



TACTIC 4: Tracking and Attacking Scientists, Journalists, and Influencers

“You can’t be afraid of the absolute hand-to-hand combat, metaphorically.”

Marc Moreno, Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow

In the documentary *Merchants of Doubt*, Marc Moreno, a former staffer for U.S. Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), described working to thwart action on climate by attacking the scientists speaking out about the crisis. “You’ve got to name names and you’ve got to go after individuals,” Moreno said. That’s just what he did to some of the world’s most renowned climate scientists: “We went after [climate scientists] James Hansen and Michael Oppenheimer,” Moreno added, “and we had a lot of fun with it.”³⁴²

Attacking experts is another key industry spin tactic — one the pesticide industry has been deploying for decades. Sixty years ago, when Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, her scientific analysis of the harms of DDT, Monsanto engaged in targeted personal attacks to try to undermine the landmark book. Pesticide defenders derided Carson as a “spinster,” a “priestess of nature,” and even accused of being a “mass murderess” responsible for the lost lives of African children, wrote *Audubon* magazine’s [Frank Graham, Jr.](#) These character assaults, he notes, had “nothing to do with the science or merits of pesticide use.”³⁴³



Mark Moreno ginned up attacks on climate scientists. Conservative foundations that fund Moreno’s group ClimateDepot have also funded Jon Entine’s Genetic Literacy Project.

Character assassination has been deployed against countless scientists since. But industry goes after more than just the scientists; companies and their public relations proxies also attack journalists, public interest groups, and anyone raising concerns about their products as a key tactic. These attacks serve two purposes: they work to undermine the credibility of those raising concerns and, at the same time, they can have a chilling effect, causing many to think twice about putting themselves in industry crosshairs.

Orchestrating “outrage” against cancer researchers

In looking at how Monsanto, and now Bayer, responded to the existential threat of the IARC cancer ruling on glyphosate, we see this tactic at work. In the lead up to IARC’s 2015 report classifying glyphosate as a probable human carcinogen, Monsanto rolled out an “unprecedented and harsh strategy” to discredit experts, as [Jonathan Samet](#), Dean of the Colorado School of Public Health, described in the *American Journal of Public Health*.³⁴⁴ Monsanto’s attacks, he said, amounted to an “attack on expert review” itself. Journalists at *Le Monde* [described](#) Monsanto’s coordinated attack on IARC as “an effort to destroy the United Nations’ cancer agency by any means possible.”³⁴⁵

As we shared in the previous tactic, Monsanto’s own [internal documents](#) reveal that, in the weeks before IARC issued its March 20, 2015 ruling, Monsanto had already begun to engage “industry partners” in a plan to, in their words, “orchestrate outcry” and “outrage” with the cancer agency’s decision.³⁴⁶ The examples below highlight the lengths to which Monsanto and its allies were willing to go — and feel they

needed to go — to marginalize, silence, and discredit critics of glyphosate. These examples also show the hidden influence pesticide companies wield, weaving their narrative through powerful third-party allies in media, academia, and the highest levels of government.

“The Monsanto strategy parallels those used by the tobacco industry and others, but the glyphosate story is notable for its intensity...”

Jonathan Samets,
[American Journal of Public Health](#)

Personal attacks on scientists

One key industry partner engaged in Monsanto’s plan to discredit the IARC cancer panel in the wake of its glyphosate ruling was the **Genetic Literacy Project (GLP)**, a group that claims it is the “most visited biotechnology focused web source in the world.”³⁴⁷ While its tagline is “science not ideology,” and its founder Jon Entine describes himself as an independent journalist,³⁴⁸ the GLP’s mission is to “prevent legislative overreach in genetic engineering,” according to [tax filings](#), and one of its top funders from July 2020 to June 2021 was Bayer.³⁴⁹

Entine and his group have a long history of ties to the chemical industry; Entine’s work has included defending pesticides, industrial chemicals, plastics, fracking, and the oil industry, often with attacks on [scientists](#),³⁵⁰ [journalists](#),³⁵¹ and [academics](#).³⁵² GLP has published [hundreds of articles](#) promoting and defending glyphosate,³⁵³ some authored by chemical industry lobbyists^{354, 355} or climate science skeptics.^{356, 357}

