

Crop Chemophobia II: When activist journalists twist science in support of ideology

Attacking pesticides is sexy. Many activists, lawyers and journalists have made careers out of propagating a simple, compelling narrative about the chemicals farmers use to produce our food. The story goes something like this (cue ominous narrator voice):

Greedy company X developed synthetic chemical Y to kill pests. It worked so well that farmers now depend on it. But, thanks to an intrepid reporter or rogue scientist, we know that greedy company X buried evidence showing that chemical Y is harmful to humans and the environment. Worse, internal documents have shown that the firm corrupted the EPA, preventing the regulatory agency from taking any steps to protect public health. Stories that include [Nazi references](#) are good for extra Facebook likes and retweets.

[su_panel color="#3A3A3A" border="1px solid #3A3A3A" radius="2? text_align="left"]**Editor's note: This is part two of a two part series. Read part one: [Crop chemophobia I: Pesticides are vital to organic and conventional agriculture — but they can be misused. Here's how to distinguish between legitimate concerns and anti-science propaganda.](#)**[/su_panel]

This narrative isn't always inaccurate; pesticide manufacturers and regulatory agencies can be greedy and dishonest. But, as I discussed in [part one of this series](#), journalists fall prey to these sins, too. Specifically, their Erin Brockovich-inspired stories about corporate malfeasance often lack nuance, require double standards and overlook the important roles pesticides play in food production and *protecting* public health.

In this installment, I'll cover a few more hallmarks of bad pesticides reporting, the goal being to help you separate solid journalism from activism only masquerading as journalism.

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According to the “experts”

Recognizing the need for expert input, authors of anti-pesticide stories usually include a quote or two from credentialed scientists, perhaps an EPA official or an independent expert. These name drops give the story a veneer of credibility, but a little digging shows that these scholars are not what they appear to be.

The Intercept article I mentioned [in part one](#), “The Department Of Yes: How Pesticide Companies Corrupted The EPA and Poisoned America,” is a perfect example. The author described Charles Benbrook as “a veteran agricultural economist who has spent years poring over internal documents on pesticides as an expert witness in the litigation with Monsanto and Bayer over Roundup.” This was a lie by omission, since Benbrook [is a known](#) organic food-industry consultant. He [was paid \\$100,000 to](#) “ramrod” pro-organic studies through the peer-review process.



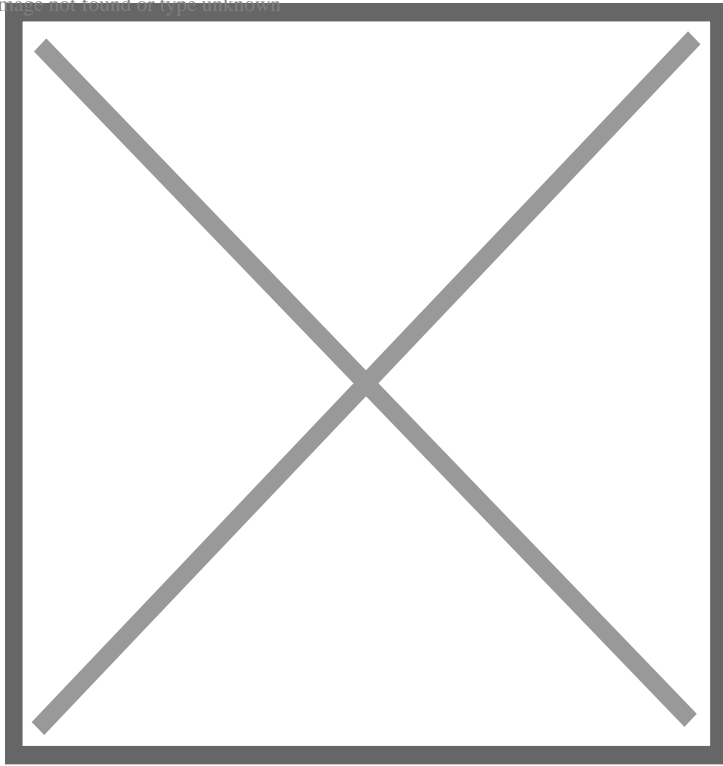
Charles Benbrook. Credit: Biology Fortified

Such tomfoolery was undoubtedly as dishonest as anything the author accused Monsanto of. Though The Intercept either didn't know about Benbrook's conflicts of interest, or deliberately left them out of the story. Either option tarnishes the website's credibility.

