

The Gates Foundation Is Trying to Feed the Poor With GMO Propaganda

By Stacy Malkan / U.S. Right to Know

A unit of Cornell is operating as a public relations arm for the agrichemical industry.

The founders of Cornell University, Andrew D. White and Ezra Cornell, dreamed of creating a great university that took a radical approach to learning. Their revolutionary spirit, and the promise to pursue knowledge for the greater good, is [said to be](#) at the heart of the Ivy League school their dream became.

It is difficult to understand how these ideals are served by a unit of Cornell operating as a public relations arm for the agrichemical industry.

Yet that is what seems to be going on at the Cornell Alliance for Science (CAS), a program [launched](#) in 2014 with a \$5.6 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a goal to “depolarize the charged debate” about GMOs.

A review of the group’s materials and programs suggests that beneath its promise to “restore the importance of scientific evidence in decision making,” CAS is promoting GMOs using dishonest messaging and PR tactics developed by agrichemical corporations with a long history of misleading the public about science.

Communicating science or propaganda?

CAS is a communications campaign devoted to promoting genetically engineered foods (also known as GMOs) around the world. This is made clear in the group’s [promotional video](#).

CAS Director [Sarah Evanega, PhD](#), describes her group as a “communications-based nonprofit organization represented by scientists, farmers, NGOs, journalists and concerned citizens” who will use “interactive online platforms, multimedia resources and communication training programs to build a global movement to advocate for access to biotechnology.”

In this way, they say they will help alleviate malnourishment and hunger in developing countries, according to the video.

Dr. Evanega said her group has no connections to industry and receives no resources from industry. “We do not write for industry, and we do not advocate for or promote industry-owned products,” she wrote in a [blog post](#) titled “A Right to Be Known (Accurately)” in which she pushed back against criticisms from my group, U.S. Right to Know.

Yet the flagship programs of CAS – a 12-week course for [Global Leadership Fellows](#) and two-day intensive [communications courses](#) – teach communication skills to people who are “committed to advocating for increased access to biotechnology” specifically so they can “lead advocacy efforts in their local contexts.”

The group also has unusual dealings with journalists. What does it mean, as the CAS video states, that it is “represented by” journalists?



CAS offers [journalism fellowships](#) with cash awards for select journalists to “promote in-depth contextualized reporting” about issues related to food security, crop production, biotechnology and sustainable agricultural.

Are these journalists also GMO advocates? How ethical is it for journalists to represent the policy positions of a pro-agricultural-chemical-industry group?

Messaging for corporate interests

One thing is clear from the publicly available CAS messaging: the context they offer on the topic of genetically engineered foods is not in-depth and comprehensive, but rather highly selective and geared toward advancing the interests of the agricultural industry.

For example, the video: Brimming with hope about the possibilities of GMOs to solve world hunger in the future, it ignores a large body of scientific research that has documented problems connected with GMOs – that herbicide-tolerant GMO crops have [driven up](#) the use of glyphosate, an herbicide [linked to cancer](#) by the world’s leading cancer experts; and accelerated [weed resistance](#) on millions of acres of U.S. farmland, which makes crop production harder for farmers, not easier.

There is no mention of the failure of GMO crops designed to [ward off harmful insects](#), or the rising concerns of medical doctors about patterns of illness in places like [Hawaii](#) and [Argentina](#) where exposures are heaviest to the chemicals associated with GMOs.

There is no recognition that many [scientists](#) and [food leaders](#) have said GMOs are not a priority for feeding the world, a debate that is a key reason GMO crops have not been widely embraced outside of the United States and Latin America.

All these factors are relevant to the discussion about whether or not developing countries should embrace genetically engineered crops and foods. But CAS leaves aside these details and amplifies the false idea that the science is settled on the safety and necessity of GMOs.

Disseminating selective information of a biased or misleading nature to promote a particular agenda is known as the practice of propaganda.

Working from industry’s PR playbook

The Cornell Alliance for Science was supposed to [present](#) “a new vision for biotechnology communications,” yet the group relies on an established set of messages and communication tactics that are familiar to anyone who follows the PR campaigns of the agribusiness industry.

