

Viewpoint: 15 explanations for why activists lie and try to scare people about ‘killer’ chemicals, genetically engineered crops and nuclear energy

We always hear NGOs saying that we cannot trust industry, that we have to exclude industry evidence or that industry lobbyists are spreading deception and falsehood. We are constantly reminded of the few cases where industry actors had lied or withheld important information in the last century. But I worked in industry for 15 years and I did not see any of this. Instead I saw a strict application of ethical practices, adherence to codes of conduct and genuine efforts to develop product stewardship and sustainable development.

I also saw a lot of activists outside of our offices spreading lies about us. It was interesting to note that these NGOs did not have any staff who had ever worked a single day in large companies. You would figure if they had recruited some former corporate exiles in their organisation, they would have paraded these prized golden calves in front of the media to tell their horror stories first-hand. If industry was such a bastion of evil, greedy liars, then those with a moral conscience would surely leave and join these missionaries to spread their righteous creed and sanctity.

Nada...

Instead we hear regular stories of leaders of activist organisations leaving NGOs like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth or Extinction Rebellion disillusioned by the inconsistencies with reality and lack of moral integrity (Moore, Tindale, Lynas, Zion Lights...).

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Why do they lie?

It is not just the lies that activists tell the public about what happens inside of companies, or the lies about who funds their green lobbying (and by how much). Activists lie on the daily about the viability of their alternative solutions, like, for example:

- How wind and solar can easily replace the energy produced by nuclear reactors
- How organic food is better for human health and the environment
- How banning all plastics will be beneficial to society and nature
- How seed solutions or genetic modifications offer no agricultural or ecological value
- How traces of certain chemicals must be considered as endocrine disruptors
- How agroecology will feed the world and stop climate change

All of these claims are bald-faced lies, spread knowingly and relentlessly. Some lies, like those told on PVC, endocrine disrupting chemicals and GMOs, have been repeated for 30 to 40 years, exaggerations on nuclear energy risks have gone on for more than 60 years. With constant lying carried over

generations, these grey-haired campaigners must be morally exhausted.

So it raises the question: Are these activists moral recidivists, hell-bent on deception and subterfuge to win their campaigns and spread their dogma? Are they habitual liars without any conscience? Why do they continuously lie and are they even aware of it? I raised this [question](#) when a large group of NGOs led a campaign to get the European Commission to produce legislation to stop industry from greenwashing while seemingly completely oblivious to the level of greenwashing their own campaigners have been committing.

I would like to think positively about the motives of this influential stakeholder group and assume that there are other elements at play than mere awfulness or sheer stupidity. Not all environmental campaigners apply the Joseph Goebbels *Ten-step Method to Communications*. Perhaps there are several different types of lies or lying circumstances that the zealot-prone would not even recognise as morally challenging.

Here are 15 explanations to attempt to address why activists lie.

1. White Lies for White Angels

Virtue is a fascinating fact filter. When one feels they are doing good or fighting evil, then everything they do and say is justifiable regardless of the lack of veracity or evidence. An activist confronting industry is willing to accept and communicate any hint of doubt or uncertainty on a targeted company, product or substance. Any double standards or hypocrisies can be excused in the war of good versus evil. We want to believe those we deem virtuous and we are presumed to doubt anyone who does not share our value base. This is the fuel that fires the activists' *argumentum ad hominem* strategy: *I don't have to consider your "facts" because you've been bought off by industry (ie, you're evil)*.

2. "It's not a lie if you believe it"

The wise George Costanza made this philosophical observation on the TV program, Seinfeld. And like George, people can believe a lot of stupid things, especially if they are vulnerable or desperate. The green cult handbook provides a complex belief system for those searching, religiously, for meaning and virtue in their lives. This leaves them vulnerable to those willing missionaries who deftly herd them into their interest centres. These innocents cannot imagine that their social media attacks on what they have been told are threats to all of humanity (from a nuclear meltdown or some world-destroying chemical like glyphosate) could be false.

3. Narrative Reality Lock

Another great philosopher, Bertrand Russell, spoke about how reality changes when we view the world through rose-coloured spectacles. Today we speak of how our narrative creates value and coherence for the stories we tell. The sense of right and wrong from these stories then filter what we are willing to believe to be true or false (and speaking up for what is "true" becomes a moral decision). So if your narrative has convinced you that industry is always lying, acting only on pure greed and without care for

the safety of humans and the environment, then you will easily amplify any false claims against industry actors and take great strides to disprove or diminish any factual claims your enemies may be making. This narrative reality lock makes it nearly impossible for individuals to recognise when they are spreading lies.

