

NOTE: The following article by Claire Robinson, the managing editor of the new online database SpinProfiles, as well as containing some fascinating detail on the corporate take over of public science, shows why such a database is vital in confronting two-faced science.

Claire's original article on the SpinProfiles site - www.spinprofiles.org - also contains many embedded links to specific profiles and sources, and provides a good introduction to the kind of material and resources on the site and the user friendly way in which it operates. Find it here <http://tiny.cc/v5mXs>

EXTRACT: Transparency is critical if we are to expose the kind of two-faced science and two-faced lobbyists who are intent on presenting private interests as the public good. This is why GMWatch is participating in the new SpinProfiles project to develop a free online index cataloging the details of industry-friendly experts, and the institutes, think tanks, and front groups they work out of in their battle to influence public opinion and public policy. It is a massive international undertaking, written collaboratively with wiki technology, and aimed at tackling PR and propaganda activities on a wide range of issues.

For it to succeed we need the support and involvement in the SpinProfiles community of as many concerned citizens from around the world as possible. Please help us catalogue the kind of background detail that is missing not just from "Making Sense of GM" but a wide array of PR interventions worldwide. We must end the rule of two-faced science.

Nothing to declare – GM guide's two-faced science

By Claire Robinson

SpinWatch, 5 May 2009

<http://tiny.cc/wDN9Q>

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1.Mind the gaps

On 9 February 2009, Sense About Science (SAS) published "Making Sense of GM"[1] – a new guide to GM food and crops aimed at helping the public "distinguish fact from misinformation".[2] The guide, co-authored by a group of scientists, focuses on unproven 'tomorrow' claims for GM and fails to address the scientific, social, and economic concerns about the effects of the technology. More insidiously, the guide's potted biographies of its

authors omit to mention that many are well known GM supporters and are connected to UK institutions and groups closely aligned with industry.

GMWatch sent out a press release[3] that filled in some of the gaps. Ten days later, an article appeared in the Times Higher Education reporting on the concerns over the guide's silence about its contributors' links with industry.[4] The article pointed out that while the SAS guide noted the authors' public affiliations, such as their positions in universities or research institutes that are primarily funded from the public purse, it omitted any mention of any links to the biotech industry.

Vivian Moses, for example, is described as emeritus professor at Queen Mary & Westfield College, but his position as chairman of the biotech industry-financed lobby group CropGen goes unmentioned.[5] The guide similarly fails to mention the corporate interests of the John Innes Centre (JIC), where eight of its 28 contributors are based, even though the JIC has direct financial relationships with GM companies.[6]

Dr Michael Antoniou, a geneticist at King's College London, described the omissions as "outrageous". He told the Times Higher Education: "GM is a sensitive issue. People have been extremely suspicious because of its industrial connections. So it is imperative that they declare these in this context, as in a journal publication." [7]

Guy Cook, a professor at the Open University who has written a book on the use of language in the GM debate, agreed that the contributors' interests should have been declared. "If not," he told the Times Higher Education, "they deal a severe blow to their own cause, the authority of science, which rests upon rationality, objectivity, evidence and disinterest. The problem with GM advocacy is that it has compromised these principles, and in so doing has dangerously undermined public trust in scientists." [8]

David Miller, professor of sociology at the University of Strathclyde and a director of Spinwatch, likened SAS's guide to "a PR exercise". [9]

2.Nothing to declare

In a letter to GMWatch, the John Innes Centre denied it had vested interests. "The majority of our funding is from the public purse," the letter stated. "We do not regard our affiliations to industry (whether biotech or any other) as a contentious issue. Our interests are not 'vested' and our scientists are extremely careful to avoid any potential conflicts of interest." [10]

The JIC was keen to distance its director, Chris Lamb, from the San Diego, California-based plant biotech company, Akkadix, that he co-founded. According to the letter, "Contrary to what is implied by the GMWatch press release ... the Director of the John Innes Centre has no shareholdings in any biotechnology company or other commercial organization related to the work of the JIC, and hence cannot as implied receive research funding from such an organization." [11]

The letter also emphasised the importance that the JIC places on "plant science research for

'public good'".[12] The message was clear – the JIC's financial relationships with the GM industry are so much in the background that they do not affect its stance or activities in any meaningful way.

