



When public health comes a poor second to profit

Tobacco causes lung cancer, sugar and fizzy drinks are the primary cause of tooth decay in children, workplace exposure to asbestos is strongly linked to mesothelioma, diesel engine emissions and certain pesticides have carcinogenic properties – and the list goes on. Yet despite being aware of the mountain of evidence proving the toxicity of these products, their manufacturers used all the marketing tricks in the book to boost sales, and public authorities took decades to ban them (the best possible outcome) or to impose limits on their use (the more frequent outcome). How did we find ourselves in this situation? The answer is not hard to find: the tobacco, beverage, asbestos, automotive and agrochemical lobbies have done their jobs extremely well, allowing the multinationals to feather their own comfortable nests at the expense of human health and the environment.

Stéphane Horel is a journalist and writer for the French newspaper *Le Monde*. In her latest book, *Lobbytomy, comment les lobbies empoisonnent nos vies et la démocratie* [Lobbytomy: how lobbies are poisoning our lives and democracy], she dissects the strategies used by unscrupulous companies such as Monsanto, Philip Morris, Exxon or Coca-Cola to protect current and future sales of their harmful products and to thwart any regulations likely to affect their bottom line.

Horel's well-documented investigations serve as a primer for newcomers to the field on the various lobbying techniques – sponsored research, conflicts of interest, self-regulation, etc. – used so expertly by manufacturers to push through the decisions they want.

The most popular of all these strategies was developed back in the 1950s by the tobacco companies, and involves manipulating

science and sowing the seeds of doubt. According to the "Tobacco Papers", the industry's response to the first publications proving that smoking was bad for your health was to fund research aimed at sparking controversy and spreading doubt about whether cigarettes really did cause lung cancer. Over 6 000 industry-sponsored papers were published in scientific journals over a period of almost 40 years, all of them attempting to demonstrate that people got lung cancer for many different reasons, that there was no scientific consensus on the harmful effects of smoking and still less evidence to support claims of its harm, and that a vast array of confounding factors made it impossible to draw any conclusions. The truth did eventually prevail, but it took decades to reach that point, during which sales continued unabated and the death toll rose. Tobacco was responsible for the premature death of 100 million people over the course of the 20th century, and it is estimated that this figure will rise to as high as one billion over the course of the 21st century.

Science has also been put to work for profit in the intervening decades to make it harder for the public authorities to clamp down on a long list of other toxic substances (asbestos, lead, mercury, benzene, vinyl chloride, etc.).

The take-away message from this book is that this strategy of influencing decisions continues to pay off. For example, it has been deployed successfully by Monsanto to keep Roundup on the European market and to secure an extension of the European Food Safety Authority approval for glyphosate, the active ingredient in the world's most widely used herbicide, despite the fact that it has been defined as probably carcinogenic to humans

by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). In a similar vein, legislators are dragging their heels on binding measures in the fields of endocrine disruptors despite mounting evidence of their harm to humans and the environment, and the same is true for the anthropogenic causes of climate change.

This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand why the production of knowledge is controlled by industrial players rather than independent research organisations, and how manufacturers ensure that decisions which are supposed to serve the public good are subverted for their own interests.

At the end of the book, the author has included a model declaration of interests form which could help to prevent manipulation of this kind, and which could serve as inspiration for the national and European regulatory agencies to sever the knot with their committees of experts who are "under the influence". They might then succeed in tightening up the legislation needed to protect human health and the environment against hazardous products, and in increasing public confidence in governmental policies.

– Tony Musu

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[Lobbytomy: how lobbies are poisoning our lives and democracy]

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