4. Echo-Chamber Distortion

Social media has made the diffusion of cults much easier and more mundane. Algorithms have filtered me into online groups of like-minded people, keeping me from hearing contrary views or asking questions that might give me uncomfortable answers. These echo chambers define our truths and make it impossible to even comprehend other ways of thinking. As we drink the Kool-Aid provided by our social media gurus and share the lies, we have no idea of how our reality has been distorted. In the early days of the socialisation of the Internet, I had referred to this as the Age of Stupid (with the challenge that I may never be able to discern if I am not, in reality, the stupid one). Now it is just the reality we have to work with.

5. Hyperbolisation

Fish tales have a habit of quickly turning minnows into whales. The more a story is repeated, the more embellished it becomes. So a small risk of a cancer from a pesticide residue, once amplified and shared thousands of times, becomes a certainty. [Possibilists](#) use this technique to turn remote possibilities of a hazard into the real probability of a risk ... then invoking the precautionary principle. Who needs good reason when you can scare regulators with “reason enough”. Take, for example, endocrine disruption fear stories. We are told that we simply don’t know if certain chemicals or plastics are possible endocrine disruptors (at low doses with possible cocktail effects) so precaution is necessary for all synthetic chemicals. But then you have a single cup of coffee, a known endocrine disruptor, containing over 1000 chemicals. As Bruce Ames [said](#): *“They’ve identified a thousand chemicals in a cup of coffee. But we only found 22 that have been tested in animal cancer tests out of this thousand. And of those, 17 are carcinogens. There are 10 milligrams of known carcinogens in a cup of coffee and that’s more carcinogens than you’re likely to get from pesticide residues for a year!”* But since these chemicals are natural, and we enjoy the benefits of our cup of coffee, no one will hyperbolise the risks.

6. Factual Engineering

Individuals who feel they need to be right will engineer facts to fit what they want to believe. This is sometimes known in the scientific community as cherry-picking. If you calibrate your chromatograph in the right manner and limit your test parameters, you can prove or disprove whatever you want. So we see Ramazzini-quality studies produced and published on the risks of glyphosate, aspartame, PFOS, PVC and other chemicals claiming them to be carcinogens, endocrine disruptors (“in mice”), toxic to other species... and nobody questions the motives of those behind this research. And if it helps fund your lab or harm an industry that you despise, it is all for the better.