When Entine launched GLP in 2011, he also ran a public relations firm that [included Monsanto among its clients](#).³⁵⁸ And while GLP’s website claimed for years that the organization did not accept corporate funding, its own disclosures suggest otherwise. In fall 2016, GLP disclosed “pass through” funding from Academics Review,³⁵⁹ a disclosure that was removed after documents surfaced showing Academics Review received its funding from pesticide companies.³⁶⁰ GLP also disclosed receiving

funds from the **Center for Food Integrity**, a group underwritten by food and pesticide companies.³⁶¹ Internal Monsanto [emails from 2014](#) suggest additional corporate ties: the emails discuss how Monsanto executives chose GLP as the “primary outlet” to publish a series of papers about GMOs written by professors and influenced by Monsanto.^{362, 363} GLP published the papers with no mention of Monsanto’s involvement.³⁶⁴ (In 2020, GLP says it decided to accept corporate funding and its IRS tax forms for fiscal year 2020/2021 show \$100,000 in funding from Bayer.³⁶⁵)

As part of Monsanto’s strategy to prepare for the IARC ruling, Monsanto Regulatory Affairs Lead Eric Sachs [invited Entine](#) to attend a briefing with executives about the forthcoming IARC report, internal emails show. Entine agreed to participate and asked Sachs whether Monsanto was interested in “expanding/ follow up” on Genetic Literacy Project’s “GMO science” website content. He emphasized that GLP’s reach was growing, with website traffic having “expanded dramatically” in the past year. Following that email exchange, GLP would go on to publish dozens of articles critical of IARC, many of them personal attacks on the scientists involved in the glyphosate report. Posts on the GLP website accused IARC scientists of everything from “[corruption, distortion and fraud](#)”³⁶⁶ to “[conspiracy](#),³⁶⁷ [lying](#),³⁶⁸ and [secrecy](#),”³⁶⁹ some even claiming the independent scientists were motivated by “[profit and vanity](#).”³⁷⁰

IARC scientists weren’t the only ones in GLP’s bull’s eye: When a group of independent scientists — three of whom served on a 2016 EPA expert advisory committee on glyphosate — reported “compelling links” between glyphosate-based herbicides and non-Hodgkin lymphoma in a February 2019 meta-analysis,³⁷¹ Entine and one of his board members, Geoffrey Kabat, suggested those scientists committed “[deliberate fraud](#),” too.³⁷² Kabat, an epidemiologist, has a long history of defending toxic products; he has published several papers favorable to the tobacco industry, for example, including one that claims the health concerns of secondhand smoke are over-hyped.³⁷³ Kabat also has “longstanding financial and other working relationships with the tobacco industry” that have not always been fully disclosed, according to a 2005 paper in *BMJ Tobacco Control*.³⁷⁴

Genetic Literacy Project

SCIENCE NOT IDEOLOGY

Congress should reign in IARC cancer agency's 'corruption, distortion and fraud'

Paul Driessen, climate science denialist

How activist scientists hijacked IARC for personal profit and ideological vanity

David Zaruk, former chemical industry lobbyist

IARC director lied to Congress about cancer agency debacle

David Zaruk, former chemical industry lobbyist

IARC accused of selectively excluding best scientists from glyphosate review

American Council on Science and Health, industry funded group

Corruption and secrecy behind IARC's glyphosate cancer designation?

Jon Entine, executive director of Genetic Literacy Project; principal of a PR firm that had Monsanto as a client when he set up the Genetic Literacy Project

These and over 200 other articles about IARC appear on the Genetic Literacy Project website. A 2015 Monsanto PR plan listed Genetic Literacy Project as one of the "industry partners" that could help protect Roundup from cancer concerns raised by IARC.

Engaging climate science denialists

The efforts of Jon Entine and his Genetic Literacy Project to discredit scientists who raised cancer concerns about glyphosate echo the playbook Marc Moreno used to raise doubts about climate science: "name names" and "go after individuals." The parallels do not end there: despite GLP's claims to stand for "science not ideology," its funding sources trace back to some of the largest, most consistent funders of climate science denial. These include the **Searle Foundation** (which also backs Moreno's³⁷⁵ ClimateDepot), **Scaife Foundation**, and **Templeton Foundation**, which have supported GLP for many years, and more recently,³⁷⁶ the **Charles Koch Foundation** and **DonorsTrust**, a funding organization *Mother Jones* has described as the "dark money ATM of the conservative movement."³⁷⁷ All these are leading funders of climate science disinformation campaigns, according to a [2013 study](#) by sociologist Robert Brulle. These foundations have "bank-rolled denial," Brulle wrote, and they "promote ultra-free-market ideas in many realms."³⁷⁸

Indeed, several GLP posts attacking the IARC scientists were written by individuals with long histories of defending polluting industries. These include not just Kabat, but also David Zaruk,³⁷⁹ a chemical industry lobbyist;³⁸⁰ and Paul Dreissen,³⁸¹ a well-known climate denialist and senior policy advisor at the Committee for a **Constructive Tomorrow (CFACT)**, the parent group of Moreno's **Climate Depot**.