3. Industrial alignment of John Innes Centre

That, at least, is the message for the public, who form the target audience for Sense About Science's GM guide. But when Chris Lamb was appointed JIC director in 1999, the press release from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the public funder of the JIC, projected a very different message. It trumpeted Lamb's "extensive experience" of working with the industrial sector. And the chief executive of the BBSRC emphasised that Lamb had "an excellent track record" in "exploiting scientific know-how in applied and commercial projects".[13] This emphasis is unsurprising from a public funding body aligned to industry both in strategic direction and through the number of industry figures on its boards.[14]

The BBSRC's press release also highlighted Lamb's role as a founder of Akkadix.[15] Indeed, in the same year that Lamb was made director of the JIC, he was also appointed co-chair of the scientific advisory board of Akkadix.[16] And the JIC's annual report for the year 2000-2001 stated that among its continued building of collaborative links with industry was "Notably, Akkadix, an international gene discovery and functional genomics company". A press release from Akkadix in 2000 confirmed that an agreement had been reached between Akkadix and the JIC for a research programme "supported by Akkadix for an initial period of three years" and that might "be extended thereafter. Developments arising under the program will be available to Akkadix to license."[17]

The industrial alignment of the JIC was as much in evidence two years later, when Lamb told the press in relation to the latest development arising out of its GBP50 million pound funding deal with Syngenta,[18] "Collaborations with companies, such as Syngenta, is one way to ensure science is converted into products that benefit end-users."[19] The Chairman of the JIC's public funder – the BBSRC – was at that time Peter Doyle, a director of Syngenta who had helped broker the original deal between his company and the JIC.[20]

In its letter to GMWatch, the JIC downplays its relationship with Syngenta, emphasising that the Syngenta lab closed seven years ago.[21] It doesn't mention that when Syngenta announced it was pulling out of the deal in autumn 2002, the JIC's spokesperson was quoted as saying "The frustration for us is this was a new kind of relationship that looked like setting an exciting precedent." [22] That hoped-for "precedent", together with another multi-million pound deal struck around the same time as the Syngenta deal with another GM giant, Dupont, had had the effect of nearly quadrupling the JIC's industrial funding.[23]

In its letter the JIC also says that Lamb's firm, Akkadix, folded in 2000-1.[24] But these biotech failures do not alter the fact that both the JIC and the BBSRC saw such commercial collaborations with the biotech industry as wholly desirable. Syngenta pulled out of its deal with the JIC not because of any desire on the JIC's part to distance itself from the GM giant but because of public hostility to GM crops. Similarly, Akkadix was one of many biotech companies

that faded from the scene when the San Diego biotech bubble burst in the wake of a consumer backlash against GM.[25] Their failure, far from giving the JIC any less of an interest in gaining public support for GM crops, shows public acceptance is critical to the success of such collaborations.

The JIC typifies the two-faced science behind SAS's GM guide. To GM supporters and potential investors, it highlights the importance of its corporate collaborations. But in its attempts to communicate the supposed benefits of GM to the public, the JIC airbrushes away its alignment with industry.

4. Sense About Science's double game

SAS's strategy is identical to that of the JIC. SAS's GM guide – co-edited by its director, Ellen Raphael, and the JIC's Jonathan Jones, who is on the advisory board of the biotech corporation Mendel Biotechnology[26] – makes no reference to its authors' corporate affiliations.

Sense About Science is perfectly placed to play such a double game. It calls itself an "independent charitable trust promoting good science and evidence in public debates". It says, "We do this by promoting respect for evidence and by urging scientists to engage actively with a wide range of groups, particularly when debates are controversial or difficult." These "difficult" debates include "scares about plastic bottles, fluoride and the MMR vaccine to controversies about genetic modification, stem cell research and radiation".[27] But the last accounts it lodged with the Charity Commission show that it received substantial donations from life science, pharmaceutical, oil, chemical, plastics, radiological, and mobile phone companies – the same industries whose interests it defends against their critics.[28]

There are other ways in which what you see is not what you get with SAS. Bizarrely, none of the leading lights of this lobby group for "promoting good science" has a science background. SAS's founder, Dick Taverne's professional life was in the law, politics and business. Its directors, Tracey Brown and Ellen Raphael, both studied sociology under Frank Furedi, the controversial "father" of the now defunct Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), who during the early 1990s backflipped to the farthest fringes of the libertarian right. And both are intimates of Furedi's so-called "LM network", which lobbies in favour of GM foods, human cloning, global warming, and against restraints on corporations. Prior to working for SAS, both its directors worked for the PR firm Register Larkin, which numbered several biotech corporations amongst its clients.[29] Needless to say, none of this information could be deduced from the staff biographies provided by SAS.[30]

