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'I Was Wrong'

How One Activist's
Apology Changes
the GMO Debate





Mark Lynas, British activist

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COVER IMAGE: In 1999 Mark Lynas wrote the article *Savages Strike a Blow Against Capitalism* published in *Earth First!* making him a leader for the 1990s anti-GM movement in Europe. In a recent interview he apologized for having spent years ripping up GM crops and playing such a large role in starting the anti-GM movement. He also acknowledged he assisted in tainting an important technological option that can be used to benefit the environment.



‘I Was Wrong:’

How One Activist’s Apology Changes the GMO Debate

Richard S. Levick

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It wasn’t just an acknowledgement of error. It was the recantation of an agenda.

On January 3, British activist Mark Lynas apologized to a gathering of academics at Oxford for his staunch opposition to the production and distribution of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Lynas cogently detailed a number of reasons why he was both wrong and wrongheaded in the role he played spearheading the anti-GMO movement in Europe. Wrong, because of specific factual errors and oversights. Wrongheaded, for choosing passionate advocacy over disinterested science.

Some environmental activists have been publicly and predictably apoplectic over Lynas’ conversion. “It is a measure of the sorry state of many environmental debates that such a calm statement before a polite audience of

academics would cause such a ruckus,” wrote one commentator.

Actually, the reaction by the activists is totally understandable. They know that a public conversion like Lynas’ is potential dynamite. It creates celebrity where there was none before. Lynas, famed in Europe, was relatively unknown in the U.S until this current controversy and the significant media attention and social media commentary that were subsequently garnered stateside.

Justly or not, a public conversion also adds credibility to positions that might otherwise be viewed as mere self-interest. Presumably, it was a hard step for Lynas to have taken. Presumably, some compelling truths must have therefore persuaded him to do so. In any event, it’s clearly not lost on the industry that Lynas’ conversion could be a watershed event.

“We hope that the tremendous reaction to the speech by Mark Lynas serves as evidence that honest consideration of the science will change minds about agricultural biotechnology,” says Dr. Cathleen Enright, executive director of the Council for Biotechnology Information in Washington, DC.

“The biotechnology industry has found itself trapped in a corner as any discussion of GMOs inevitably devolves into controversies about Monsanto,” adds Jon Entine, Executive Director of the Genetic Literacy Project and a Senior Fellow at George Mason University’s Center for Health & Risk Communication. “Lynas’ conversion is a welcome event if only because it offers to instead focus the dialogue squarely on science, irrespective of politics, and on the very real possibility that we have an immensely promising sustainable technology at hand.”

Yet many in the biotechnology industry are likely still wondering how to best take full advantage of this singular event, in order to persuade more people (including public officials) that its technology will beneficially transform food production worldwide, as well as ensure a stronger role for objective scientific thought in the ongoing discussion.

They would do well to revisit Lynas’ actual remarks for a few salient clues.

It’s fitting that the Oxford Farming Conference was the conversion site as it was also Oxford where Lynas threw a cream pie in the face of Bjorn Lomborg, a critic of eco-apocalyptic agendas.

“Pies for lies,” yelled Lynas. Now he soberly recants “demonizing an important technological option which can be used to benefit the environment...I could not have chosen a more counter-productive path.”

As Lynas points out, his was no Road-to-Damascus conversion. To the contrary, his comments at Oxford should not have surprised anyone who read earlier interviews in which he acknowledged that “simplistic solutions don’t really work... There are processes of gradually opening one’s mind and beginning to take seriously alternative viewpoints, and then looking more closely at the weight of the evidence.”

At Oxford, Lynas went further. When he first heard about Monsanto’s GM soya, he thought “...here was humankind acquiring too much technological power; something was bound to go horribly wrong...” The anti-GMO movement, effectively joined by the most powerful global NGOs, was therefore “explicitly an anti-science movement.”

The real kicker in his Oxford speech follows next: *“For me this anti-science environmentalism became increasingly inconsistent with my pro-science environmentalism with regard to climate change”* [emphasis added].

For the GMO industry, it’s a suggestive and very useful inconsistency. Message One: Science is the activists’ real bugaboo. Environmentalists have long been accused of practicing “junk science,” but “anti-science” is a decidedly heavier gauntlet to throw down.

Yet even a pro-science message isn’t really a strong enough strategy. As Lynas points out, there are “deep seated fears of scientific powers being used secretly for unnatural ends,” what he calls the “Frankenstein food tag.” Some folks don’t therefore mind the anti-science stigma.

“ [I was] demonizing an important technological option which can be used to benefit the environment... I could not have chosen a more counter-productive path.”