The report [Spinning Food](#), which I co-authored with Kari Hamerschlag and Anna Lappé, documents how agribusiness and food industry funded groups are spending tens of millions of dollars a year to promote [misleading messages](#) about the safety and necessity of industrial-scale, chemical-intensive, genetically engineered agriculture.

The companies that profit most from this system – Monsanto, Dow, DuPont and other agricultural giants – have repeatedly violated trust by misleading the public about science, as Gary Ruskin showed in his report [Seedy Business](#). So they rely on [front groups](#) and [third-party allies](#) such as scientists and professors to spread their messaging for them.

A core industry narrative is that the science on GMO safety is settled. Pro-industry messengers focus on possible future uses of the technology while downplaying, ignoring or denying the risks; make inaccurate claims about the level of scientific agreement on GMOs; and attack critics who raise concerns as “anti-science.”

As one example, Mark Lynas, political director of CAS, wrote a New York Times [op-ed](#) accusing 17 European Union countries that banned GMO crop cultivation of “turning against science.” He dubbed them the “coalition of the

ignorant.”

The article is heavy on attack and light on science, brushing over the topic with an inaccurate claim about a safety consensus that [many scientists have disputed](#).

As molecular geneticist Belinda Martineau, PhD, wrote in [response](#) to Lynas, “Making general claims about the safety of genetic engineering ... (is) unscientific, illogical and absurd.”

The World Health Organization [states](#), “it is not possible to make general statements on the safety of all GM foods.”

Yet, while claiming to stand up for science, CAS routinely makes general – even outlandish – claims about GMO safety.

From the group’s [FAQ](#):

- “You are more likely to be hit by an asteroid than be hurt by GE food – and that’s not an exaggeration.”
- “GE crops currently available to the public pose no greater health risks or environmental concerns than their non-engineered counterparts. This is not opinion.”

In fact, it is propaganda.

Battling transparency in science

In the spring of 2014, CAS launched a [petition](#) attacking my group U.S. Right to Know for filing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to obtain the emails of publicly funded professors as part of our [investigation](#) into the food and agricultural industries and their PR operations.

CAS called the FOIA requests a “witch hunt,” yet documents obtained via these FOIA requests generated news stories in several top media outlets about academics who were working with industry PR operatives on campaigns to promote GMOs without disclosing those ties to the public.

The story broke in a front-page New York Times [article](#) by two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Eric Lipton, who explained how Monsanto, facing consumer skepticism about GMOs, “retooled their lobbying and public relations strategy to spotlight a rarefied group of advocates: academics, brought in for the gloss of impartiality and weight of authority that come with a professor’s pedigree.”

In one case, [reported](#) by Laura Krantz in the Boston Globe, a Monsanto executive told Harvard professor Calestous Juma to write a paper about how GMOs are needed to feed Africa.

“Monsanto not only suggested the topic to professor Calestous Juma. It went so far as to provide a summary of what the paper could say and a suggested headline. The company then connected the professor with a marketing company to pump it out over the Internet as part of Monsanto’s strategy to win over the public and lawmakers,” Krantz wrote.

Juma said he took no money from Monsanto but noted he has received funding from the Gates Foundation, which has been partnering with Monsanto for years on pro-GMO projects after [Rob Horsch](#), Monsanto’s veteran top executive for international development, joined the Foundation in 2006. Horsch [now leads](#) Gates’ agricultural research and development team. (A [2014 analysis](#) by the research group Grain found that about 90% of \$3 billion the Gates Foundation has spent to feed the poor in Africa has [gone to wealthy nations](#), primarily universities and research centers.)

The public has a right to know if academics posing as independent sources are working behind the scenes with corporations and their PR firms on coordinated messaging campaigns to push a corporate agenda.

CAS takes the position in its petition that the public doesn't have a right to know about the ties between industry PR operatives and 14 public scientists who have "contributed to the scientific consensus about the safety of GMOs."

