



Food and drink industry sought to influence scientists and academics, emails show

Gareth Iacobucci

The BMJ

Documents obtained from US public records provide fresh evidence of how food and drink companies have sought to promote their interests through a powerful group funded by the industry, researchers say.

US Right to Know, which campaigns for transparency in the food industry, sought emails and documents through the US Freedom of Information Act covering communications between academic researchers and the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), whose funders include Coca-Cola and other global corporations.

A paper summarising the contents of the documents, published in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*,¹ shows what it calls “a pattern of activity in which ILSI sought to exploit the credibility of scientists and academics to bolster industry positions and promote industry-devised content in its meetings, journal, and other activities.”

ILSI was set up by a Coca-Cola executive 40 years ago. It is based in Washington, DC, but operates throughout the world. It is a not-for-profit organisation and says that it does not lobby. But Gary Ruskin, executive director of US Right to Know and one of the authors of the paper, said, “ILSI is insidious because they say they work for health when really they defend the food industry and its profits. Across the world ILSI is central to the food industry’s product defence, to keep consumers buying the ultra-processed food, sugary beverages, and other junk food that promotes obesity, type 2 diabetes, and other ills.”

A 2019 investigation by *The BMJ* showed how Coca-Cola had shaped public health policy in China through its funding of the ILSI-China group.² A separate report last month from the pressure group Corporate Accountability reported that ILSI’s

research, governance, and activities were “fraught with conflicts of interest.”³

The latest study is based on five FOI requests filed by US Right to Know between 2015 and 2018, covering communications with researchers at four US institutions: Texas A&M, the University of Illinois, the University of Colorado, and North Carolina State University.

The group said it uncovered examples of how ILSI promoted the interests of the food and agricultural industries, including defending controversial food ingredients and suppressing views that were unfavourable to the industry. It also found evidence of how corporations such as Coca-Cola were able to earmark contributions to ILSI for specific programmes and how the group used academics to bolster its authority but allowed hidden influence of the industry in their publications.

“We conclude that undue influence of industry through third-party entities like ILSI requires enhanced management of conflicts of interest by researchers,” the authors said. “We call for ILSI to be recognised as a private sector entity rather than an independent scientific non-profit, to allow for more appropriate appraisal of its outputs and those it funds.”

ILSI was approached for comment but not had not responded by the time of publication.

- 1 Ruskin G, Steele S, Stuckler D. Pushing partnerships: corporate influence on research and policy via the International Life Sciences Institute. 10.1017/S1368980019005184.
- 2 Greenhalgh S, King J, Cannon Fairbank W. Making China safe for Coke: how Coca-Cola shaped obesity science and policy in China. *BMJ* 2019;364:k505010.1136/bmj.k5050.
- 3 Iacobucci G. Food and soft drink industry has too much influence over US dietary guidelines, report says. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1666. 10.1136/bmj.m1666 32332047

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>