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How Media Watchdogs Became Industry Lapdogs

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | November 13, 2023

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While the free press of the past served the role of watchdog and independent informer, the press we have today is far from free and unbiased
- One way by which industry and even government are shaping and manipulating the press is by way of press embargoes, and the so-called "close-hold embargo" in particular
- Another way is through the creation of front groups, and there are now many dozens of industry front groups masquerading as independent information organizations
- In June 2019, a study of International Life Sciences Institute's (ILSI) internal documents revealed how the organization exerts worldwide influence promoting an industry-focused agenda
- The Science Media Centre has been effective in shaping media coverage about science. One analysis found a majority of journalists who used SMC services did not seek additional perspectives for their articles

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The press plays an enormously important role in our society. It informs us about important events and reveals problems we might not have been aware of before. At least that's the theory. Sadly, while the free press of the past indeed served the role of watchdog and independent informer, the press we have today is far from free and unbiased.

In fact, it's hard to look at today's press corps as champions for the free-flow of information. Most reporters simply aren't, anymore. They do shape society, though — just not in the way you might think. Evidence reveals a deep trend of manipulation occurring in many fields, but it appears particularly prevalent in science and medicine.

One way by which industry and even government are shaping and manipulating the press is by way of press embargoes, and the so-called "close-hold embargo" in particular. Another way is through the creation of front groups, and there are now many dozens of industry front groups masquerading as independent information organizations.

Virtually every major industry employs front groups to give the appearance of independent thinking and reporting on industry affairs when, in reality, they're simply spouting industry PR. As such, they are an integral part of an industry propaganda machine.

Recognizing Industry Front Groups

I've previously published information about several such front groups, including the International Food Additives Council (IFAC), the Coalition Against Costly Food Labeling Proposition and Alliance to Feed the Future.

Back in 2013, the Center for Food Safety also published a report with the telling title, "Best Public Relations Money Can Buy: A Guide to Food Industry Front Groups,"[1] which reveals how the food and agricultural industries hide behind friendly-sounding organizations aimed at fooling the public, policymakers and the media.

The report highlights specific tactics used by industry front groups to deceive or shape public opinion, such as:[2]

- Astroturfing (creating fake grassroots campaigns)
- "Shooting the messenger" — ridiculing, marginalizing and discrediting critics
- Paying for science that supports the industry narrative

- Scaremongering

American Council on Science and Health

The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) is a respectable-sounding front group for Monsanto and other multinational biotech companies. A 2013 Mother Jones[3] article spilled the beans on who's actually funding this pro-industry science group.

They defend everything from fracking to pesticides, the toxic plastic ingredient bisphenol-A (BPA) and genetically engineered foods — all in the name of squelching "unwarranted fear mongering by those who don't understand the science."

The ACSH claims to be an independent research and advocacy organization consisting of "concerned scientists" who are devoted to debunking "junk science."

But once you understand who this front group really serves, it becomes easy to see why the scientific basis for the ACSH's recommendations may be questionable at best. As reported by Mother Jones:[4]

> *"[I]nternal financial documents ... show that ACSH depends heavily on funding from corporations that have a financial stake in the scientific debates it aims to shape."*

One prominent player has been Hank Campbell,[5] president of the ACSH from 2015 until 2018.[6] He also founded, purchased or was otherwise tied to a string of websites and organizations focused on science reporting, including ION Publications LLC, Science 2.0, Science Codex and ScienceBlogs.com.

In a now-deleted November 17, 2018, Twitter post,[7] NYU professor Charles Seife illustrated Campbell's network of science blogs in "Mapping a Monsanto-Loving Octopus,"[8] showing the intricate connections between ACSH and the various blogs, and how these various sites all promote Big Biotech's products and aims. As reported by U.S. Right to Know (USRTK) in December 2018:[9]

> *"According to documents[10] released via litigation, Monsanto paid the American Council on Science and Health in 2015 to defend glyphosate and help discredit[11] the scientists of the World Health Organization's cancer research panel for their report raising cancer concerns about the herbicide.*
>
> *The documents indicate that Monsanto executives were uncomfortable about working with ACSH but did so anyway because 'we don't have a lot of supporters and can't afford to lose the few we have,' Daniel Goldstein, Monsanto's senior science lead, wrote in an email to colleagues."*

Seife is accurate enough in his description of Campbell's science network as an octopus. It's a rather bewildering maze of ties. Here, I will summarize just one. ScienceBlogs was founded in 2006 by Seed Media Group, whose board at one point included the now infamous Jeffrey Epstein,[12] who died in prison pending trial on sex trafficking charges.