In service of the anti-IARC messaging, well known climate denial groups also echoed the attacks on the scientists raising concerns about glyphosate. "Congress should stop funding the International Agency for Junk Science," declared the **Competitive Enterprise Institute**,³⁸² a "free-market organization that disputes climate change is a problem," according to the *New York Times*.³⁸³ Additional attacks on IARC scientists came from the **Heartland Institute**,³⁸⁴ the **Cato Institute**,³⁸⁵ and **CFACT**³⁸⁶ — all groups that have received funding from oil companies and foundations that have supported climate science disinformation.

Influencing media narratives to discredit scientists

The holy grail of PR spin is free media in your favor. In the case of the IARC ruling, a series of articles critical of the cancer research group appeared in the international wire service Reuters between 2016 and 2018, and gave a boost to Monsanto's campaign to defend glyphosate. Thanks to internal documents the public can now see how Monsanto and its PR firm Red Flag worked to shape the stories that were reported by Kate Kelland, a longtime correspondent for Reuters. One email from a [Red Flag employee](#) to Monsanto notes, "You'll recall that following engagement by Red Flag a number of months ago, the first piece [in Reuters] was quite critical of IARC."³⁸⁷ The email indicates that the PR team helped Kelland [find an anonymous source](#)³⁸⁸ to criticize IARC and also offered her [exclusive materials](#).³⁸⁹ In another case, Kelland [shared an article](#) about glyphosate with Monsanto executives before it went to print.³⁹⁰

The most influential of Kelland's articles ran in [June 2017](#), claiming that the chair of the IARC glyphosate panel, Aaron Blair, withheld key data in the panel's glyphosate assessment.³⁹¹ Had that data been included, the article claimed, the panel would have been less likely to have designated glyphosate a probable human carcinogen. The story reverberated around the world with reprints and reports lifted from the article appearing in many leading newspapers and even progressive outlets such as *Mother Jones*.³⁹²

Questions about Kelland's reporting began surfacing shortly after publication, however. Kelland had characterized her source as "court documents" from a deposition Blair had given in a Monsanto legal case. But the deposition was not filed in court, and Kelland did not provide her readers with access to the original documents, so it was initially impossible to verify her claims. Carey Gillam, a former Reuters' reporter who worked for U.S. Right to Know at the time, gained access to the documents, and [reported how Blair's full testimony](#) contradicted key claims in Kelland's article.³⁹³

Two years after the articles were published, internal documents released via litigation revealed that Kelland's source for the

documents was Monsanto's media relations executive Sam Murphey. In an April 27, 2017 email to Kelland, Murphey included not only Blair's testimony but also suggestions for how to frame the story, along with a slide deck and talking points for a suggested article about how "IARC chair concealed crucial data" and "concealed data undermines IARC's conclusions."^{394, 395} The email also included a request that the information be treated as background material, and not reveal Monsanto as the source. When Reuters published Kelland's article critical of Blair and IARC two months later, the article was centered around those Monsanto talking points, but did not disclose that information had been provided by Monsanto.³⁹⁶

IARC defended its glyphosate assessment and pushed back against Reuters' reporting with a [statement](#) explaining that the panel does not consider unpublished and unfinished data in its assessments.³⁹⁷ IARC also noted that Monsanto had paid a consulting fee to a key source Kelland used for her article, Bob Tarone, industry influence that was not disclosed in the reporting. While Reuters later did add a note about the conflict of interest, no other corrections were made. (Kelland has not responded to requests for comment on these critiques.)

Kelland's reporting continues to circulate on social media and has appeared in paid ads on Google and Facebook. It also won the 2017 Science Story of the Year Award from the Foreign Press Association. (There is no direct evidence the award was influenced by Bayer, but the evidence described earlier about Bayer's sponsorship deal with the Foreign Press Association raises questions about the group's impartiality.)



