

Viewpoint: How organic activists use intimidation and character assassination to attack GMOs

In Part 1, I described the vendetta by the Russian government's propaganda apparatus against technologies like fracking and modern genetic engineering techniques applied to agriculture, and the aid the Russians receive from U.S.-based organic industry lobbyists and activists.

We ended Part 1 with the observation that advocacy, which we see in many industries and special-interest groups, is one thing, but character assassination, trolling and intimidation are something else. That crosses the line. We discuss that here.

Overall, the propaganda campaign by more radical elements in the organic industry has achieved impressive gains — if you consider ripping off consumers and character assassination to be positive.

[Editor's note: This is the second of two articles examining links between Russian propaganda efforts and anti-GMO forces. Read [part one](#).]

Academics Review, a science-oriented nonprofit organization of academic experts, performed a [review](#) of hundreds of published academic, industry, and government research reports concerned with consumers' views of organic products.

It also looked at more than 1,500 news reports, marketing materials, advocacy propaganda, speeches, etc., generated between 1988 and 2014 about organic foods.

Their analysis found that “consumers have spent hundreds of billion dollars purchasing premium-priced organic food products based on false or misleading perceptions about comparative product food safety, nutrition and health attributes,” and that this is due to “a widespread organic and natural products industry pattern of research-informed and intentionally deceptive marketing and paid advocacy.”

Organic advocacy

That advocacy is particularly vile. The organic industry seeks not a level playing field for their products; instead, they try to level the players on the other side. The activists regularly trot out a litany of false accusations about their enemies.

One of the most unlikely and undeserving targets is Stephan Neidenbach, a Maryland middle-school teacher and science communicator who blogs about science and technology. The trolls and character assassins variously tried to get him fired and conducted a campaign of harassment and intimidation against him. Read his chilling account [here](#).

Academics have been a favorite target. An NGO called U.S. Right to Know, or USRTK, has filed [harassing Freedom of Information requests](#) for emails and documents of at least a hundred public university faculty and staff members, hoping to find embarrassing snippets that might imply conflicts of

interest.

Their efforts to undermine scientists and public policy scholars whose work threatens the Russians' agenda follow a familiar pattern. In the words of University of Florida plant biologist [Kevin Folta](#), who has been excoriated repeatedly by USRTK for supposedly being a Monsanto sock puppet, the activists "develop a narrative that suggests industry collusion or undue influence, especially with any attempt to connect the faculty member to Monsanto, a company that is the bogeyman favorite of activists."

Every page of every email requested by USRTK must be examined by attorneys to ascertain whether they are releasable. Professor Folta estimates that the USRTK fishing expedition may have cost his university as much as a million dollars of taxpayers' money.

The Monsanto factor

Another prominent victim was Peter Phillips, Distinguished Professor of Public Policy at the University of *surprise!*) too close a relationship with Monsanto and allowing I wrote.



Other eminent academics, such as University of Illinois

Professor (Emeritus) [Bruce Chassy](#) and University of Oklahoma Law Professor (Emeritus) [Drew Kershen](#) and science writer extraordinaire [Jon Entine](#) have also been targeted.

I have been on the USRTK hit-list since I was a prominent opponent of an unscientific, unwise and probably unconstitutional 2012 California referendum issue that would have required labeling of genetically engineered food.

USRTK were proponents of the measure. Paid pro-referendum activists lied effusively about me in the campaign, and some of their more flagrant falsehoods were regurgitated by the New York Times' hapless food columnist, Mark Bittman, [apparently without any fact-checking](#).

Fast forward to 2015, when a UN-based agency erroneously categorized the herbicide glyphosate (which Monsanto markets as Roundup) as a “probable carcinogen.” Although Monsanto and I had a long history of mutual antagonism (see [this](#) and [this](#), for example) a scientist acquaintance there emailed me and asked if that was something I might write about.

Personal attacks

I responded that I was overwhelmed with various projects but that they should sent me a “high-quality draft,” a poor choice of words by which I meant *stuff* — other government agencies’ evaluations, scientific studies, as well as the company’s view of the decision. Eventually, they sent me all of that.

When those emails were later released as part of a lawsuit in 2017, a *New York Times* reporter whom I (along with many in the scientific community) had criticized repeatedly for biased and inaccurate reporting, penned a vindictive hit-piece implying that my op-ed was ghostwritten. The *Times* article was misleading and incomplete.

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In a phone conversation — which, of course, is not reflected in the emails — I had told a Monsanto person exactly what arguments and points I wanted to make, and they sent me a rough draft that consisted almost entirely of what I had outlined. I then modified and published it as an op-ed.

In the end, *the ideas, opinions and words were my own*. (Moreover, the article was in every respect accurate and, for once, reflected the views of both the scientific community and industry.)

Let me be clear: I have authored three books, scores of journal articles and more than a thousand columns for the popular press (including, by the way, for the *New York Times*) and nobody has ghostwritten any of them.

“Google dead”

The University of Florida’s Kevin Folta has [characterized](#) the activists’ goal as leaving “these trusted professors, dietitians and physicians ‘Google Dead’, a state where their online reputation will always drag the anchor of activist derision.”

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Kevin Folta. Image credit: UF/IFAS

Professor Folta [describes](#) how these campaigns work: “In the case of (University of Saskatchewan Professor) Phillips, US-RTK acquired emails and used Jason Warick from [CBC News](#) as a complicit pipeline to media. This way it is not simply (USRTK co-director) Gary Ruskin and his band of industry-financed lackeys slandering scientists on activist websites. Instead, it takes (on) the patina of legitimate research, hard-core gumshoe reporting. It really is a reporter doing the bidding of US-RTK, who is doing the bidding of a handful of organizations, companies, and undisclosed donors paying for the hit.”

New Yorker staff writer Adrian Chen [describes](#) what happened to him in 2015 while he was doing background research in St. Petersburg about Russia’s notorious “troll farm,” the Internet Research Agency:

As I conducted my reporting, I was myself the target of an elaborate smear campaign to label me a neo-Nazi sympathizer and U.S. intelligence agent — an early use of the kind of bizarre tactics that have been documented by numerous investigations in both the Russian and Western media, and by the internal [investigations of social-media companies](#).

Thus, American activists and NGOs, paid by the organic agriculture industry and aided by Russia’s propaganda machine, routinely trash, troll and harass scientists, academics, journalists and even middle-school teachers who promote sound science generally and promulgate accurate information about genetic engineering, in particular.

Dezinformatsiya

The character-assassination campaigns present an exquisite irony: USRTK and its ilk accuse their targets of being shills — paid agents of the agribusiness industry who have a conflict of interest — but it is *they* who are the shills, bought and paid for by the organic and “natural products” industries.

The fake-news-based disinformation campaigns launched by the NGOs and other trolls on subjects from agricultural chemicals and genetic engineering to fracking erode the ability of disinterested observers — the public — to judge what is true and what is not with respect to complex public policy issues.

And it is distressing for those of us being attacked, to say nothing of our friends and families.

As the fellow said in the Mark Twain story, after being tarred and feathered and run out of town on a rail,

“If it weren’t for the honor, I’d just as soon have walked.”

However, history is on the side of scientists, science communicators and journalists who tell the truth. In the words of philosophy professor Crispin Sartwell in a Wall Street Journal [op-ed](#), “The power of the Russian intelligence services. . . is considerable, but it does not include the ability to bend the fabric of reality.”

On the other hand, even if we’re not found floating face-down in the Volga, it’s no fun being among the Google Dead.

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