

## 6 fake news websites stoking fear about crops grown from genetically-engineered seeds

“Fake news” is now a well-known term, at least to Americans in the wake of the US presidential election. But followers of events in genetic modification of food and crops have been familiar with the “fake news” phenomenon for years. A number of websites have thrived for years, offering misleading stories with alarmist headlines — in opposition to GMO crops and livestock. Some of these sites (they all have a strong, if not exclusive, online presence) focus directly on GMOs, while others provide a forum for selling products, and still others take a broad stroke on a number of environmental and health issues. Here is a selection of these “Fake news” sites.

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### Natural news

[Natural News](#), renamed from NewsTarget.com in the mid-2000s, is headed by the self-described “Health Ranger” Mike Adams, who has described biotechnology scientists as “the most despicable humanoids to walk the face of this planet.” [Read GLP’s profile of Mike Adams.] The site publishes original articles, while also aggregating the work of others — almost unanimously in opposition to GMOs, vaccines, or anything it considers to be under influence of corporations. It is affiliated with the non-profit organization Consumer Wellness Center, created in 2006 by Adams.

The [website promotes](#) natural health and lifestyle products, including this \$2,000 “hydrogen infusion machine.” It was dubbed the “worst anti-science website” by science-based Skeptic.

[Natural News RGB](#)

.] In December, 2016, for example, [a story headlined](#) “US Court of Appeals: States and counties can ban GMO crops despite federal laws,” claimed the US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals had passed a law allowing local and state authorities in Hawaii to enact bans on genetically modified crops. In fact, the Ninth Circuit (which under the US Constitution cannot pass laws) did the opposite: it overruled decisions by county and local officials in Hawaii to ban GMO, citing the authority of the state and the US Plant Protection Act.

And in May, 2016, the site published [a story](#) claiming: “CRISPR gene editing lies exposed by genomics expert.” It wrote:

The biotechnology industry is carrying out a concerted public-relations campaign to promote the idea that new, so-called “gene editing” technologies are the more accurate, safer successor to now-defunct traditional genetic engineering (GE). But this campaign is founded upon several straight-up myths about the new technology, which is nothing more than the

same reckless GE paradigm under another name.

The expert? Jonathan Latham, editor of another “fake news” site, Independent Science News. In reality traditional genetic engineering is anything but defunct, since 90 percent of all corn and soybean planted in the US is genetically modified, and, in Hawaii, the papaya industry was saved by the introduction of a modified, virus-resistant version of the popular fruit.

Natural News is not exclusively devoted to opposing genetic modification and promoting organic and “natural” products. Adams has promoted such causes as AIDS denialism, 9/11 truther conspiracies, Barack Obama citizenship ‘birther’ claims and is a believer in ‘dangerous’ chemtrails and the ‘danger’ of vaccines.

## **Mercola.com**

The website Mercola.com has been publishing online for more than 20 years. In addition to selling a wide range of “natural” products, books and fitness plans all under the Mercola brand, it also publishes articles favoring organic foods, and opposing genetic modifications.

Mercola is the creation of Joseph Mercola, an Illinois-based doctor of osteopathic medicine, who [claims it](#)

as “the world’s No. 1 health Website.” Image not found or type unknown

Arguing that traditional medicine (including vaccines, pharmaceuticals and surgery) kills, he offers alternative cures including prescribing “organic, non-commercially harvested” seaweed supplements to treat thyroid problems. Mercola promotes and sells a variety of “alternative” products; for which he has received multiple warning letters from the FDA.

His website offers a steady stream articles opposing (among other things) GMOs, and which offer his natural products as alternatives.

In a [recent article](#) arguing against eating soy, Mercola points to the fact that most soy grown in the US is modified to resist the herbicide glyphosate, which, he claimed is responsible for the disruption of the delicate hormonal balance of the female reproductive cycle. The article cites two studies, one in amphibians and the other in hamsters, showing how (in amphibians) a “tiny amount” of glyphosate caused anatomical abnormalities and (in hamsters) infertility in three generations. None of these appeared in peer-reviewed journals. Instead they were published by the Pesticide Action Network and in the Huffington Post. The site also uses anti-gmo stories to help promote a \$99.00 glyphosate testing kit.

## **Independent science news**

[news](#)

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This news site was started in 2011, by the Bioscience

Resource Project, an organization that says it provides [independent research](#) and analysis in the agriculture-related biosciences and has been in existence since 2006. The site is edited by Jonathan Latham, who holds a PhD in virology and has [published papers](#) on a wide variety of topics, including genetics.

According to the organization's website:

Powerful interests routinely succeed in influencing the answers. In science, external forces influence strongly what is studied, what is published, and what is reported. When that happens, individuals (or policymakers) no longer have the information to decide rationally and choose thoughtfully. Society becomes dysfunctional at a fundamental level.

At ISN we chooses (sic) our stories carefully. Most concern simultaneous manipulations of the scientific process, the food/ag system, and the science media.

According to the site, these stories include:

- "False agribusiness claims about the safety and performance of GMO food and crops
- Bee Learning Behaviour Affected by GMO Toxins
- Roundup-Ready to Yield?
- Regulators Discover a Hidden Viral Gene in Commercial GMO Crops.

At best, the headlines and stories under them are misleading, at worst, they are simply false.

The website has posted stories arguing there is no scientific consensus on the safety GM foods (there is a consensus, actually), a guest post by well-known GM food opponent Vandana Shiva, and conspiracy theories about genetic testing and population mass surveillance by the government. It also has been linked by anti-technology intellectual [Naomi Oreskes](#), who linked one of her Tweets to the website's article on Monsanto, [a piece by](#) Jonathan Latham speculating that GM food (and therefore Monsanto and others who make them) were in peril because Chipotle had vowed to remove GMO products from its restaurants.