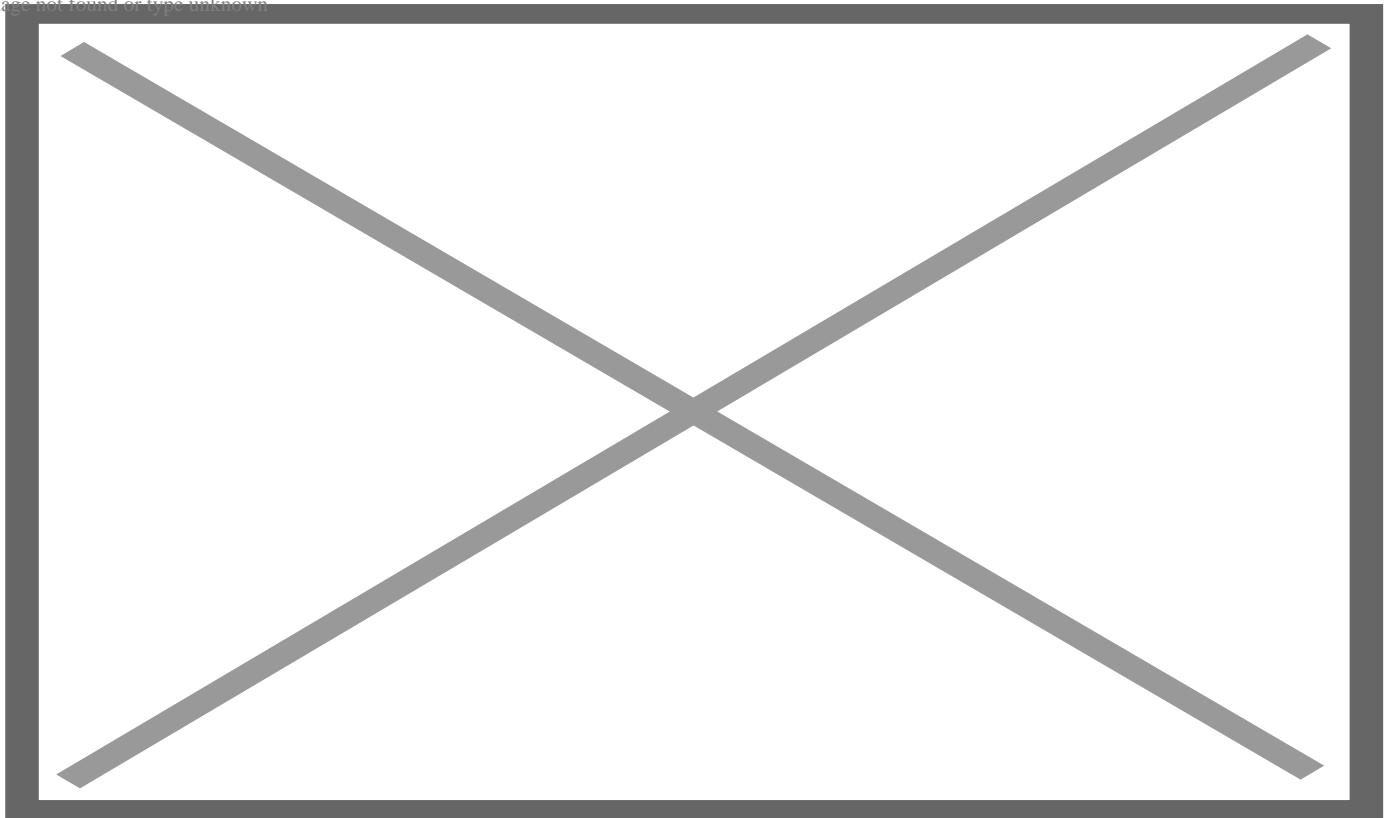
7. Exclusionary Exceptionalists

But let’s assume that there is a remote risk of cancer from a trace element of glyphosate found in a bowl

of cereal, or that a plastic tin liner might, in high doses, be a possible endocrine disruptor. Activist scientists who publish such findings know full well that the toxic equivalence of such chemical exposures is insignificant when compared to the known carcinogenicity or endocrine disruption from, say, drinking a cup of coffee (see above). So why don't they discuss the relevance of their findings within the context of meaningful toxic equivalencies? They exclude real-world comparisons because that was never the goal of their research or their funding. The objective of activist research is to demonstrate that a chemical is present and that it is not 100% safe. Since they are not risk managers, they feel it is not their responsibility to discuss what is actually safe (or what "safe" even means). Meanwhile the opportunists behind the research funding cite the results of these studies, amplifying the hazard levels to capitalise on the shared fears of their publics. I don't see those celebrated scientists then standing up and correcting the outrageous risk inferences emanating from their work. They weren't paid to.

8. Untelligent thinking

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There is an important difference between unintelligence (not intelligent) and [untelligence](#), defined as “*the ability to acquire and express ideas based on limited associations without proper information or research. Individuals who confuse anecdotes with evidence, feel intuition provides good reason and can easily dismiss internal contradictions are untelligent.*” Untelligent ideas have thrived with the rise of social media, allowing vulnerable people seeking intellectual comfort within their tribal communities to justify decisions or make statements without facts, resources or critical analysis. This weak conceptual

framework enables activist groups to easily spread lies in their campaigns without any scrutiny from their untelligent faithful.

9. Ideological Purity

Activists, by definition, are ideological. Every tenet of their dogma needs to cohere (logically and politically). It needs to be pure in order to be effective in campaigns (stress on the word “need” here as this creates an added pressure on the cognitive process). A pragmatist, by contrast, will take in all arguments, honestly, and try to find the best decision knowing they are working in an imperfect world. Ideologues already think they know the best decision and only choose facts that can justify it. So activists will exclude any evidence that might contradict or challenge their fundamentalism. Agroecologists, for example, when challenged by the benefits of gene editing in seed breeding, had to exclude it from their doctrine because it would promote the involvement of industry in agriculture. That would be dogma-denying. The WHO created a generation of bad research against vaping because they could not risk compromising their achievements in denormalising the tobacco industry. But in denying anything that does not cohere with their fundamentalist dogma, they are inflicting enormous harm on people and the environment.