So Message Two is essential: If science itself is the enemy, the environmentalists cannot then use it to buttress other agendas like global warming. Here, the biotechnology industry can be talking all the more often and loudly about (as Lynas puts it) “the value of peer-review...the importance of scientific consensus and how the only facts that mattered were the ones published in the most distinguished scholarly journals.”

The challenge posed to the environmentalists is to rely on science everywhere or rely on it nowhere. If they opt for science, they may discover, or at least need to consider, what Lynas came to believe: that, for example, GM does not increase the use of chemicals as pest-resistant cotton and maize require less insecticide. Or that the mixing of genes between unrelated species is no more unnatural than the gene flows that have driven evolution since life began.

It should be said that Lynas’ points are now being strenuously contested by some activists who certainly do have enough respect for science to responsibly engage such issues as glyphosate safeness or prenatal exposure to organophosphate pesticides. Yet the GMO industry has a practical advantage beyond the battling message points or the purported refutation of one scientific study by research leading to diametrically opposed conclusions.

After all, the industry now has less need for “company men” to play the role of salaried corporate defender. They now have Mark Lynas to help. If GM advocates play their cards right—if they’re patient and open to dialogue, and if they treat the other side with respect when respect is due—other converts may already be in the making.

There’s a practicum here for many industries under assault. The more zealous their assailants, the more it may be in their interest to persuade rather than simply beat them. No one preaches better than a convert. ■

Richard S. Levick, Esq., President and CEO of LEVICK, represents countries and companies in the highest-stakes global communications matters—from the Wall Street crisis and the Gulf oil spill to Guantanamo Bay and the Catholic Church.

WHAT'S NEXT:

— *from the* —

CFPB

with Joe Lynyak



In this LEVICK Daily video interview, we discuss what's next from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau with Joe Lynyak, a partner at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP. From a still-evolving regulatory examination function, to a complete rewrite of the rules governing residential mortgages, there are many initiatives underway that require significant adjustments by the financial services industry.



FORMER CONGRESSMAN

STEVE BARTLETT JOINS LEVICK



In this LEVICK Daily interview, LEVICK's new Strategic Policy Advisor, Steve Bartlett, discusses how companies can best navigate the complex relationships between the public and private sectors. As a former Congressman, Mayor of Dallas, and CEO of the Financial Services Roundtable, Mr. Bartlett has time and again fostered the cooperation between governments and for-profit companies that is essential to success and the realization of shared goals.

Activist Investors in 2013: “SUCCESS BEGETS SUCCESS”

Kathleen Wailes

Originally Published on LEVICK Daily



When the Activist Investor Conference 2013 convenes next week in New York City, there will be no shortage of optimism among those who make their livings ousting boards, shaking up managements, and dismantling monolithic corporations.

That's because 2012 is seen by many in the group as among the most successful years activists have ever enjoyed. Netflix, Proctor & Gamble, and Danone are only a few of the big names that faced significant activist challenges in 2012. There is little doubt that even more will be added to the list in 2013.

While the number of 13D filings (mandatory disclosures of an activist stake at or larger than five percent) were down in 2012, the dollars involved tell a very different story. As reported last month by *The Financial Times*, more than \$57 billion were being devoted to activist agendas by the end of Q3 2012. That compares to \$51 billion at the beginning of 2012 and just \$32 billion at the end of 2008. Moreover, it's important to note that several activist funds garnered investor returns of more than 20 percent last year.

These figures portend another uptick in 2013 for the simple reason that activists need to find something to do with all that cash. With more resources comes an enhanced ability to acquire stakes in, and demand changes from, companies that are seen as attractive targets. Daniel Kerstein, the head of the strategic finance group at Barclays may have put it best

when he told the *Financial Times* that “Success begets success.” Henry Gosebruch, the Managing Director of JPMorgan's M&A team added that “More money means a need to find more targets, and larger ones.”

As activists begin to cast a wider net than ever before, potential targets need to emphasize two strategic imperatives to prevent coming under the crosshairs. First is the need to communicate value and vision to the marketplace. Even if earnings are off and forecasts are pessimistic, companies can fend off the likes of Ackman, Loeb, and Icahn if shareholders know there is a solid plan in place and that management can effectively execute it.

And second, potential targets must identify ways to strengthen relationships with shareholders before activists seek to weaken them. When shareholders feel empowered and know that their insights are truly valued, they are more conditioned to side with boards and management when a hostile acquirer comes knocking.

With the 2013 proxy season just around the corner, companies need to take steps now to thwart activists armed with larger stockpiles of cash than ever before. For by the time a 13D is filed or a proxy challenge is issued, it is already too late to mount an effective defense. ■

Kathleen Wailes is a Senior Vice President at LEVICK and Chair of the firm's Financial Communications Practice. She is also a contributing author to LEVICK Daily.

