HOW FOOD INDUSTRY FRONT GROUPS AND COVERT COMMUNICATIONS ARE SHAPING THE STORY OF FOOD

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Executive Summary

How do we know if our food is safe? How are the chemicals used to produce our food impacting our health and the environment? How can journalists reporting on these issues know when their sources are accurate?

Consumers are asking more questions about how their food was grown and raised, and demanding more transparency, as a growing body of science has linked food additives and chemicals used in food production to problems ranging from cancer to bee declines.

These concerns are helping to spur record growth in organic and non-GMO food, which is in turn prompting major brands from Cheerios to Similac to Chipotle to reformulate their products. It's all part of a trend that one food industry veteran recently described in Fortune magazine as "the most dynamic, disruptive, and transformational time" he has seen in his 37-year career.

"Major packaged-food companies lost \$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives," wrote journalist Beth Kowitt in her Fortune article.¹

In this climate of market disruption, it is getting increasingly difficult to sort fact from fiction in media coverage about our food system. One reason: A particular segment of the food industry we refer to it here as the industrial food and agriculture sector, including biotech, agrochemical, pharmaceutical and agribusiness companies, as well as industrial livestock producers — is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to manipulate the public conversation about our food.

Rather than responding to changing market demands by shifting the way they do business, these companies are trying to preserve market share and win key policy battles by using "tobaccostyle" PR tactics.

In this report, we show how the industrial food sector is using its deep pockets and new tools to shape media coverage of our food system — often without the public or policymakers realizing the story is being carefully crafted. While the food industry's use of public relations to shape popular opinion and policy making is not new, the level of spending, the increase in the use of front groups to promote industry messages and the deployment of covert social media tactics to spin the story of food is unprecedented.

The growth in food industry public relations "spin" is in direct response to consumer concerns about harmful chemicals in food and the negative impacts of chemical-intensive agriculture and factory farming on public health and the environment. As demand for organic food and GMO-free products has grown, so has the backlash from an agrichemical industry that is losing consumer confidence and facing pressure for more transparency and regulatory safeguards.

As this report shows, these corporations and their allies are spending massive amounts of money on stealth communications campaigns that are designed to stall the growth of the organic sector, promote chemical-intensive industrial agriculture, and sway opinion leaders and policymakers on policy decisions affecting our food system. With the future of our food at stake, it is critical to raise awareness about the coordinated messages and covert communication tactics being used by this vast marketing machine.

Key Findings:

The industrial food and agricultural sector spent hundreds of millions of dollars from 2009 to 2013 on communications efforts to spin the media, drive consumer behavior and advance its policy agenda. Spending includes:

- \$126 million spent by 14 food industry front groups that often appear in the media as independent sources but are funded by and serve the interests of the industrial food sector. Six of these front groups have launched just since 2011 (See Annex 4).
- These include groups like the U.S. Farmers and Rancher's Alliance, whose partners include Monsanto, DuPont, Dow and Syngenta; and the Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food, created by the Grocery Manufacturer's Association to fight GMO labeling.
- More than \$600 million spent by four major trade associations — CropLife America, BIO, Grocery Manufacturers Association, and the





American Meat Institute — that promote and defend the agendas of pesticide, biotech and conventional food corporations (including but not limited to PR activities) (See Annex 3).

 Tens of millions of dollars a year on communications campaigns by the federal check-off programs for beef, corn, soybeans and dairy; as well as hundreds of millions more spent to market companies and products in this sector. For example, in 2013 Monsanto alone spent \$95 million on marketing.²

While this is not a complete tally of spending by all the industry front groups, trade associations, industry PR firms or companies shaping the public conversation about food and influencing policy, these figures attempt to convey the scope and scale of such communications activity.

Key Tactics

The food industry is deploying a host of covert communication tactics to shape public opinion without most people realizing the stories are being shaped behind the scenes to promote corporate interests. This report focuses on just six of these tactics:

- Deploying front groups who appear to be independent, but are in fact made up of industry or PR professionals to promote their messages with consumers and the media;
- Targeting female audiences by trying to coopt female bloggers, elevating female spokespeople and promoting messages to disparage "organic moms" as elitist bullies;
- Infiltrating social media and creating seemingly independent social media engagement platforms, such as GMO Answers, that are in fact run by industry PR firms;
- Attacking the credibility of scientists, advocates, consumers and journalists who raise concerns about industrial food production's methods and impacts;
- Partnering with prominent media venues on "native advertising" disguised as real news content that promotes industry messages;
- Using third-party allies to foster an echo

chamber of carefully crafted talking points to frame the story of food in favor of chemical intensive industrial food production.



Monsanto's ad in Oprah's O Magazine was pulled after thousands signed a petition urging Oprah to remove the ad. Source: www.foodintegritynow.com (2015)

We created this guide to help reporters, policymakers, opinion leaders and the public know when sources and "experts" are more focused on promoting corporate interests and messaging than

Our aim is to shed light on how the industrial food and agriculture sector is manipulating public discourse in order to defuse public concern about the real risks of chemical-intensive industrial agriculture and undermine public awareness of the benefits of organic food and diversified, ecological production systems. Our goal is to encourage journalists, opinion leaders and the public to bring increased scrutiny to industry's messages and messengers. ensuring a healthy, safe, sustainable and transparent food system. Our aim is to shed light on how the industrial food and agriculture sector is trying to manipulate public discourse in order to defuse concerns about the real risks of chemical-intensive industrial agriculture and undermine public confidence in the benefits of organic food and diversified, ecological production systems. We hope this report helps bring increased scrutiny to the food industry's messages and messengers.

