

Authors of study linking GM corn with rat tumors manipulated media to prevent criticism of their work

<http://boingboing.net/2012/09/21/authors-of-study-linking-gm-co.html>

By [Maggie Koerth-Baker](#) at 12:06 pm Friday, Sep 21



Earlier today, I posted on the recent paper that claims to have found a link between eating genetically modified corn and the growth of tumors in rats. [Short version: The research sucked](#). It's a terribly done study and it demonstrates why "peer reviewed" does not always mean "accurate".

But now, this story is getting worse. Turns out, the authors of the study (and their financial sponsor, The Sustainable Food Trust) manipulated the media to ensure that the first news stories published about the study would not be critical of its methods or results.

First, some background. When a journal is about to publish a study that they think will be big news, they usually offer the full study to reporters under an embargo system. The reporter gets to read the study, do their reporting, and write a story ... but they can't publish that story until a specific day at a specific time. If you're a daily or an online publication, there's a lot of pressure to have your story ready to go the moment the embargo lifts. Otherwise, you'll look like you weren't on the ball. There's a lot of problems with this system, but it's very common.

What's not common: Forcing journalists to sign non-disclosure agreements promising to not show the study they're reporting on to any independent researchers or outside experts. If you're trying to make sure your publication runs a story on the study right when the embargo lifts, but you can't show the study to any third-party experts *before* the embargo lifts, then the story you run is going to (inevitably) contain only information the authors of the study want you to talk about. It ceases being journalism and becomes PR.

This is what the authors of the GM corn/rat tumor study did.

At Embargo Watch (an excellent blog that discusses issues with the embargo system as a whole) Ivan Oransky explains that we know this happened because the reporters forced to sign the agreement talked about it in their stories:

As the AFP noted in their original story, since updated:

Breaking with a long tradition in scientific journalism, the authors allowed a selected group of reporters to have access to the paper, provided they signed confidentiality agreements that prevented them from consulting other experts about the research before publication.

My Reuters colleagues described the embargo agreement in a similar way:

In an unusual move, the research group did not allow reporters to seek outside comment on their paper before its publication in the peer-reviewed journal Food and Chemical Toxicology and presentation at a news conference in London.

So did the BBC:

In a move regarded as unusual by the media, the French research group refused to provide copies of the journal paper to reporters in advance of its publication, unless they signed non-disclosure agreements. The NDAs would have prevented the journalists from approaching third-party researchers for comment.

To their credit, the reporters at the three outlets I cite above went back and refiled their stories with comment from scientists unrelated to the study, and from Monsanto, once the embargo lifted. But the Sustainable Food Trust knew damn well reporters would be under pressure to file something the moment the embargo lifted — especially since this was an embargo likely to be broken, as it was — and that their hands would be tied as far as outside comment.

The authors of that study, and The Sustainable Food Trust, deliberately tried to make sure that the first stories you read about their study didn't tell you how bad the study was.

Guys, that's messed up.

And, again, just as with Emily Sohn's story at Discover, neither the authors of the study nor The Sustainable Food Trust replied to Ivan Oransky's request for an interview.

[Read the rest of the story at Embargo Watch](#)

In lighter news, I have decided to begin referring to this scandal as "Corn Maze".

Image: [corn maze](#), a Creative Commons [Attribution Share-Alike \(2.0\)](#) image from [andy_emcee's photostream](#)

Maggie Koerth-Baker is the science editor at [BoingBoing.net](#). She writes a monthly column for *The New York Times Magazine* and is the author of [Before the Lights Go Out](#), a book about electricity, infrastructure, and the future of energy. You can find Maggie on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).



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ChicagoD

Strange. Given the criticisms of the study I expected these scientists to have been open and honest about their results.



-

theophrastvs

Peer review is vital. But (as one that's experienced it on both sides) it is sadly often a matter of 'Friend review'. I'm aware of more than a couple grand profs who would never permit one of their papers to be sent to any but former postdocs. "but how can they control to whom it's sent?" they're

buddies with the particular journal's editorial board. cronyism is a bane of every walk of life. Good science journalism [pull-o-forelock to Ms Koerth-Baker] is good medicine for this.



foobar

Doesn't matter. The anti-GMO crowd will be repeating this for years anyway. As science, it's horrible, but as propaganda it's entirely fit to order.



Cowicide

I also think this is a boon to the GMO industry crowd who'll be repeating this flawed study as evidence of a "conspiracy" against them and further muddle the waters of science that legitimately questions the safety and sustainability of GMO's within our food chain.

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Maggie Koerth-Baker

Basically, it's bad news all around. These guys are phenomenally dumb. It's going to be anti-science propaganda (in both directions) for years. And it makes me feel all HULK SMASH.



Maggie Koerth-Baker

Not to mention the inside baseball journalism problems here. I mean, it's great that the AP, et. al, included this info and later updated the stories.

But why wasn't the story, to begin with, "Hey, these guys tried to jerk us around." Why play ball at all on this thing?



dustbuster7000

Baseball Journalism? Am I missing something here?



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dustbuster7000

OK, it appears the relevant phrase here is "inside baseball", not "baseball journalism". And my ignorance is hilarious given the meaning of the phrase.



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Gideon Jones

Reminds me of a certain autism/vaccine study... Oddly enough (or not), there seems to be a good bit of overlap between the two crowds.



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TooGoodToCheck

I'm not sure I can handle a scandal name that lacks the suffix "-gate"



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disillusion

So Corn Gate? Isn't Cornwall enough, now we need a gate?



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ChicagoD

Gate is overused. Hole isn't . . .



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Roscoe

Too bad that one rushed "sky is falling" study is out there, yes. But this is a drop in the bucket compared against the swell of disinformation, obfuscation, and lies that are perpetually spewed out of the for-profit BigAg/petro-chemical companies that are poisoning the heck out of our fragile little blue marble. Monsanto, Dow, Bayer and their ilk don't serve anyone but their shareholders, and the revolving doors between US government and private companies are paving the way to total environment collapse. Yes, that's dramatic - but the amount of toxins in our environment, that are released unchecked, are atrocious. Regulation? none...

CA is still going to vote yes on prop 37 - the people still have a voice and we'd better use it!

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PeterK

What sort of toxins? Where are they being released? What does "total environment[al] collapse" even mean? That life will cease to exist on Earth?

I think we need a little less hyperbole, and a little more rational discussion.



Roscoe

Sure thing Peter - DDT, Agent Orange, BT/RoundUp - all of these are out in the wild, and all have negative impact on our planet. As soon as they're manufactured, and sold, right away they're seen as wonderful progress. Then only after years of use are the problems uncovered. An independent, active and involved scientific community investigate these chemicals and lo and behold - Condors almost fully extinct, super bugs that are resistant to BT, etc...

The science is there - and yes, I may be emphatic, but I'm not slinging any lies here.

The unconstrained release of new molecules, from pesticides to pharmaceuticals, is of grave importance to the longevity of our species. We're a juvenile species that is just now discovering the range of our capabilities - what scares me is that it's our sense of responsibility and wisdom that are lacking maturity.

I'm no Luddite either - I believe technology is our best solution to yesterday's bad technology. We just can't let the profiteers dominate any longer at the expense of our health.