The “banned in Europe” fallacy

The Intercept also cited Nathan Donley, a biologist at the [anti-pesticide group](#) Center for Biological Diversity. According to Donley's 2019 study, The Intercept author lamented, “At least 85 pesticides banned in China, Brazil, or the European Union were still used in the U.S. In 2016 ...” That sure sounds terrible, but a little digging reveals some pertinent yet undisclosed details.

Image not found or type unknown



Nathan Donley. Credit: Des Moines Register

First, the fact that another country has a different regulatory framework than America does not prove that ours is inappropriate. China, governed as it is by a brutal communist regime, maintains some of the [strictest speech restrictions](#) in the world. Should we throw out the First Amendment as a result? The answer is obviously “no,” though the analogy helps highlight the flaw in The Intercept’s bromide. One scientist recently dubbed this assertion the “[it’s banned in Europe](#)” fallacy, because it’s so commonly employed by anti-vaccine and anti-GMO groups.

More to the point, how dangerous are these pesticides the EPA allows to remain on the market? Do they cause thousands of cases of cancer every year? No. The EPA’s [registration process](#) is designed to weed out substances that pose such serious risks to public health. When these chemicals do cause harm, it’s usually due to acute poisoning. As Donley correctly noted in his [paper](#) the “vast majority of these poisonings were accidental in nature and range in severity from minor to, in some cases, death.”

These deaths are certainly tragic (and avoidable). But relatively rare “accidents and misuses,” to use Donley’s phrasing again, do not prove that these chemicals should be banned. Instead, these incidents confirm that pesticides have to be used appropriately—much like cars, household cleaners or alcohol, the known carcinogen many of us enjoy without much fear of cancer.

Parenthetically, Donley’s study was peer-reviewed by none other than, wait for it, [Charles Benbrook](#)!

A study's a study? Arguments based on bad research

Speaking of sloppy research, be on the lookout for news articles that cite low-quality studies as if they're Gospel. Here's an example from the Intercept story:

Years after [studies](#) found that rates of Parkinson's disease are measurably higher among people who have used [the weedkiller] paraquat, litigation against Syngenta, its manufacturer, is also increasing.

The study cited in the above paragraph is from 2011. In the decade since, higher quality research has been published. For example, two studies of employees at a paraquat manufacturing facility [found](#) "no evidence of an increased incidence of [Parkinson's] among production workers based on mentions of PD on the death certificates of workers who had died." It's also likely that paraquat can't cross the blood-brain barrier efficiently enough to damage the dopamine-producing neurons at the root of Parkinson's Disease. [1]

Reporters deserve your skepticism

The Intercept [adorably claims it's](#) "dedicated to holding the powerful accountable through fearless, adversarial journalism." That's clearly false given the shenanigans documented here. But the problem isn't unique to this one website. Media outlets regularly warn the public to avoid conspiracy theories and "trust the science," only to turn around and [promote the musings](#) of anti-vaccine activists. Reporters will happily take corporate donations [while decrying](#) the corrupting influence of industry funding on science. The examples go on, but you get the point.

This doesn't mean that journalists are always wrong. But it definitely confirms that they deserve your skepticism until they prove themselves trustworthy. If reporters employ the slight of hand you see above, you know they're trying to fool you instead of inform you.

Notes:

[1] See my June story [Glyphosate 2.0: Lawsuits Claiming Herbicide Paraquat Causes Parkinson's Move Forward](#) for a discussion about the quality of these studies.

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