

02.06.2019, Carey Gillam

How Monsanto manipulates journalist and academics.

Monsanto's own emails and documents reveal a disinformation campaign to hide its weedkiller's possible links to cancer.

Monsanto's weedkiller Roundup, one of the world's most popular herbicides, may cause cancer. Photograph: Mike Blake/Reuters

Over the past year, evidence of Monsanto's deceptive efforts to defend the safety of its top-selling Roundup herbicide have been laid bare for all to see. Through three civil trials, the public release of internal corporate communications has revealed conduct that all three juries have found so unethical as to warrant punishing punitive damage awards.

Much attention has been paid to Monsanto conversations in which company scientists casually discuss ghostwriting scientific papers and suppressing science that conflicts with corporate assertions of Roundup's safety. There has also been public outrage over internal records illustrating cozy relationships with friendly regulators which border on – and possibly cross into – collusion.

But these once-confidential Monsanto documents demonstrate that the deception has gone much deeper. In addition to the manipulation of science and of regulators, the company's most insidious deceit may be its strategic manipulation of the media, according to the records.

We recently learned that a young woman falsely posing as a freelance BBC reporter at one of the Roundup cancer trials was in fact a "reputation management" consultant for FTI Consulting, whose clients include Monsanto. The woman spent time with journalists who were covering the Hardeman v Monsanto trial in San Francisco, pretending to do reporting while also suggesting to the real reporters certain storylines or points that favored Monsanto.

Lawyer Tim Litzenburg, who represents several plaintiffs suing Monsanto over claims Roundup causes cancer, told me that he has traced what he calls a "dark money project" by Monsanto aimed at winning favorable public opinion. The project includes planting helpful news articles in traditional news outlets; discrediting and harassing journalists who refused to parrot the company's propaganda; and secretly funding front groups to amplify pro-Monsanto messaging across social media platforms.

"We now know they had pet journalists who pushed Monsanto propaganda under the guise of 'objective reporting,'" Litzenburg, a partner with the firm Kincheloe, Litzenburg & Pendleton, told me. "At the same time, the chemical company sought to amass dossiers to discredit those journalists who were brave enough to speak out against them."

According to the internal Monsanto documents Litzenburg has received through discovery, pro-Monsanto narratives are disseminated by individuals and groups that promote the work of journalists

who follow Monsanto's desired storylines while seeking to smear and discredit journalists whose work threatens Monsanto.

For me, a career journalist who spent 17 years covering Monsanto for the international news agency Reuters, the revelations are not surprising. In 2014, an organization called Academics Review published two scathing articles about my work at Reuters writing about Monsanto's genetically engineered crops and its Roundup herbicide business. Monsanto had been unhappy with some of my stories, complaining that I should not be including the views of company critics. Academics Review amplified those complaints under the guise of being an independent association.

Internal Monsanto documents have revealed, however, that Academics Review was and is anything but independent. The organization was the brainchild of Monsanto, designed as a vehicle for responding to "scientific concerns and allegations" while "keeping Monsanto in the background so as not to harm the credibility of the information," as one November 2010 email from Monsanto executive Eric Sachs stated. According to a March 11, 2010 email chain, Academics Review was established with the help of a former director of corporate communications at Monsanto who set up his own public relations shop and a former vice president of a biotech industry trade association of which Monsanto was a member.

Other internal documents show Monsanto's money and marching orders behind the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH), an organization that purports to be independent of industry while publishing articles attacking journalists and scientists whose work contradicts Monsanto's agenda. Articles written by ACSH associates have appeared in USA Today, the Wall Street Journal and Forbes.

ACSH has published several articles aimed at discrediting not just me but also Pulitzer-prize-winning New York Times reporter Eric Lipton, who ACSH calls a "science birther", and former New York Times reporter Stephanie Strom, who ACSH accused of "irresponsible journalism" shortly before she left the paper. Both reporters had written articles exposing concerns about Monsanto. The New York Times' Danny Hakim has also been targeted by ACSH for writing about Monsanto. "Danny Hakim Is Lying To You," reads one of several posts by ACSH about Hakim.

Internal Monsanto emails show ACSH seeking and receiving financial commitments from Monsanto. One email string from 2015 between the company and ACSH details the "unrestricted" financial support ACSH desires while laying out the "impacts" across social media ACSH is achieving. "Each and every day we work hard to prove our worth to companies like Monsanto..." the ACSH email states. A separate email chain among Monsanto executives states "You WILL NOT GET A BETTER VALUE FOR YOUR DOLLAR than ACSH."

Tom Philpott, a longtime journalist with Mother Jones magazine who has written critically about genetically modified crops for several years, has also felt the sting of industry harassment.

"These are vicious and utterly unfounded attacks on a journalist's credibility, well designed to undercut him with his employer," he told me.

While harassing reporters whose coverage it deems negative, Monsanto has also found ways to cultivate certain journalists to carry its messaging. Monsanto's internal documents show that when the company wanted to discredit the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) after the group classified Monsanto's glyphosate weed killer as a probable carcinogen, Monsanto turned to a London-based Reuters reporter with specific story suggestions.

The emails show that a controversial story published in June 2017 by Reuters, raising questions about the integrity of the IARC's review of glyphosate, was secretly fed to the news agency by Monsanto executive Sam Murphey. Murphey gave the reporter documents that had not yet been filed publicly in court along with a desired story narrative and a slide deck of suggested points to make in the story.

The story, which did not disclose Monsanto as the initial source, closely followed Monsanto's suggestions, the emails show.

Another newly released email details how Monsanto's fingerprints were on at least two other Reuters stories about the IARC. A 1 March 2016 email speaks of the involvement of Monsanto's "Red Flag" campaign in a Reuters story critical of IARC and Monsanto's desire to influence a second, similar story Reuters was planning. Red Flag is a Dublin-based PR and lobbying firm. According to the email, "following engagement by Red Flag a number of months ago, the first piece was quite critical of IARC." The email goes on: "You may also be aware that Red Flag is in touch with Reuters regarding the second report in the series..."

A little over a month later, Reuters published a story headlined "Special Report: How the World Health Organization's cancer agency confuses consumers."

The stories in question were shared by ACSH, the American Chemistry Council, Monsanto and others. In Europe, French prosecutors are now probing Monsanto's campaign to manipulate journalists and others, including secret files on influential individuals compiled by Monsanto public relations firm FleishmanHillard. Bayer AG, the German company that acquired Monsanto last June, has admitted that FleishmanHillard created lists of people in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom on behalf of Monsanto. The company has apologized for the secret files and said it is hiring an external law firm to investigate the matter.

In the United States, Raymond Kerins, Bayer's head of communications, told me that the company "stands for openness and fair dealings, with all of our audiences, including the news media."

The comment rings hollow as the character attack pieces on me and other journalists continue to circulate and Monsanto's history of harassment and media manipulation seems to be growing – just as the number of plaintiffs alleging Roundup causes cancer also grows.

It's time for the dishonesty to end.

- Carey Gillam is a journalist and author, and a public interest researcher for US Right to Know, a not-for-profit food industry research group