In 2010, journalist Gaia Vince published an article[13] in The Guardian discussing ScienceBlogs' decision to publish a nutrition blog written by scientists contracted by PepsiCo, and her dealings with Seed Magazine, a Seed Media Group publication. (Recall: Seed Media owned ScienceBlogs).

Vince recounts how the magazine dropped one of her stories for the simple reason they were "in the midst of advertising negotiations with Dow" and her piece happened to be critical of the company.

> *"It seems I had to run my articles past the ads department. In more than a decade working in the industry, I had never come across such a blatant disregard for editorial independence,"* Vince wrote.[14]

After languishing and being shut down toward the latter end of 2017, ScienceBlogs was picked up by ACSH's president Campbell in 2018.[15]

International Life Sciences Institute, Science Media Centre

Two other front groups worth mentioning are the International Life Sciences Institute[16] (ILSI) and Science Media Centre (SMC). ILSI is a nonprofit created in 1978 by Alex Malaspina, a former senior vice president at Coca-Cola Co. and a regulatory affairs leader.

In June 2019, a study of ILSI's internal documents[17] revealed how the organization exerts worldwide influence promoting an industry-focused agenda. The study,[18] published in the journal Globalization and Health, found some of the top officials at ILSI were asked to sit on international panels discussing the negative impacts of tobacco, chemicals and sugary foods on individuals.

They used their position to push for more lenient regulations on products that have mountains of scientific evidence proving the impact on health. Lead author Sarah Steele told The Guardian:[19]

> *"Our findings add to the evidence that this nonprofit organisation has been used by its corporate backers for years to counter public health policies. ILSI should be regarded as an industry group — a private body — and regulated as such, not as a body acting for the greater good."*

A few months later, September 16, 2019, The New York Times[20] described ILSI as "the most powerful food industry group you've never heard of," citing evidence from the Globalization and Health study showing ILSI acts as a lobby arm for its funders — food and agrichemical companies such as Coca-Cola, BASF, Bayer, DuPont, Syngenta, McDonalds and many others.[21]

In the article, journalist Andrew Jacobs describes how ILSI has manipulated and undermined food and health policy in India. Similarly, the U.K.-based SMC is a nonprofit "news agency" that receives funding from a variety of food and chemical companies and their industry trade groups, as well as media groups, government agencies and various universities and foundations. As reported by the USRTK:[22]

> *"The SMC was set up in the UK in 2002 'after media frenzies over MMR, GM crops and animal research' to help the news media better represent mainstream*

science, according to the SMC fact sheet. According to the group's 2002 founding report, the SMC was created to address:

- *a growing 'crisis of confidence' in society's views of science*
- *a collapse of respect for authority and expertise*
- *a risk-averse society and alarmist media coverage and*
- *the 'apparently superior media strategies' used by environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth*

… The SMC model has been influential in shaping media coverage about science. A media analysis[23] of UK papers in 2011 and 2012 found that a majority of reporters who used SMC services did not seek additional perspectives for their stories.

The group also wields political influence. In 2007, SMC stopped a proposed ban on human/animal hybrid embryos with its media campaign to shift coverage from ethical concerns to the benefits of embryos as a research tool …"

Government Agencies Manipulate Media Too

Disturbingly enough, for-profit industries are not the only ones manipulating the media and the public narrative. A Scientific American investigation[24] published in October 2016 revealed the same thing is also happening within some of our government agencies, in this case the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. According to Scientific American:[25]

"It was a faustian bargain — and it certainly made editors at National Public Radio squirm. The deal was this: NPR, along with a select group of media outlets, would get a briefing about an upcoming announcement by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration a day before anyone else.

But in exchange for the scoop, NPR would have to abandon its reportorial independence. The FDA would dictate whom NPR's reporter could and couldn't

interview.

'My editors are uncomfortable with the condition that we cannot seek reaction,' NPR reporter Rob Stein wrote back to the government officials offering the deal. Stein asked for a little bit of leeway to do some independent reporting but was turned down flat. Take the deal or leave it."

As it turns out, NPR accepted the deal and Stein joined reporters from a dozen other media organizations to get the scoop. "Every single journalist present had agreed not to ask any questions of sources not approved by the government until given the go-ahead," Scientific American writes.

Is the Free Press Really Free?

