

Washington Post Bayer alliance undermines trust

Bayer has a long history of scientific misconduct when it comes to Roundup weedkillers

By Stacy Malkan

Public trust in science has been waning since the start of the pandemic.

A 2022 study from the Pew Research Center shows that nearly a quarter of Americans lack confidence in medical scientists – a significant drop from just two years ago.

Restoring public faith in science is an urgent and worthy endeavor. Unfortunately, a recent effort by the *Washington Post Live*, titled “Trust in Science,” threatens to erode public trust even further.

The December event was sponsored by one of the worst possible messengers for inspiring trust in science: Bayer.

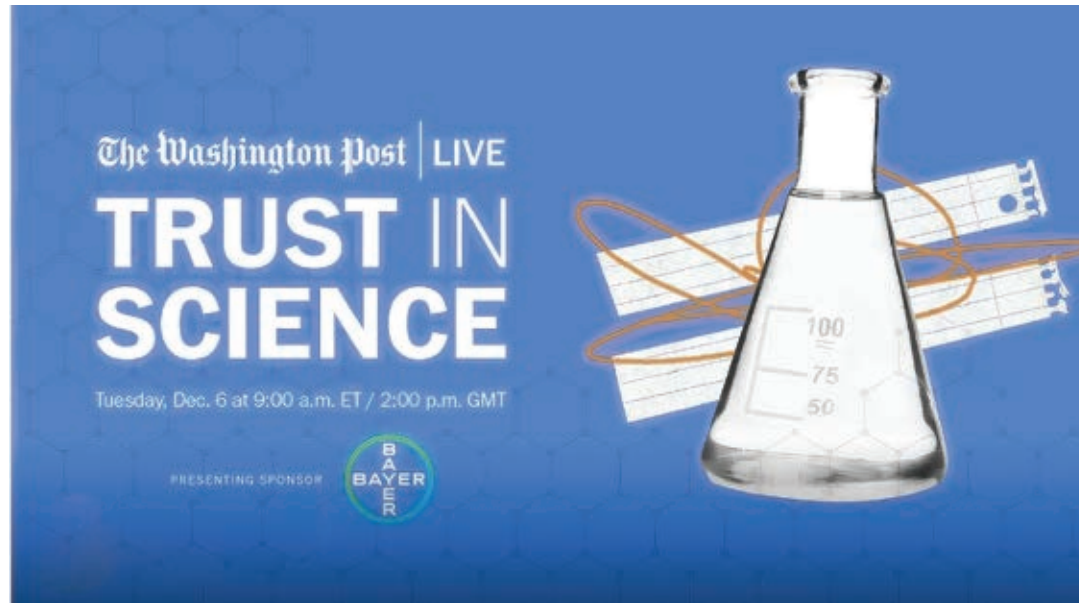
The company’s vice president of public affairs, Matthias Berninger, told the *Live* audience that Bayer is committed to being “fully transparent” about the research it funds.

But Berninger did not address, and was not asked about, the long history of scientific misconduct and lack of transparency surrounding one of Bayer’s flagship products, glyphosate-based Roundup weedkillers.

Internal corporate documents and investigative reporting have established Bayer’s role in science denial and other product-defense strategies to protect its profits from Roundup.

“Science is supposed to be constant, apolitical, and above the fray,” explains David Michaels, former head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and author of *Triumph of Doubt*, a book about deception in science.

According to Michaels, recent years have seen the rise of “science-for-sale specialists, a product-defense industry that sustains them – a cabal of ap-



parent experts, PR flaks, and political lobbyists who use bad science to produce whatever results their sponsors want.”

In a new report, *Merchants of Poison: How Monsanto Sold the World on a Toxic Pesticide*, U.S. Right to Know (USRTK) in collaboration with Friends of the Earth and Real Food Media, documents how Bayer (which purchased Monsanto in 2018) relied on such strategies to defend the world’s most widely used weed killer.

