

“Doubt Is Our Product”

The Story of Cigarettes, Climate Change, and Food

By Dale Lugenbehl, *American Vegan*, Winter 2018, Vol. 18, No. 1

Back in 1969, an internal memo within the Brown and Williamson Tobacco company was discovered by outside investigators. That memo stated that

“Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also a means of establishing controversy.” (1)

At the time of this memo, there was a huge accumulation of high quality scientific evidence that established a positive link between smoking cigarettes and lung cancer, and this information was a threat to the profits of the tobacco industry. The industry could do nothing to refute that mountain of evidence. What they did instead, was simply create confusion, uncertainty, and doubt in the minds of the general public. The tobacco industry did that by producing their own “experts” who claimed that there was not enough evidence to prove conclusively that smoking caused cancer. They also produced some “research” of their own which showed that there was not a cause and effect relationship between smoking and cancer.

Was their research well designed and up to a high scientific standard? No. Could their research be duplicated by others outside the industry? No. Did the tobacco industry expose any real flaws in the studies establishing that smoking caused cancer? No. But this was not their strategy. If they could place occasional headlines in the media such as “New study shows smoking may not be cause of cancer,” that would be enough to create uncertainty and doubt in people’s minds, and many of them would simply say “Well, nobody really knows for sure about smoking and cancer so I might as well continue to smoke.” Uncertainty and doubt always tend to maintain the status quo and give people an excuse to continue doing what they really want to do.

Eventually, of course, there was so much evidence and it was so well known that people could no longer say there was any doubt. A much smaller number of people still continued to smoke, but it was with the knowledge that they were risking becoming sick and dying as a consequence.

The same strategy has also been used to make it appear that no one really knows whether climate change is real or what might be causing it. People could then say, “If nobody knows, I might as well continue to drive my SUV, eat my burgers and live just as I always have.” Up until the Obama administration, climate change was often referred to as a “theory.” During the George Bush Presidency, scientific reports warning about climate change were deliberately edited to downplay the danger and create doubt in the public mind about climate change. This editing of information was done by members of the administration with ties to the oil industry.

Back in 2006, scientists working for the federal government were submitting reports on climate change to be released to the media and general public. These reports were edited by a White House staffer named Phil Cooney. A 2006 *60 Minutes* broadcast explained the process.

Cooney, ...a [lawyer and] former oil industry lobbyist, became chief-of-staff at the White House Council on Environmental Quality. ...Cooney edited climate reports in his own hand. In one report, a line that said earth is undergoing rapid change becomes "may be undergoing change." ...One line that says "energy production contributes to warming" was just crossed out. "He was obviously passing it through a political screen," says Rick Piltz [of the federal Climate Change Science Program]. "He would put in the word "potential" or "may" or weaken or delete text that had to do with the likely consequence of climate change, and pump up uncertainty language throughout." ...Phil Cooney, ...didn't return 60 Minutes' calls. In June, he left the White House and went to work for Exxon Mobil. (2)

Fortunately, things have moved ahead and today climate change is generally seen as a fact, with only a few skeptics who hold out against it out of ignorance, entrenched political ideology, or the desire to maintain their own financial profit at the expense of the well being of the entire planet.

Today, essentially the same strategy of creating doubt is being used by the animal foods industries. What follows is a very instructive example of creating uncertainty about the health dangers of eggs, leading many people to simply continue eating their present diet because "nobody really knows what's healthy anyway." In recent years we have seen reports in the media of some studies showing that eating eggs, despite their high load of saturated fat and cholesterol, is not really bad for health. Many people read about the *results* of the study, but never probe into *how the study was actually done*. They also typically do not read the mountain of other studies implicating eggs with numerous life-threatening diseases.

Upon looking into one such study, it turns out that the subjects in the study had very unhealthy levels of blood cholesterol (in the 230 to 240 range) before the studies began. Dr. Joel Kahn points out that "...when you add in several eggs a week, you don't see much change. [It's like] ...smoking 20 cigarettes a day, [if you change to] smoking 19 or 21 it will probably not make a profound difference to your lung cancer risk." On the other hand, if your present blood cholesterol is low, adding eggs to your diet makes a huge difference. As Dr. J. David Spence put it, "...the American diet already contains so much that could cause harm, it's hard to measure the effect of [adding] a single potentially unhealthy food." (3)

If we look deeper, we will also find out that studies of this sort typically have strong financial ties to the industry that is selling the product. Dr. John McDougall: "Over the past three decades industry has bought and paid for the patients, researchers, doctors, and medical journals that have produced the bulk of the published medical research." (4)

We must remember that knowledge is power. We can learn to see the "doubt strategy" for what it is, use our critical thinking abilities to see through the smoke screen, and no longer fall victim to it. And if we do not have the best science background, there are people like Dr. John McDougall, Dr.

Neal Barnard, Dr. T Colin Campbell and others who are motivated by truth rather than financial profit, who can help guide us through the science.

We can also remember that, similar to smoking and climate change, we will eventually, perhaps soon, reach the point where the health evidence against animal products is so overwhelming and so widely known that these products will be seen in a light similar to the way tobacco is presently seen. We may even see labels on animal foods similar to the warning labels presently required on cigarettes!

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Citations

- (1) *What the Health*, by Eunice Wong with Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn, Xlibris, 2017, p. 294
- (2) Transcript from *60 Minutes* program aired March 19, 2006, CBS.
- (3) *What the Health*, pp. 97-98
- (4) "The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act: A Big Step Forward, by Dr. John McDougall, *The McDougall Newsletter*, April, 2010, Volume 9, Issue 4, <https://www.drmcDougall.com/misc/2010nl/apr/sb.htm>