When President Obama rolled out his new gun control plan at the White House, he included some small but noticeable concessions for the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other advocates of responsible gun ownership.

First, there is the fact that the Administration did not opt for an easy fix, simply pursuing an all-out ban on assault weapons and leaving it at that. With the inclusion of measures aimed at improving background checks, halting illegal gun trafficking, and ensuring gun-owners' mental health and stability, there is a decent chance that a balanced, common-sense approach will win out over reactionary solutions that might make us feel good, but not make us any safer.

Of course, the NRA's response to the president's proposal was as subtle as a shotgun blast.

"Attacking firearms and ignoring children is not a solution to the crisis we face as a nation," the NRA said in its response, noting that it believes "only honest, law-abiding gun owners will be affected and our children will remain vulnerable to the inevitability of more tragedy."

That declaration closely followed the release of an advertisement cynically citing the fact that the president's own daughters are protected by Secret Service agents with automatic weapons when they go to school. The ad, which asks "Are the president's kids more important than yours?" makes a compelling, albeit insensitive point in favor of the NRA's proposal to place armed guards in every school throughout America.

UNDER FIRE:

Why the NRA Can't Duck and Cover

Gene Grabowski

Originally Published on LEVICK Daily



BLOGS *worth following*



THOUGHT LEADERS

Amber Naslund

brasstackthinking.com

Amber Naslund is a coauthor of *The Now Revolution*. The book discusses the impact of the social web and how businesses need to “adapt to the new era of instantaneous business.”

Brian Halligan

hubspot.com/company/management/brian-halligan
HubSpot CEO and Founder.

Chris Brogan

chrisbrogan.com

Chris Brogan is an American author, journalist, marketing consultant, and frequent speaker about social media marketing.

David Meerman Scott

davidmeermanscott.com

David Meerman Scott is an American online marketing strategist, and author of several books on marketing, most notably *The New Rules of Marketing and PR* with over 250,000 copies in print in more than 25 languages.

Guy Kawasaki

guykawasaki.com

Guy Kawasaki is a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, bestselling author, and Apple Fellow. He was one of the Apple employees originally responsible for marketing the Macintosh in 1984.

Jay Baer

jaybaer.com

Jay Baer is coauthor of, “*The Now Revolution: 7 Shifts to Make Your Business Faster, Smarter and More Social.*”

Rachel Botsman

rachelbotsman.com

Rachel Botsman is a social innovator who writes, consults and speaks on the power of collaboration and sharing through network technologies.

Seth Godin

sethgodin.typepad.com

Seth Godin is an American entrepreneur, author and public speaker. Godin popularized the topic of permission marketing.

INDUSTRY BLOGS

Holmes Report

holmesreport.com

A source of news, knowledge, and career information for public relations professionals.

NACD Blog

blog.nacdonline.org

The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) blog provides insight on corporate governance and leading board practices.

PR Week

prweekus.com

PRWeek is a vital part of the PR and communications industries in the US, providing timely news, reviews, profiles, techniques, and ground-breaking research.

PR Daily News

prdaily.com

PR Daily provides public relations professionals, social media specialists and marketing communicators with a daily news feed.

BUSINESS RELATED

FastCompany

fastcompany.com

Fast Company is the world’s leading progressive business media brand, with a unique editorial focus on business, design, and technology.

Forbes

forbes.com

Forbes is a leading source for reliable business news and financial information for the World’s business leaders.

Mashable

mashable.com

Social Media news blog covering cool new websites and social networks.

While some members of Congress, gun control advocates and media pundits find the NRA’s words and actions since the Sandy Hook tragedy to be repugnant, it’s important to remember that the NRA isn’t seeking to win these critics—or anyone else—over to its side. The NRA, quite naturally, is playing to a base that is as strong as ever and likely to get stronger as fundraising and outreach efforts against the more restrictive elements of the President’s plan swell the organization’s coffers and energize its supporters.

Furthermore, the NRA understands that you never lead a negotiation by making concessions. It can’t be denied that the NRA’s stubborn adherence to its mission is a good part of

the reason behind the president’s measured approach. It may even be what is keeping public outrage from spilling over into the halls of Congress on a larger scale than we’ve seen.

Seen in this context, the NRA isn’t merely insensitive to the victims of gun violence. It is an organization speaking to the needs of members, the vast majority of whom are responsible citizens who can be trusted to handle firearms safely. **L**

Gene Grabowski is an Executive Vice President at LEVICK and a contributing author to LEVICK Daily.

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ARTICLES

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**THE URGENCY
OF NOW.**