The Cornell petition is accompanied by a photo montage featuring Carl Sagan, Madame Curie, Albert Einstein and other deceased scientists who have not signed the petition, stamped with the slogan, "I stand with the #Science14" – a bit of PR flair that mirrors the [dishonest propaganda](#) used to oppose GMO labeling.



Aligning with industry PR writers

At an esteemed institution like Cornell, you might expect to find experts in science or ethics teaching communication courses that promise to restore scientific integrity to public discourse. Instead, at CAS, you will find experts in crisis management communication who specialize in opposing public health regulations.

For example, Trevor Butterworth, a visiting fellow at Cornell and director of Sense About Science (a "non-partisan, non-profit organization that advocates for sense about science!") is [partnering](#) with CAS to teach students and scientists how to communicate with journalists about GMOs.

Butterworth has a long history of communicating science for the benefit of corporations wishing to keep their products unregulated. A 2009 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [article](#) by Meg Kissinger and Susanne Rust about industry lobbying efforts on bisphenol A (BPA) identified him as a "chemical industry public relations writer."

As an editor of STATS at George Mason University, Butterworth was a prolific defender of BPA who "regularly combs the Internet for stories about BPA and offers comments without revealing his ties to industry," Kissinger and Rust wrote.

"STATS claims to be independent and nonpartisan. But a review of its financial reports shows it is a branch of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. That group was paid by the tobacco industry to monitor news stories about the dangers of tobacco." (The tobacco industry, they noted, was lobbying alongside the chemical industry to keep BPA unregulated.)

Butterworth has also promoted industry positions arguing against regulations for vinyl plastic and [phthalates](#), [fracking](#), high fructose [corn syrup](#) and [sugary sodas](#).

He now partners with CAS to teach students how to communicate about GMOs, and CAS political director Lynas sits on the advisory board of Sense About Science.

Lynas' work raises more questions: Why does a science group need a political director? And why would CAS choose Lynas for the role? Lynas is not a scientist but an environmental writer who rose to [sudden fame](#) after embracing GMOs, and his science has been critiqued at length by [scientists, reporters and professors](#).

Depolarizing the GMO debate?

Corporations have been known to deploy outrageous messaging when their products run into trouble; [examples](#) include “DDT is good for me,” “More doctors smoke Camels” and the Dutch Boy campaign to promote lead paint to children.

A low point for chemical industry messaging was its [PR campaign](#) to paint “Silent Spring” author Rachel Carson (and environmentalists in general) as murderers of millions of children in Africa for raising concerns about DDT.

That sort of messaging is making a comeback in the GMO debate.

In September 2015, the CAS Speakers Series hosted Owen Paterson, Member of Parliament from the UK, for a [talk](#) titled, “Check Your Green Privilege: It's Not Environmentally Friendly to Allow Millions to Die.”

Paterson's [speech](#) was filled with hyperbolic claims about GMOs that lack scientific rigor (GMOs “are in fact safer than conventionally bred crops ... one of the most environmentally friendly advances this world has ever seen ... can save millions of lives that today are squandered by the ideology of massively supported environmental campaign groups.”)

The speech garnered praise from the [American Council on Science and Health](#), a well-known industry front group, in a [blog](#) by Dr. Gil Ross titled, “Billion Dollar Green Campaigns Kill Poor Children.”

Ross explained in the blog that the CAS Speakers Series was created, “to use facts to counter the perceived tendency of college students to follow the environmentalist mantra without too much thought... the concept of being afraid of genetic engineering is akin to looking under the bed for hobgoblins such as Godzilla, awakened by the atomic tests of the Cold War.”

Paterson and Ross are unhelpful to the image of scientific integrity CAS is trying to project. Ross is a convicted felon who spent [time in jail](#) for Medicaid fraud. Paterson, the former UK environment secretary, is widely seen as a [climate change skeptic](#) whose views are [incompatible](#) with science.

How are bloggers in Hawaii helping feed the poor in Africa?

