

Browsing a corporation's mind

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Industry archives are a treasure trove. No matter how old, their minutes, correspondence, memos, or invoices always tell the truth. What they tell us is an ageless truth about corporate lies.

Thanks to the millions of pages of the “cigarette papers,” scholars and journalists worldwide were able to reconstruct and analyze decades of deceitful tactics by the most deadly industrial sector humanity has ever created—the tobacco industry [1]. Hundreds of books, academic articles, and investigative news articles have been published in the past 25 years, generating a trove of knowledge. The documents reveal profound disruption of scientific processes through an elaborate strategy aimed at “manufacturing doubt” [2] about the dangers of smoking.

Scattered industry archives, made public from litigation and ‘discovery’ processes or freedom of information requests, also made it possible to study how industries manufactured doubt around the hazards associated with other toxic substances. Asbestos, lead, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and petrochemicals each most certainly deserved one or several databases of their own.

But now justice is done. Thanks to the ToxicDocs database [3], we can dive deeper into the documents describing hazards, documents written by the makers of the poisons. Journalists working on these issues need to familiarize themselves with these ToxicDocs archives if they want to understand what is happening today.

Industry tactics and propaganda are not reinvented each and every morning. They stem from decades of sophistication. One inspires the other. Industry sectors even share Swiss Army characters—scientists, consultants, and propagandists [4]. The production of alternative scientific facts to whitewash hazardous products and noxious practices has now become a business sector in its own right.

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This situation makes us wonder whether we can still trust industries that were once capable of knowingly lining children's pajamas with toxic chemicals. Or, to paraphrase British columnist George Monbiot: Can we trust multinational corporations to tell us the truth about multinational corporations? [5].

Industry archives in ToxicDocs mainly relate to United States (US) corporations and regulatory agencies, Americans, and polluted sites across North America. Yet this does not make them irrelevant to European journalists and European issues. On the contrary, it is fascinating to see that free market and free trade have not only facilitated the circulation of goods; they have also accelerated the exportation (or importation from a European perspective) of influence strategies by US-based corporations, their consulting firms, and their product-defense companies to the old continent. These are easily recognizable in the tactics employed by the many trade associations, scientific consulting firms, and 'front groups' based in Brussels, where the institutions of the European Union (EU) are headquartered and heavily lobbied.

In this context, it is important to underline that the EU has become the global epicenter for leading-edge environmental and public health regulation. The most active lobbying operators during the discussions over the 2006 EU chemical regulation, REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation, and Restriction of Chemicals), were the US chemical corporations... and the US government [6]. They are still around.

Because there is no such thing as the United States legal system's 'discovery' procedure in the EU judicial system, industry archives are invaluable. Besides revealing evidence of organized deceit, we can also see how loyalty, and a sense of community and belonging create bonds between employees. We can also see how executives, in-house toxicologists, and public-relations people talk to each other, the wordings used, the language chosen to describe the issues—or not. Sometimes a single sentence nested in an email speaks volumes. Detailed reports on how ghostwriting is used in the pharmaceutical sector has surfaced in the past decade [7]. But how widespread is ghostwriting in the agrochemical and chemical sectors? This is a new question that arises from a few sentences in the "Monsanto Papers," the thousands of documents released following litigation on glyphosate in the US, that now will be harbored by ToxicDocs, creating the largest collection of Monsanto documents [8].

Browsing through industry archives sometimes feels like exploring a corporation's mind. Sigmund Freud's nephew, the so-called "father of spin" and the inventor of modern lobbying, namely Edward Bernays, "liked to think of himself as a kind of psychoanalyst to troubled corporations" [9]. Thanks to ToxicDocs, it's now our turn to delve into the minds of those troubled corporations.

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