Ginning up political effort to defund IARC

Internal Monsanto documents also shine light on how the company used its political allies to try to further undermine IARC experts. An internal email from 2015 shows Monsanto executives discussing the company's outreach to several federal agencies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as the State Department and key members of Congress, to [discuss "managing the IARC issue."](#)³⁹⁸ Another document shows how Monsanto [consultants drafted](#) at least one letter [calling for an investigation](#) of the "flawed" IARC process, designed to look as though it was written by a member of Congress.³⁹⁹

The result? Congressional Republicans "excoriated and pushed to defund the IARC," [reported *The Intercept*](#), a political assault "scripted in part by Monsanto."⁴⁰⁰ The salvo launched with a congressional investigation, a volley of letters from Republicans accusing IARC of wrongdoing, and threats to cut U.S. funding to the cancer research panel. (To put the level of funding in perspective, the U.S. contributed €1.7M in 2021 toward the organization's €22M budget.)⁴⁰¹ In 2018, House Science Committee Chairman Lamar Smith (a climate science denier) called a hearing to investigate the IARC scientists' alleged misdeeds, citing "media reports" as the source of the concerns.⁴⁰² These concerns traced back to the Reuters' reporting described above by Kate Kelland that was based on documents and talking points she had received from Monsanto's public relations.

"Emails show Monsanto orchestrated GOP effort to intimidate cancer researchers. Documents suggest the firm has antagonized regulators and applied pressure to shape research of the world's leading herbicide."

Lee Fang of [The Intercept](#)

Attacking journalists who raise concerns about pesticide products

"Danny Hakim is lying to you – and it's not his first rodeo either," declared an American Council on Science and Health blog in March 2017.⁴⁰³ The attack on Hakim, a *New York Times* journalist, came in the wake of his reporting on corporate interference in the science on glyphosate, pesticides, and pollinator declines, and the failure of GMO crops to increase yields.^{404, 405, 406} The blog derided Hakim as a journalist with this caveat: "if we can even call him that."

Mean-spirited attacks on journalists like this one are another common feature of pesticide industry spin. Often deployed by industry-tied front groups like ACSH, this strategy seeks to undermine journalists reporting on the malfeasance of industry players, while lifting up those who write favorably about companies and their products. Examples abound: Liza Gross, a reporter at *InsideClimate News*, who has written critically about the chemical industry,⁴⁰⁷ tobacco products⁴⁰⁸ and industry spin groups⁴⁰⁹ has been described by ACSH as an "activist" who pushes "corporate conspiracy theories."^{410, 411} In 2018, ACSH stepped up such attacks with a new website called Deniers for Hire, with a section on "bad journalists" with attack profiles on Hakim, Gross, Gillam, and other journalists who critically reported on the pesticide industry, including *New York Times* journalist Eric Lipton, *New York Times* contributing writer Michael Pollan, and former *Times* columnist Mark Bittman.⁴¹² (After promotion pushed "Deniers for Hire" to the top of the Google search for some of the groups and people profiled, ACSH pulled the site without explanation in the summer of 2019.)

Other journalists have experienced blowback. Tom Philpott, a longtime journalist who covers food and agriculture for *Mother Jones*, has experienced industry harassment. Describing the emails, tweets, and other communications he and his editors received from Monsanto's third-party allies after he reported critically about GMOs, [Philpott said](#): "These are vicious and utterly unfounded attacks on a journalist's credibility, well designed to undercut him with his employer."⁴¹³ Monica Eng, a former *Chicago Tribune* journalist, described what

happened after she reported on undisclosed funds Monsanto was paying to a professor: “I’ve worked as a professional journalist in Chicago for more than three decades,” Eng explained in *The Progressive*.⁴¹⁴ “I’ve uncovered questionable activity in government groups, nonprofits, and private companies, but I don’t think I have ever seen a group so intent on trying to personally attack the journalist covering the issue.”

A Monsanto document released in 2019 highlights how Monsanto worked with third-party allies to try to discredit journalist Carey Gillam and her book *Whitewash: The Story of a Weed Killer, Cancer, and the Corruption of Science* (Island Press, 2017), which exposed a range of environmental and health problems associated with the company’s herbicide business. The 2017 document, an Excel spreadsheet titled *Project Spruce: Carey Gillam Book*, describes plans by Monsanto and the crisis management firm FTI Consulting to place paid ads on Google and generate negative book reviews with the help of allies they described as “Pro Science Third Parties.”⁴¹⁵ These included the spin groups Sense About Science and Science Media Center, the Global Farmers Network, and the Campaign for Accuracy in Public Health Research, a project of the American Chemistry Council, the chemical industry’s main trade group. By the spring of 2022, *Whitewash* would have 226 reviews on Amazon.com, most of them 5 star reviews.⁴¹⁶ Of the 29 1 and 2 star reviews, 21 were published on or around October 21, 2017 shortly after the launch of Project Spruce.