10. Anal Animosity

All too often, activists are driven by rage ignited by some personal event. One of Brussels’ most enigmatic exaggerants is Martin Pigeon. In one exchange with this chain-smoking toxic warrior, I discovered that what drove his hatred against industry was not that lobbyists were paid to represent companies, but that they got paid more than he did. In his intensive lobbying (to block corporate lobbying), Pigeon admitted to withholding information about who was paying his bills at Corporate Europe Observatory (like when he paid off journalists like Stéphane Horel or used Chris Portier to challenge EFSA’s risk assessment knowing full well those research expenses were being paid by US tort law firms profiting from lawsuits against Monsanto). When you are filled with such hate, rancour and outrage, then lying and deceiving to feed this deep-seated animosity are the least of your problems.

11. Machiavellian Opportunism

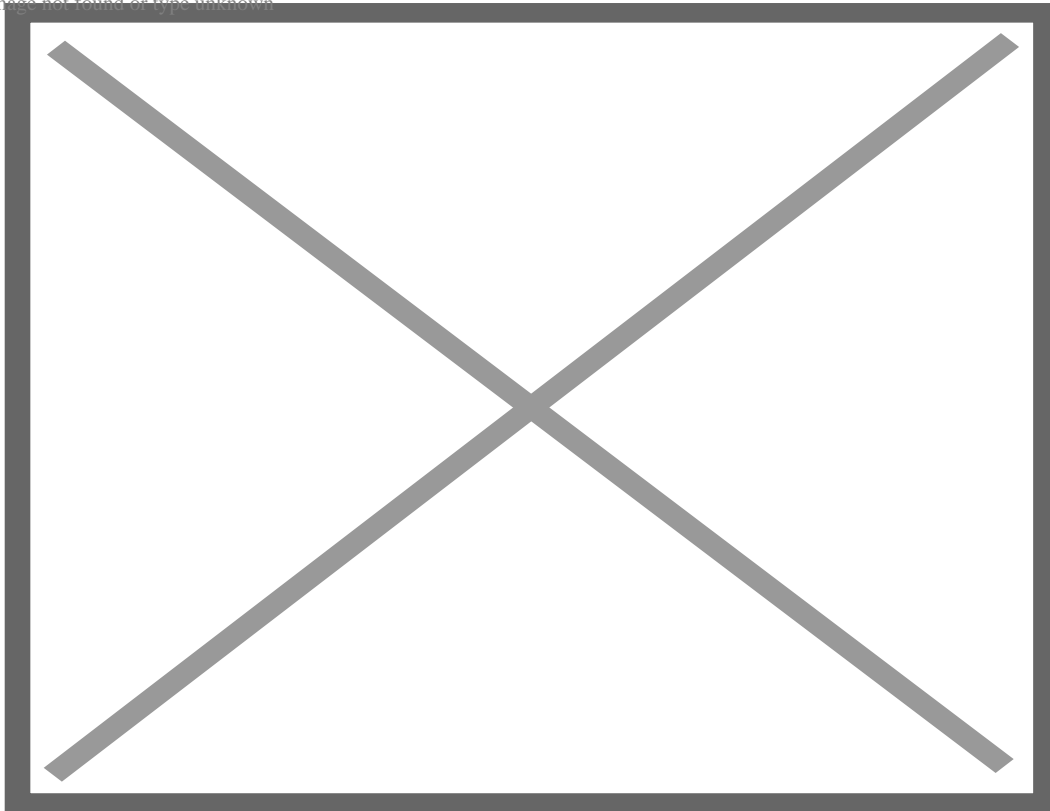
The ends justify the means and if an activist is on a mission (eg, to destroy an industry his or her organisation has been incessantly attacking), then being economical with the truth is perceived to be perfectly justifiable. For environmental NGOs, the goal of their campaigns is to win (rather than to find a compromise to come to a better situation). And if winning means having to lie, withhold information, distort facts or deceive the public, then that’s what must be done. I often hear people justify their mendacious behaviour by saying: “Well, Monsanto lies all the time!” When it all comes down to winning, then a zealot doesn’t care if the environment or human health suffer from the consequences of their campaigns (like food security issues from their pro-organic beliefs or energy poverty from their anti-nuclear actions).

