

The New York Times

The Opinion Pages



Dot Earth

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September 21, 2012, 4:08 pm [Comment](#)

<http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/21/group-promoting-rat-study-of-engineered-corn-forced-coverage-rush/>

Group Promoting Rat Study of Engineered Corn Forced Coverage Rush

By [ANDREW C. REVKIN](#)

Major science journals have long offered media advance access to newsworthy papers ahead of publication under [embargo agreements](#). This process, [while imperfect](#), allows reporters a few days to do reporting and vet studies with independent scientists who also abide by agreed timetables.

A different approach to a press embargo was taken by the [organizations that orchestrated publicity](#) around this week's [much discussed study](#) reporting big health impacts on rats fed genetically engineered corn, led by a French scientist strongly opposed to genetically engineered foods. The study has been of particular interest because of California's [looming vote over Proposition 37](#), which would require labeling of such foods. (There's been fresh discussion of [some merits](#) and [apparent weaknesses](#) in the work.)

[Ivan Oransky](#), the executive editor of [Reuters Health](#), who also blogs on medical research and the press, has an important post at his invaluable Embargo Watch blog revealing how the embargo rules, involving signed agreements, used by those involved with the rat study appear to have had the opposite goal — making sure reporters ran with the scary news about tumor rates and premature mortality in rats fed chow with G.M.O. ingredients without having time for analysis and crosschecking. (I did not have any such special access when I wrote on the paper.) Here's an excerpt from Oransky's post and a link to the rest:

A [study of the effect of genetically modified corn on rats](#) that you may have read about earlier this week doesn't seem to have said much about whether GMOs are safe. But it sure said a lot about how the scientists who did the work used a crafty embargo to control their message....

It turns out there was likely [an embargo break on the research](#). But that's not why you're reading about it here. What drew my attention — thanks to a few eagle-eyed Embargo Watch readers pointing me to this [post by Thomas Lumley](#) — is how the co-sponsors of the research handled the embargo. 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.

Oransky, who described this as “an outrageous abuse” of the system, went on to propose calling this kind of embargo agreement a “stenographer’s embargo” — in that it turns journalists into typists with no ability to examine what’s reported. Please [read the whole post here](#).

Of course some of the blame lies with the reporters or media outlets willing to sign such an agreement, given how it shackles them. The science writer [Carl Zimmer](#) made this point in [a comment on Oransky’s blog](#):

I have no sympathy for stenographers. The more that journalists bend to these demands, the more people can corrupt the system. The scientists should be ashamed of their own behavior in this affair, but we also need to deliver a dose of shame to the reporters who caved to these outrageous demands, so as to discourage it from happening again.

But this incident mainly reveals just how dubious this whole affair has been.

If the rat research ends up replicated, it’ll constitute a substantial breakthrough, and a challenge to the agricultural biotechnology industry. But until then, I have to place it in a big bin of suspect studies “done by people out to prove something rather than investigate something,” as the evolutionary biologist Michael Eisen said in [a late update to my previous post](#) on this work.

Eisin, if you missed it, added: “This affects every aspect of the work, from study design, to execution, interpretation and publicity.... The result of all of this severely tainted work (and there’s plenty from

the pro-GMO side too) is that the really good science in the field gets drowned out, and isn't taken seriously because people just assume that it, too, must be biased. Total mess."

A total mess, indeed.