“I’m just one person, just one reporter working from a home office in the Midwest, juggling three kids with irregular writing deadlines,” Gillam *wrote in the Guardian in 2019*.⁴¹⁷ “So the knowledge that a multibillion-dollar corporation spent so much time and attention trying to figure out how to thwart me is terrifying ... When corporate power is so intensely brought to silence messengers, to manipulate the public record and public opinion, truth becomes stifled. And we should all be afraid.”

Attacking journalism

The attacks on the New York Times’ Eric Lipton went far beyond smears. After Lipton wrote an article reporting on University of Florida Professor Kevin Folta’s ties to Monsanto, Folta sued Lipton and the New York Times for defamation. In his lawsuit, Folta made wide-ranging motions to try to obtain documents from people involved in the story—requests a federal judge dismissed as “downright silly” and “laughable.” And the New York Times pushed back on Folta’s claims, noting that Lipton’s reporting was based on Folta’s own email communications. Folta dropped the lawsuit in April 2019, but did not answer queries about who paid for the two-year legal fight. Meanwhile, this kind of attack on journalists can have a chilling effect on others who want to dig into similar storylines.⁴¹⁸

| Project Spruce: Carey Gillam Book DRAFT: 9.11.17 | | | |
|---|--|------------|---------------------------------|
| Day | Activity | Lead | Additional Participants |
| Ongoing | Proactively background key glyphosate reporters | | |
| | Paid placement of existing blog post on Carey Gillam when google search “Monsanto Glyphosate Carey Gillam” | Cole | |
| | Develop third party stakeholder list and identify engagement lead | Cole / FTI | |
| wb 9.11.17 | Engage Pro-Science Third Parties (Sense About Science, Science Media Center, Global Farmer Network, CAPHR) *Identify independent spokesperson (spokespeople) | Cole | [insert Mon person responsible] |
| | Engage Industry & Farmer Customers (ASA, NCGA, individual customers, etc.) | Cole | [insert Mon person responsible] |
| | Engage Regulatory Authorities via regulatory teams (EPA, EFSA, ECHA, PMRA) Ask regulatory authorities to engage | Cole | [insert Mon person responsible] |

The “Project Spruce” spreadsheet shows how Monsanto and FTI planned to ask third-party allies to write negative reviews about Carey Gillam’s book that is critical of glyphosate.

Deploying women to attack organic food

Another tool in the corporate attack toolbox: recruit women to go after “organic moms” and other concerned citizens who are trying to cut down on exposures of glyphosate and other pesticides. Why target mothers? According to Pew research, 80 percent of women with children do most of the food shopping and most of the meal preparation in their households (for women with spouses but no children, the number was 68 percent for shopping and 75 percent for meal prep).⁴¹⁹ And market trends are clear: demand for organic food continues to outpace conventional foods that allow synthetic pesticides, with many consumers citing health concerns about pesticides as their reason for choosing organic.⁴²⁰ As *Fortune magazine* reported in 2015, concerns over pesticides, GMOs, antibiotics and food additives — led by moms and millennials — were driving an “\$18-billion food revolution” with demand shifting away from conventional food companies.^{421, 422}