12. Arrogant Intellectual Patriarchs

The academe is full of 'liars with tenure' who have dedicated their lives researching on a theory. In their glory days, they raised generations of worshipping post-docs who rely on the authority and genius of their professor to progress in their own careers. But what if everything they had researched on, published on, taught... was discovered to be factually incorrect? It would take the greatest of humility for someone to admit when they have been proven to be in error. Given the high level of hubris in the academe, this rarely happens. Rather, legitimate evidence is often suppressed or twisted to prevent reputational damage with debates descending into ad hominem attacks. This is most evident in the endocrine disruption campaign, now entering its third generation of patriarchy. Would the [grandfathers](#) of this campaign ever admit to the facts they have been hiding or unreporting in order to preserve their legacy? Sad creatures clutching at straws.

13. Incentivised Lies

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Follow the money! If a trust or foundation is going to pay you to create uncertainty, and you believe that everyone else is lying, then deceit is just perceived as part of the process. Today activist scientists are being funded by interest groups, NGOs and US tort law firms to run studies designed to provide ready-made evidence to influence policies, public perception and production processes. In just five years, for example, this funding turned 50 years of research data showing very little impact from glyphosate into a [glyphysteria](#) that the herbicide is now responsible for practically every environmental and human health issue. The activist world is full of stupid money made during stock market and crypto bubbles now filtering

down to connected networks. If you throw enough cash at campaigners who are angry and confused, you can create cults that are able to convince enough vulnerable people to say and do anything.

14. Zealot Intransigence

Imagine campaigning against a chemical, process or product for three decades without success. Golden Rice is being commercialised and celebrated, nuclear energy continues to be essential to most energy mixes, artificial sweeteners are used in more products helping people lose weight... Normal people would accept that if the science or public will is not on their side, they would then just walk away. But zealots cannot tolerate anything contrary to what they demand or could they accept anyone contradicting their worldview. So they double down, fight harder and bend the truth even more. The best case in point is how a network of German anti-GMO campaigners continue to fight on while accepting that the science is not on their side. The Risk-Monger recently [released](#) an internal strategy document showing how these activists acknowledge that scientific facts are working against them, that regulators are easing restrictions on plant breeding and that their decades-long campaign has failed. So as a response, are these NGOs going to walk away and do something more productive with their time? No, not at all. Their new approach is to double-down, try to change the narrative and turn the biotech discussion into a social rights issue.

15. Because they can get away with it

One of the key elements of trust is intention. If someone is campaigning with what is perceived as the best intentions, we are less severe in our judgements (and attempting to save the world is seen as pretty damn good intentions). NGOs portray themselves as volunteer watchdog organisations. If my watchdog barks at the moon 99 times out of 100, I will tolerate that because its intention is to protect me ... and being right that one time is even celebrated. The precautionary principle fits this 'better safe than sorry' mindset. Meanwhile, if industry scientists make a mistake just one time out of a million, that is completely unacceptable and something needs to change. Knowing they can get away with lying, exaggerating or misrepresenting themselves, activists take liberties with the truth no others would ever dare to, hoping that just that one time, they might be right. And if they are wrong (again), and people or the environment suffer, it still doesn't matter since nobody will hold them accountable for the lies they spread.

Does Integrity Matter?

In the Greed, Lies and Glyphosate [exposé](#), after demonstrating the wickedness of certain opportunists, I concluded that "integrity doesn't pay the rent". No matter why activists lie, exclude information or justify their opportunities, at some point people who strive to be good should be hearing a little voice in their head telling them that something they are doing is not right. This is integrity gnawing away at one's character.

Where is the integrity in these environmental-health debates where lying has become so commonplace?

If you are angry with the system; if you feel that the powers that be are unjust and corrupt; if you feel the world is led by liars and greedy thieves on the take, then that little voice in your head is easily silenced by

perceived externalities. I understand and feel for these people who view the world through such a dark prism.

But their rage and insensitivity, no matter the reason, cannot justify basing public policies on their angry lies or on a bent ideology that will hurt farmers, consumers, the environment and those most vulnerable. These zealots are free to believe and tell people whatever makes them feel better, but the rest of us don't have to listen or give them the time of day (any more than we should listen to creationists or flat-earthers). There is no reason for regulators to tolerate their emotional exaggerations and dramatic fictions in the policy-making process.

Integrity is found in respect for facts and reality.

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