Efforts to control reporters and limit their ability to speak to other sources or approach the subject at hand from any angle they see fit is deeply problematic and wholly inappropriate. A significant problem is that these deals are secret, so the public doesn't know that the journalists doing the reporting have relinquished their right to cover the subject objectively and/or at depth.

Yet this kind of media manipulation is becoming ever more popular, and as noted by Scientific American, "is an increasingly important tool used by scientific and government agencies to control the behavior of the science press."

Indeed, if you read a lot of science articles, you'll find most sound like copies of each other. They have the same talking points and make the same arguments, regardless of who's doing the reporting. The article goes on to note:[26]

"Documents obtained by Scientific American through Freedom of Information Act requests now paint a disturbing picture of the tactics that are used to control the science press.

For example, the FDA assures the public that it is committed to transparency, but the documents show that, privately, the agency denies many reporters

access … and even deceives them with half-truths to handicap them in their pursuit of a story.

At the same time, the FDA cultivates a coterie of journalists whom it keeps in line with threats. And the agency has made it a practice to demand total control over whom reporters can and can't talk to until after the news has broken, deaf to protests by journalistic associations and media ethicists and in violation of its own written policies.

By using close-hold embargoes and other methods, the FDA, like other sources of scientific information, are gaining control of journalists who are supposed to keep an eye on those institutions. The watchdogs are being turned into lapdogs."

Watchdogs Turned Into Lapdogs

As explained in the featured article, the embargo tactic can be traced back to the 1920s. In the beginning, it took the pressure off journalists, allowing them to investigate a story without fear of losing the "scoop" to another reporter.

Embargoes basically work like this: Reporters are given an advance copy of breaking news along with scientists' contact information, with the clear understanding that their story cannot run until the embargo expires. This way, all of the reporters will publish the same story on the same day.

However, it didn't take long for scientific institutions to realize that this system could be used to their advantage. Not only do embargoes allow them to control the timing of the press coverage, it also allows them to control the content — in part by making deals limiting who the reporters are allowed to talk to, and in part by cherry-picking the reporters selected to participate in the embargo. Over time, this system has led to journalists ceding more and more of their independence.

The strategy now known as a "close-hold embargo" is the same as a regular news embargo with the added condition that the reporters must also agree to restrict their

investigation to the individuals specified by the source. In the FDA case above, reporters were "expressly forbidden from seeking outside comment," Scientific American writes.

As noted by critics, this transforms journalists into little more than stenographers. The FDA's close-hold embargo received a rash of critique and pushback from journalistic associations, leading the agency to publicly backtrack, stating it would establish new ground rules for news embargoes. Scientific American writes:

> *"Initially published online in June 2011, the FDA's new media policy officially killed the close-hold embargo: 'A journalist may share embargoed material provided by the FDA with nonjournalists or third parties to obtain quotes or opinions prior to an embargo lift provided that the reporter secures agreement from the third party to uphold the embargo.'*
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> *Due diligence would always be allowed, at least at the FDA. Health and science journalists breathed a sigh of relief … In reality, there was no misunderstanding. The close-hold embargo had become part of the agency's media strategy. It was here to stay — policy or no policy."*

Close-Hold Embargoes May Be More Common Than We Think

As mentioned, unless a reporter breaks the rules and discloses the close-hold embargo, it's virtually impossible to know when it's at play, since the whole deal is a secret. It's also very difficult to determine whether reporters invited to receive the story were cherry-picked because of their known or assumed stance on the topic at hand.

Reporters who have been critical in the past are unlikely to be invited, and thus have no access to any of the data or the sources, making it very difficult if not impossible to craft a report.

Breaking the close-hold embargo even once is also a surefire way to be left out in the cold. The end result is consistently one-sided reporting where everyone is saying the same thing and quoting the same sources.

Unfortunately, there's no indication that journalists are trying to take back control. As mentioned in the featured article, in the case of a close-hold embargo, all they have to do is let the embargo expire and then reach out to outside sources after the fact for a more nuanced perspective. This means their report will be delayed, but it might offer a more complete picture.

The take-home message here is that there's cause for skepticism when it comes to "facts" presented in the news. An obviously one-sided story could be indicative of a secret close-hold embargo behind the scenes, for example, although it would be hard to prove it. Unfortunately, in a case like that, cross-checking with other media sources won't do you any good, since they're all likely to report the exact same talking points from the same lineup of approved sources.

The only remedy I can see is to search for sources presenting the other side of the argument. This used to be part of the journalist's job, but now it's become incumbent on the reader.

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