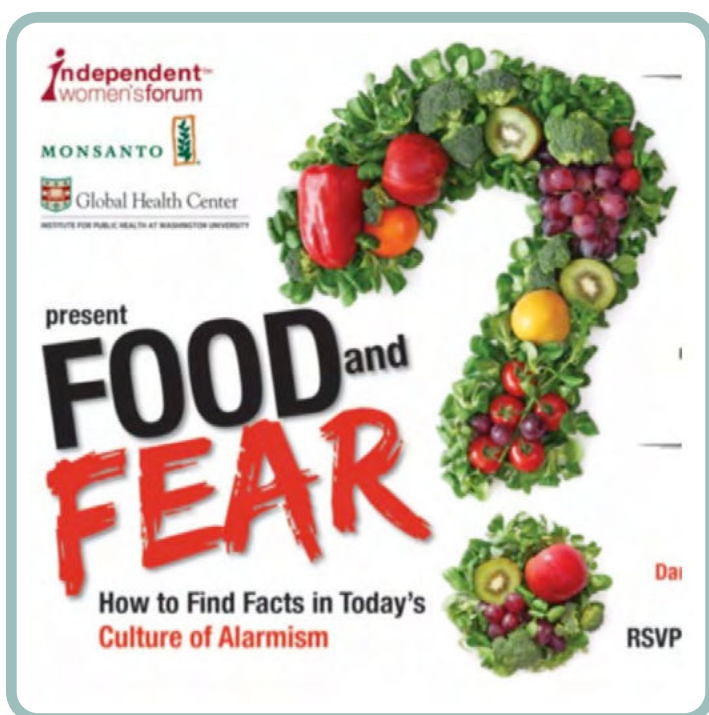
Monsanto and other pesticide companies have pushed back by teaming up with groups and writers who disparage these concerns. In 2017, for example, Monsanto partnered with the non-profit **Independent Women’s Forum (IWF)** on a “Food and Fear” lecture series, during which speakers encouraged women to ignore

“alarmist” concerns about toxic chemicals in food. A 2016 IWF podcast encourages “reasonable moms” to push back on organic “food alarmism.”⁴²³ That same year, [IWF asked Monsanto to contribute](#) \$43,000 to a “Super Women of Science” lecture series designed to undercut support for a California law to label toxic chemicals in food and consumer products.⁴²⁴

Founded in 1993, IWF spent \$3 million in 2019 toward its mission to “engage more individuals in the civic process, educate them about the impact of public policies on their lives and our economy, and build support for policies that empower individuals.”⁴²⁵ This mission belies the group’s actual work: serving the interests of corporate donors like Monsanto and foundations like the Scaife Foundation, Searle Freedom Trust, and DonorsTrust that heavily back deregulation of toxic industries and climate science denial.⁴²⁶

Monsanto and Bayer have also allied with a particular genre of female writers and public speakers: “science communicators” who claim to correct misinformation about chemical risks. The *Washington Post* featured “**Sci Babe**” in a 2018 column about “skeptics” who are “using science to fight a wave of bad nutrition advice on the Internet.”⁴²⁷ SciBabe also took up the glyphosate debate for *Self* magazine. “Should you worry about herbicides in your food? ... Nope,” she concluded, claiming, inaccurately, that “no studies have found a causal link between glyphosate and cancer.”⁴²⁸ Neither *Self* nor the *Washington Post* mentioned SciBabe’s conflicts of interest, including that her talks have been sponsored by Monsanto and DuPont or that she had a contract with the artificial sweetener company Splenda to “debunk junk science” about artificial sweeteners.⁴²⁹

Other women writers with industry ties also use the “babe” moniker or similar PR handles to push glyphosate product-defense messaging on blogs and social media designed to represent or appeal to women. “This just in ... glyphosate STILL not found to cause cancer,” claims “**Food Science Babe**,” a writer for the farming publication *Ag Daily*, whose social media bio says she is “creating science based information about food and spreading facts not fear.”⁴³⁰ Other defenders of glyphosate in



this genre include *Ag Daily* writers “**Farmer’s Daughter USA**,” the corporate-side attorney Amanda Zaluckyj;⁴³¹ and Michelle Miller, the “**Farm Babe**,” a “writer and public speaker for agriculture” who “reaches millions on social media,” according to *AgriPulse*.⁴³² The “**Foodie Farmer**”⁴³³ and “**Hawaii Farmer’s Daughter**”⁴³⁴ (a one-time Cornell Alliance for Science fellow) are more examples.

More broadly than glyphosate defense, these writers serve up similar messaging fare: they argue that synthetic chemicals in food are nothing to worry about, heap scorn on the organic food industry and public interest groups, and oppose efforts to increase transparency or restrict hazardous chemicals in food or farming — often under the banner of “freedom for women.” The tactic harkens back to one of Edward Bernays most famous stealth PR efforts, the “Torches for Freedom” campaign to eliminate the social taboo of women smoking — and thus increase sales for his tobacco industry clients. Bernays’s salvo opened on March 31, 1929 when a woman named Bertha Hunt stepped out onto a crowded street at New York’s Easter Parade and created a scandal by lighting a Lucky Strike cigarette.⁴³⁵ The contrived stunt that was made to look spontaneous and independent is widely considered to be one of the first public relations campaigns.