## **Sustainable pulse**

[This website](#) says it is owned and maintained "by a group of concerned citizens and scientists." While some editors claim it is based in the UK, it is registered in Bulgaria, and two of its chief editors, Henry Rowlands and [Radostin Nonkin](#), work in Bulgaria. In addition to its site, which predominantly features articles about opposition to GMOs, it is connected to what it calls "reference projects:"

- [GMO Evidence](#)—"a simple resource that shows the global picture of harm from GMOs & Roundup."
- GMO Seralini—a main source page for all of Gilles-Eric Seralini's papers and other materials, including his famous 2012 discredited study on tumors in rats that had been retracted, and

subsequently republished in a so-called “pay for play” publication. Image not found or type unknown

- GMO [Judy Carman](#)—a similar source page for Australian anti-GMO advocate and researcher, who is best known for her (also discredited, based on questionable methods) 2013 study in the little-known open access Journal of Organic Systems, in which she claimed to have found a link between genetically modified maize and inflammation of the stomach in pigs.

On its main page, one of its most popular posts is a story, “Review Links Roundup to Diabetes, Autism, Infertility and Cancer,” referring to a 2013 paper by anti-GMO advocates Stephanie Seneff and Anthony Samsel. No link between glyphosate and these diseases by any reputable scientific lab has ever been found.

In a [lead story](#), Sustainable Pulse quoted “experts” from the anti-GMO activist community, such as GM Watch and GM Freeze, on their opposition to testing by Rothamsted Research on a type of wheat engineered to more efficiently use photosynthesis to increase crop yields. While the group also quoted the head of the Rothamsted project, quotes from the anti group questioned whether farmers needed to grow more wheat:

What is the purpose of growing more wheat in the first place? World food production already far exceeds the needs of generations to come but people still go hungry. Nobody is starving because of some fundamental flaw with photosynthesis; they are starving because they are poor.

Which is half right.

## The Ecologist

“Setting the environmental agenda since 1970,” according to the [news site’s](#) masthead, the organization was established as a journal in London, publishing scientific papers that were, according to the papers’ authors, too radical for other journals and magazines. It published in print until 2009, when it became an online magazine and stopped publishing academic-type papers.

**ecologist**

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Taking a clear anti-globalization, pro-local effort stance on issues, it has

posted stories pertaining to climate change, the oil industry, nuclear power, animal rights, and genetically modified foods. Jonathan Latham is frequently posted on the site, including [this story](#) accusing the Cornell University Alliance for Science for “being chicken,” in allegedly turning down a debate with anti-GMO activists. It turns out that the “invitation” was tucked into a dense comment section on social media. It also has been running stories critical of policies of the new UK government in the wake of the nation’s vote to withdraw from the European Union. The site also posts screeds from Carey Gillam, a former Reuters reporter who left the news agency for US Right to Know, and whose work is reliably anti-GMO.

The Ecologist’s editors and writers often produce pieces that look well-researched, but the conclusions invariably fall in line with their anti-GMO, technology-skeptic editorial trends. In February, a large piece on the Zika virus in Brazil and other parts of South America cited several studies discussing the possibility that a pesticide, or a previous genetically modified virus, was responsible for the microcephaly cases seen early last year. While the story was updated extensively and even refuted some of its earlier claims of “jumping DNA” and inserted transposons, it still concluded that any future release of genetically modified insects (such as the Oxitec modified mosquito):

Were to take place, it could give rise to numerous new mutations of the virus with the potential to cause even more damage to the human genome, that we can, at this stage, only guess at

## Russia Today (RT)

Russia Today, or RT as it now known—its pedigree is Pravda, the propaganda organ of the Communist Party—made a [headlines](#) in January when a US intelligence report pointed to it as a major propaganda instrument used in attempts to influence the US presidential election. The television network and website (which have US versions) follow a pattern familiar to followers of Russia and the former Soviet Union—a state-run news agency that claims to be independent but generally hews to Russian policies and

authorities.  
**Russia Today**

Image not found or type unknown. It is often accused of spreading propaganda and violating journalistic traditions of

impartiality. In the United Kingdom, the media regulator [Ofcom repeatedly](#) found RT breached rules on impartiality, and of broadcasting “materially misleading” content.

RT reports on a wide range of global issues, much like Reuters, the BBC, AFP or CNN. On GMOs, RT is solidly critical, as is the Russian government, which recently enacted a ban on any foreign GMO from entering the country, and outlawed the creation of a commercial GMO product.

Some stories, including this one on FDA approval of the Simplot potato last year that has a Reuters copyright on it, appear to be straight news, but emphasize comments from anti-GMO activists. The Reuters story heavily quotes Jeffrey Smith, founder of the anti-GMO organization Institute for Responsible Technology:

“It makes sense on paper,” he said of the potatoes that are purported to be resistant to blight – the pathogen responsible for the Great Famine. However, one of the issues is that the effects of modified these genomes are largely unknown.

“When we tamper with the genome in the way that they’ve been doing with genetic engineering in our food supply, you end up increasing allergens, toxins, new diseases or other problems – causes massive collateral damage in the DNA” he said.

This quote, of course, ignores the extensive testing by developers of the potato, reviews by FDA officials, and the advances in knowledge of genetics in general.

A video on RT spends more than six minutes opining on a number of issues, from the so-called “DARK Act,” to alleged “wheat escape” and perpetuates many of the typical myths that are refrains of the anti-GMO movement, such as whether QR codes really work, and the false story of the “world killing” *Klebsiella* microbe that was modified to increase alcohol production and boost decomposition.

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