provide a "limit of detection" or LOD. The LOD defines the edge of the sensitivity of the assay where quantitation is linear and faithful. My guess is that all of the values read are at or below the LOD.

5. Negative Controls. The article says that Ben and Jerry's sources ingredients from non-GE crops. So where would any signal come from? The author hints that it comes from dairy products, which exposes the potential agenda of this article. There is no reason for it to be there, they did not provide information about its detection — chances are they are reading noise, but without proper controls it is hard to tell (yes, Cherry Garcia came up as 'none detected', but is that because the assay is inhibited by a compound in cherry? We don't know. There are no proper controls.)

6. Biological Significance. But let's assume the numbers are real. **They are not a risk, so this is a non-story.** As it states in the article you'd have to eat 45,000 pints of ice cream to start to approach physiologically relevant amounts of the herbicide.

7. Independence. The laboratory commissioned appears to be a relative of Genetic ID, John Fagan's former company in Fairfield, IA (the center of the anti-biotech universe, home to Jeffery Smith and other similar dim luminaries).

8. Agenda. The NYT report treats the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) like they are some legitimate organization dedicated to consumer concerns and protections. However, they are a long-standing group against conventional farming and biotechnology. They give organic production a bad name.

[Editor's note: Read the GLP's profile of the [Organic Consumers Association](#).]

9. Ethics. The NYT article provides an advertisement for Carey Gillam's upcoming anti-glyphosate book. Gillam is paid by an organization that gets the majority of its funding from OCA.

10. Activist-Manufactured News. Once again the NYT demonstrates a breakdown in journalistic ethics and its anti-science, anti-agriculture agenda. Activists want to stop biotechnology, companies that sell it, and farmers that use it.

The New York Times strives to manufacture fear. I'm trying really hard to avoid the term 'fake news', but the work by Stephanie Strom is a textbook example. Here's how it works:

A. Activist organizations like OCA create a false story.

B. They hand it to a reporter at the *New York Times*.

C. A story is created devoid of legitimate science or evidence, but tells the story the activist organization wants told.

D. The story spreads like wildfire through the second-tier of websites, appearing to reflect legitimate content in a respected source (see inset below).

11. Why? Why did they go after Ben and Jerry's? My guess is that B&J must have done something to irritate OCA, like not agree to use only organic milk in their products. Organic milk production requires animals to not consume grain or silage from genetically engineered crops. That's expensive, and for no reason. Milk is milk.

And B&J is a curious target. They have made very public statements about the need for unnecessary food labels and risk of GE crops.

But the overarching goal is to sneak a clickbait title in front of the public, knowing that ***the story of poison in your food gets readers, fulfills an activist agenda, and most of all spreads fear of perfectly safe food.***

ice cream

Image not found or type unknown

News coverage the day after spreads the manufactured fear throughout the gullible media that report a shocking story before checking facts

The cherry on top is that a demonstratively devious activist group that wants to malign agriculture contracts an activist-friendly lab to find glyphosate and they find it. They don't report how they found it, the numbers of replicates, statistical variance, and failed to use the right controls.

The results are published **without peer review** as a sensational newspaper headline, manufactured information with the intent to erode trust in food while targeting a particular company and a technology known to be safe. And even if the results are real, the levels detected are not a threat by a longshot.

This is now how science is done. This is not how science should be reported. This is the *New York Times* lending its space and credibility to activists for more attacks against food and farming, doing the bidding of an aggressive activist organization and advertising the books rather than telling the truth.

So stand up for Ben and Jerry. Go buy a pint today and eat the whole thing. Know that it is safe and delicious, and that even if the numbers reported are real (which they likely aren't) you can eat 44,999 more pints today before you approach meaningful levels of glyphosate exposure.

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