The same “freedom for women” framing also plays out in the pesticide debate. One example is a 2019 book *Food Bullying*.⁴³⁶ The author,



Early Phillip Morris ad depicts smoking as empowering for women.

Michele Payn, describes herself as a “kickboxing professional speaker” and also “a mom tired of food bullies and keyboard cowards.”⁴³⁷ Her book claims to reveal the “\$5.75 trillion secret” food marketers don’t want you to know — that organically grown, low-pesticide, non-GMO, unprocessed foods made without chemical additives are no better for your health and the environment. Payne advises mothers to “stand up to the bullies” and “simplify safe food choices” by not worrying about risks like pesticides.

Praise for Payn’s book came from many of the pesticide defenders who appear in this report: University of Florida Professor [Kevin Folta](#),⁴³⁸ former biotech trade association executive [Val Giddings](#),⁴³⁹ Monsanto employees [Cami Ryan](#)⁴⁴⁰ (social sciences lead) and [Robb Fraley](#)⁴⁴¹ (former chief technology officer) and the [Genetic Literacy Project](#).⁴⁴² A [page on Payn’s website](#) entitled “Speaking and Training” offers various “keynotes for agriculture” and “workshops for farm, ranch and ag” options. Clients, the page notes, include Bayer and Syngenta.⁴⁴³

Another example: a 2018 film called *Science Moms*,⁴⁴⁴ produced by a group of “**Sci Moms**” who say their purpose is to promote “evidence-based parenting” and “facts not fear” about chemical risks.⁴⁴⁵ The film was “funded independently by Kickstarter,” according to the [Sci Moms website](#), and among the donors listed in the credits: employees of Monsanto, Syngenta, and the Cornell Alliance for Science.⁴⁴⁶ The film gives special thanks to Vance Crowe, Monsanto’s director of millennial engagement at the time.

SciMom’s co-founder, Kavin Senapathy, co-authored several articles in *Forbes* with similar messaging: denouncing the “fear of pesticides,” attacking the organic industry as a marketing scam, and warning that “radical environmentalists” are more of a threat to the planet than pesticide industry products. *Forbes* deleted all of these articles after the *New York Times* reported that Senapathy’s co-author, Henry I. Miller, published an article about glyphosate in *Forbes* that had been ghostwritten by Monsanto.⁴⁴⁷ (Miller is also a longtime defender of oil and tobacco industry interests.)⁴⁴⁸ Senapathy later tried to distance herself from Miller and Monsanto’s Vance Crowe in a 2019 article she wrote for *Undark* magazine.⁴⁴⁹ But she continues to pen articles

promoting GMOs and using standard pesticide industry spin messaging: downplaying risk and making false assurances of safety about chemical-intensive food and farming.⁴⁵⁰

Surveilling “friends and foes”

Monsanto’s attack tactics — especially its efforts to discredit scientists who raised cancer concerns about glyphosate — are well documented. And so, too, are the pesticide industry’s efforts to closely monitor its critics and gather information for its attacks. In May 2019, a whistleblower from Bayer’s PR firm FleishmanHillard shared with French journalists a “multitude of information” the firm was tracking on 200 journalists, politicians, scientists, nonprofit leaders, and others that had been flagged as influencers in the glyphosate debate.⁴⁵¹ The list of “friends and foes of pesticides,” as [CBS News described it](#), contained personal contact details, opinions, and level of engagement in relation to Monsanto products.⁴⁵² Upon review, the journalists at *Le Monde* shared the list with French authorities, who [opened a criminal probe](#) to determine whether the document represented illegal collection and processing of personal data.⁴⁵³ France’s former Environment Minister Ségolène Royal, who was on the list, noted that this was “a very important discovery because it shows there are objective strategies to silence strong voices.”⁴⁵⁴

In the wake of the revelations, FleishmanHillard admitted it had drawn up similar watch lists in six other European countries. Bayer temporarily suspended the PR company, apologized, and hired a law firm to investigate, claiming in a statement: “Our highest priority is to create transparency. We do not tolerate unethical behavior in our company.”⁴⁵⁵ A few months later, Bayer’s law firm reported finding “no evidence of illegal activity.”⁴⁵⁶ But in 2021, France’s personal data protection agency fined Monsanto \$473,000 “for illegally compiling files of public figures, journalists and activists with the aim of swaying opinion towards support for its controversial pesticides,” reported the French news agency RFI.⁴⁵⁷

Although Monsanto’s strategy raised legal and ethical questions, it is worth noting that tracking “friends and foes” is common industry practice. FleishmanHillard CEO John Saunders defended

his firm’s work, framing it as business as usual: “Corporations, NGOs, and other clients rightfully expect our firm to help them understand diverse perspectives before they engage,” Saunders explained.⁴⁵⁸ “To do so, we and every other professional communications agency gather relevant information from publicly available sources. Those planning documents are fundamental to outreach efforts.”