With its year round growing season, the Hawaiian Islands are an important testing ground for GMOs. They are also ground zero for [concerns](#) about pesticides associated with GMOs, and a key focus of industry's pro-GMO propaganda campaigns and allies such as CAS.

Elif Bealle, executive director of the [Hawaii Alliance for Progressive Action](#), has been active in grassroots efforts for [pesticide reporting](#), [bans](#) and [pesticide buffer zones](#) around GMO crops. She has also been keeping an eye on CAS, which she said has been recruiting local bloggers and has associates on several of the Islands.

“They present themselves as ‘just concerned local residents’ or ‘neutral journalists.’ They are almost full time commenting on online newspaper articles, submitting, Community Voice Op-Eds, etc. Their blog posts are regularly picked up and disseminated by the biotech trade group website in Hawaii, the Hawaii Crop Improvement Association,” Bealle said.

For example, Joni Kamiya, a CAS [Global Leadership Fellow](#), uses [her blog](#), Hawaii Farmer's Daughter, to promote the “safety and science” of GMOs with messaging that glosses over science and disparages GMO critics.

Kamiya is also an “independent expert” for GMO Answers, a [GMO PR website](#) created by Ketchum PR firm and funded by agricultural companies. Her articles are posted on [Jon Entine's](#) Genetic Literacy Project, which was also tapped to publish the GMO promotion papers assigned by Monsanto and written by professors.

Kamiya's writing also appears on the home page of [Kauai Farming and Jobs Coalition](#), a group with unknown funding that claims to “represent a wide range of individuals and organizations in our community” and promotes articles by Monsanto, Genetic Literacy Project and other food industry [front groups](#) such as the Center for Consumer Freedom.

Other CAS allies in the Islands include Lorie Farrell, a [CAS associate](#) who writes for GMO Answers and helped [coordinate](#) opposition to the GMO cultivation ban on the Big Island for Hawaii Farmers and Ranchers United; and Joan Conrow, who has a consulting [contract with Cornell](#) and writes the [confrontational blog](#) Kauai Eclectic.

Their messaging follows a typical pattern: they claim a scientific consensus on GMO safety and attack people calling for transparency and safety as outsiders who are killing the “Aloha spirit” of the Islands.

Arming the conflict

In his [article](#), “The War on Genetically Modified Food Critics,” Tufts Professor Timothy Wise takes the media to task for falling for industry PR tactics and incorrectly reporting the science on GMO as “settled.”

“What we’re seeing is a concerted campaign to ... paint GMO critics as anti-science while offering no serious discussion of the scientific controversy that still rages,” Wise wrote.

One indicator of that campaign, he said, was the Gates Foundation award to Cornell to “depolarize” the debate over GM foods.

“The Gates Foundation is paying biotech scientists and advocates at Cornell to help them convince the ignorant and brainwashed public, who ‘may not be well informed,’ that they are ignorant and brainwashed ... It’s kind of like depolarizing an armed conflict by giving one side more weapons,” Wise wrote.

Instead of arming the PR wars in service of industry, Cornell University should stand up for science by convening a more honest discussion about GMOs – one that acknowledges the risks as well as the benefits of genetically engineered foods.

One that refrains from attacking and instead seeks common ground with groups calling for transparency and health and safety standards.

CAS Director Dr. Evanega said her group does share common values around right to know and access to information, and she disputes the notion that CAS was formed to promote GMOs.

“So-called ‘GMOs’ are not a monolithic thing,” Dr. Evanega wrote in her [blog](#). “For example, it makes no sense to cluster together such diverse technologies as bacteria engineered to produce insulin and papaya engineered to resist a virus. We support access — to innovation and the information that will help people make sound decisions based on science and evidence — not fear, emotions.”

Certainly GMOs are not a monolithic thing. That’s exactly why it is inaccurate and dishonest to claim that people are more likely to be hit by an asteroid than to be harmed by GMOs.

A science alliance that truly is about restoring integrity to science should illuminate a comprehensive record of research, not parrot the talking points of PR firms and corporate players.

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