The analysis is based on a deep dive into the Monsanto Papers released in litigation and many more documents obtained in a years long investigation by USRTK.

What do these documents reveal? A long history of scientific misconduct stretching back decades.

Our report details the emails describing, in their own words, Monsanto scientists ghostwriting studies, shaping and editing research to convey particular messages, choosing industry-friendly scientists as messengers and other anti-science actions – all for the purpose of protecting

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their profits from glyphosate sales.

Bayer is currently funding the Genetic Literacy Project, a PR group that has posted dozens of articles attacking the scientists of the World Health Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), which classified glyphosate as a probable human carcinogen in 2015.

The documents also revealed corporate efforts to antagonize U.S. regulators and gin up a Congressional push to defund IARC.

Ignoring these facts, Bayer claims that glyphosate is one of the most studied herbicides in the world, and there is no reason to worry because regulatory agencies say there is no cancer risk.

But again, the documents paint a different picture.

In the words of one Monsanto scientist, “you cannot say Roundup is not a carcinogen, we have not done the necessary testing on the formulation.”

The documents show the Monsanto scientists discussing how to deal with “vulnerabilities” in the science on glyphosate, avoiding additional research suggested by experts they hired, and influencing regulatory reports with subpar science.

The documents led one federal judge to write that “there is strong evidence from which a jury could conclude that Monsanto does not particularly care whether its product is in fact giving people cancer, focusing instead on manipu-

lating public opinion and undermining anyone who raises genuine and legitimate concern about the issue.”

The “unscrupulous means” Monsanto used to protect its profits – tactics Bayer continues to this day as it maneuvers to keep glyphosate on the market – may have been “desperate” and “underhanded,” but they were also “perfectly legal,” former *Nature* editor Mark Buchanan explained in Bloomberg.

Companies can get away with selling dangerous products, he wrote, because the “current science regulators rely on for toxicity testing is wildly out of date.”

A 2021 study from the Institute of Cancer Research at the Medical University of Vienna underscores the point: Researchers reviewed 53 safety studies on glyphosate submitted to regulators by large chemical companies and found that most did not comply with modern international standards for scientific rigor. Most of the studies did not even include tests that are most able to detect cancer risks.

All of this adds to public distrust of science, and the agencies that are supposed to protect our health.

Raising further concerns about the *Washington Post Live*’s effort to strengthen trust in science is the panel’s headliner guest: former National Institutes of Health director and current science advisor to the President, Francis Collins. NIH, the nation’s leading medical research agency, plays a crucial role in advancing public health related science,

and Collins has had a long and impressive scientific career. But the agency, with Collins’s help, has also been stonewalling efforts to uncover information about the origins of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and the risks of gain-of-function research that seeks to augment the infectivity or lethality of potential pandemic pathogens.

Did the virus that causes COVID-19 come from a research-related accident? And if so, how can we strengthen lab safety protocols to safeguard against future pandemics?

U.S. Right to Know has had to file lawsuits against NIH for refusing to turn over information we requested in 12 Freedom of Information Act requests. For nine of these FOIA requests, we filed legal action more than a year ago, and NIH has not turned over a single page since we filed the litigation.

Collins played a role in the agency’s lack of transparency. Emails show that Collins even offered the NIH’s help to “put down the very destructive conspiracy theory” of a possible lab origin for SARS-Cov-2, even as scientists behind the scenes discussed the feasibility of a lab origin.

We expect more creditable words and action from our NIH directors. The NIH and *Washington Post Live* owe the public more than a tawdry public relations panel sponsored by a corporation that inspires no trust in science.

Three years into the worst pandemic in a century, and we still don’t know how it began. Across the world, about 20 million people may well have died so far from COVID-19. There will be more. We have entire federal agencies to investigate plane crashes and prevent car crashes, which kill far fewer people.

We deserve a real investigation into how and why COVID-19 emerged. Congress should demand one, and require its agencies to release information that could help prevent the next pandemic. **CHC**

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