Monsanto’s Fusion Center

According to internal Monsanto [documents released in 2019](#), the company was also gathering intelligence in the U.S. through what it called its “Fusion Center” — a concept borrowed from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.⁴⁵⁹ Long the domain of military intelligence-gathering, fusion centers are becoming more common in the private sector, according to a 2018 *New York Times* article by Stacy Cowly.⁴⁶⁰ Industry’s fusion centers are often staffed by “former government cyberspies, soldiers and counterintelligence officials,” Cowly reported, who deploy “the tools and techniques used for national defense.”

“The seeds of life are not what they once were/Mother Nature and God don’t own them any more.”

Neil Young, from his album
The Monsanto Years

Monsanto used the information to defend against concerns raised in the growing body of science that was tying glyphosate and other pesticides to serious health concerns. Internal documents show that Monsanto’s Fusion Center was monitoring digital properties and social media activities and analyzing content from journalists, activists, even popular singers who were speaking out publicly about pesticides in general, and glyphosate specifically. Monsanto executives were tracking individuals, small groups, online comments, and even single tweets. No detail seemed too small.

3. Traditional and Social Media Monitoring : Work with the Fusion Center to monitor USRTK digital properties, the volume and sentiment related to USRTK/FOIA, as well as audience engagement. Share weekly report with core team.

Monsanto’s PR plan to counter USRTK’s public records investigation included plans to track the group’s digital impact.

One Monsanto document notes how its Fusion Center tracked the singer Neil Young who was critical of the company in songs appearing in his 2015 album *The Monsanto Years*. According to an email from a Monsanto official reported by The Guardian, the company’s Fusion Center “evaluated the lyrics on (Young’s) album to develop a list of 20+ potential topics he may target” and created a plan to “proactively produce content and response preparedness.” They were also “closely monitoring discussions” about a concert featuring Young, Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp and Dave Matthews.⁴⁶¹

In 2016, the Fusion Center was also tracking Rachel Parent, a Canadian teenager who had founded the GMO labeling advocacy group Kids Right to Know. Internal emails show that Andy Shaul, director of corporate engagement for the Monsanto Fusion Center, sent background reports to his colleagues about Parent and other women who planned to attend the company’s annual shareholder meeting to raise concerns about glyphosate. The emails discuss how to address the teenager’s crowdfunding campaign (which had raised just \$250 at the time of his emails). Monsanto’s Shaul also shared comments one of the women made on a *Huffington Post* blog and a video clip that “might be useful in preparing for her personality.”⁴⁶²

In other internal documents, the company details how to deal with “1 tweet from Gary Ruskin,” the co-founder of USRTK, who was investigating the pesticide industry’s ties with academics via Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The Monsanto document describes plans to, “Work with the Fusion Center to monitor USRTK digital properties, volume and sentiment related to USRTK/FOIA, as well as audience engagement,” and included a “social media response” grid for dealing with problematic tweets. The company’s plan

involved developing “foundational messages” to frame USRTK FOIA requests as an attack on scientists and posting the messages on GMO Answers, the industry-funded website run by Ketchum public relations firm discussed below. In the case of “1 tweet from Gary Ruskin,” a “tailored statement” would be posted on GMOAnswers.com, but not promoted. In the case of “More than one day of social volume” at “50+ tweets,” the company detailed plans to promote the GMO Answers response on Facebook and Twitter along with “Google promotion around potential search terms.”

The example shows the intense level of scrutiny and planning Monsanto brought to product defense and its efforts to counter critics. In the next section we look at how they wield their power and attempt to control messaging and reporting about pesticides online.

| Scenario |
|--|
| 1 st tweet from Gary Ruskin |
| 10 tweets/hour (from different sources) |
| One of th |
| If 25 tweets/hour (from different sources) |
| If 50 tweets/hour (from different sources) |

Monsanto was closely tracking tweets and managing responses.