Although advocates and educated consumers backed by powerful new research on the benefits of organic food and farming and the risks of chemical intensive agriculture — are using the tools of social media and organizing to push back against this propaganda, they lack the vast financial resources of industry. Left unchecked, the recent growth in industry-sponsored spin, misinformation and covert communications could succeed in misleading consumers and reducing demand for and access to safe, sustainable and organic food. In order to advance the policies needed to reform industrial food production and build a healthy food system for all, we need to expose industry influence and make sure that we're hearing the real story, not spin.

Reporters and their audiences deserve to be able to trust the sources and information used in coverage of these important issues. We hope this report is helpful in revealing many of the key groups and tactics used by industry and assist in the quest for fair and accurate reporting on our food system.



A note on terms: Throughout this primer we use the term "food industry" or "industrial food sector" as a shorthand and imperfect proxy to refer to the companies involved in the industrial food and agriculture sector. These companies include agricultural biotechnology companies such as Monsanto; agrochemical companies such as Syngenta and Dow; industrial livestock producers such as Smithfield and Tyson; agribusiness companies such as Cargill and ADM; pharmaceutical companies providing antibiotics and other drugs for the livestock industry such as Elanco; and others. While this primer does not focus on specific strategies used by food companies such as Coca- Cola, PepsiCo or McDonald's, or food retailers such as Walmart or Kroger, many of these same tactics and even some of the same front groups, are also employed to serve these interests. Finally, we also note that the food industry is far from monolithic in its communications and its positions, with sectors and companies often working at cross-purposes with each other. In this primer, we focus on many of the shared communications interests of the industrial food sector.

Introduction: The Boom of Spin

The increase of industry-sponsored spin comes at a time when big food and agrochemical companies are waking up to a new consumer. Millions of Americans — and more every day — are concerned about growing scientific evidence of the impacts of agrochemicals, factory farming and GMOs on the environment and on public health. These concerns have translated into skyrocketing sales of organic, sustainable, local and non-GMO consumer products:

- Certified-organic product sales jumped to more than \$35 billion in 2013, up 11.5 percent from 2012, the fastest growth in five years, according to the Organic Trade Association;³
- Farmers markets in the United States have more than doubled in the past decade, to 8,268 in 2014;⁴
- 71 percent of Americans are concerned about biotechnology in food⁵ according to a 2014 Hartman Organic and Natural Survey, and according to Nielsen research, non-GMO certified products reached over \$10 billion in sales in 2014.⁶

Blockbuster movies such as *Food Inc. (2008)*, which grossed more than \$5 million domestically,⁷ books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma (2007)*, and *Fast Food Nation (2001)*, and public scandals — including numerous meat recalls and food-borne illnesses — have all contributed to increased public awareness and concern about the food system. On social media and in the blogo-sphere, this dramatic rise in interest in healthier, more sustainable food is reflected in a new wave of bloggers, independent journalists and websites focused on the benefits of organic agriculture and the risks to public health and the environment inherent in the industrial food system.

All of this has not gone unnoticed by the food industry: As one trade publication explained, referring to the groundbreaking work of UC Berkeley journalism professor and journalist Michael Pollan, the industry has become alarmed about the "Pollan-ization" of the public mind.⁸ In response, it has turned up the volume on its spin machine, spending hundreds of millions of dollars and deploying new tactics to convince Americans that industrial



food is safe, healthy and environmentally sound. Many of these tactics are lifted from the playbook of the tobacco industry, which used spin to stall regulation.

While food companies have always engaged in marketing, they are increasingly using covert tactics to shape the public's understanding about controversial food issues. The California Strawberry Commission can always be expected to advertise strawberries, but when this industry trade association funds a front group, the Alliance for Food and Farming, to defend the hazardous chemicals used to produce those strawberries and disparage organic farming, it is engaging in a covert public relations tactic.

The food industry's growing investment in covert spin comes at time when mainstream media is contracting, meaning there are fewer resources to do the kind of in-depth reporting to uncover this spin. Today, PR professionals outnumber journalists by a ratio of nearly 5 to 1, according to the Pew Research Center.⁹ As Pew wrote in 2015, many news outlets that once had substantial resources to report on critical issues no longer have those resources and "special interests have filled the void."¹⁰

It is in this media context that the food industry is working to shape the story of food. The following pages describe how industry-funded front groups and trade associations craft deceptive messages and often use covert tactics to move these messages into the public consciousness. This multimillion-dollar effort aims to craft a narrative about food that is intended to defuse public concern about the real risks of chemical-intensive industrial agriculture and undermine the public's perceptions of the benefits of organic food and diversified, ecological agriculture systems.