5. Sales pitch

Does any of this matter in relation to a guide that is supposed to provide the public with an objective and disinterested view of GM? Scientific research confirms the commonsense view that scientists' judgments on controversial issues are likely to be affected by their relationship to relevant commercial interests, even if the relationship is not direct.[31]

To make matters worse, nowhere are commercial pressures on science more intense than with

biotechnology.[32] As Vivian Moses, one of the GM guide's authors, wrote in a book he co-edited, "biotechnology is not some academic activity, a kind of consequence of innovative laboratory experimentation or a kind of social crusade, but is itself an intensely industrial and commercial matter". He continues, "Perhaps if pushed, we might describe biotechnology as making money with biology." "Biotechnology," he emphasises, "is about selling." [33]

This may help explain why SAS's GM guide reads like one long sales pitch to the public and contains so many reassurances that are scientifically unjustifiable.

1. The guide claims: GM is "more precise" than traditional breeding techniques and no more "unnatural" than "plants bred for conventional and organic agriculture". [34]

But Dr Michael Antoniou, a molecular geneticist at King's College London, told us: "GM transformation of plants is completely different from conventional plant breeding. It is a crude and imprecise technique that causes widespread mutations, resulting in major changes to the plant's DNA blueprint. These changes unnaturally alter the DNA's functioning in unpredictable and potentially harmful ways." [35]

2. The guide claims: "over a trillion meals containing GM ingredients have been consumed without revealing any adverse health effects." [36]

The unscientific nature of this anecdotal claim beggars belief. A report by the US Centers for Disease Control shows that food-related illnesses increased 2- to 10-fold in the years between 1994 (just before GM food was commercialised) and 1999. [37] Is there a link with GM food? No one knows, because GM foods are not even labeled in the US. As epidemiological studies have never been done, it is fatuous to say no "adverse health effects" have been revealed.

It is also ironic that one of the authors of the guide is the current head of Rothamsted Research, given that his predecessor, Ben Mifflin, is on record as saying that, under current monitoring conditions, any unanticipated health impact of GM foods would need to be a "monumental disaster" to be detectable. [38] Mifflin's honesty has been replaced with something more akin to industry spin.

3. The guide states: "A review of research on animals fed on GM by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) concluded: 'a large number of experimental studies with livestock have shown that recombinant DNA fragments or proteins derived from GM plants have not been detected in tissues, fluids or edible products of farm animals like broilers, cattle, pigs or quails.'" [39]

This sounds like a definitive statement from an authoritative source, but what the guide doesn't mention is that the EFSA's GMO panel has long been embroiled in controversy, and has faced repeated accusations of bias in favour of the biotech industry. These accusations have come not just from scientific critics and civil society but from EU member states and even from within the European Commission. [40] And the statement quoted is highly misleading. Several studies have, in fact, shown that GM DNA in animal feed is taken up by the animal's organs and appears in the milk and meat that people eat. [41]

6. The independent scientist "barely exists"

Overall, the GM guide is as incomplete as its authors' biographies, repeatedly ignoring research showing negative effects from GM foods and crops on animal health and the environment. SAS's PR project, authored by experts whose public face is apparently devoid of private interests, is symptomatic of a pervasive problem that extends well beyond biotechnology. According to a leading expert on technology and public policy, the independent scientist who conducts research for the public good "barely exists any more". "They get up and talk as if they are neutral," says Philip Bereano, a professor emeritus from the University of Washington, "But they almost always have some share in the company or some self-interested gain for their work." [42]

7. SpinProfiles' role

Transparency is critical if we are to expose the kind of two-faced science and two-faced lobbyists who are intent on presenting private interests as the public good. This is why GMWatch is participating in the new SpinProfiles project to develop a free online index cataloging the details of industry-friendly experts, and the institutes, think tanks, and front groups they work out of in their battle to influence public opinion and public policy. It is a massive international undertaking, written collaboratively with wiki technology, and aimed at tackling PR and propaganda activities on a wide range of issues.

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Claire Robinson is an editor at GMWatch – <http://www.gmwatch.org>, a co-founder of LobbyWatch – <http://www.lobbywatch.org>, and managing editor of SpinProfiles – <http://www.spinprofiles.org>.

8. Resources

9. Notes

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