

**Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America****COMMENT**

## **Smell a rat? Flawed GM cancer study highlights flawed media approach**

By [Caroline Scott-Thomas](#)+, 08-Oct-2012

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**A French study on the effects of Monsanto's genetically modified (GM) maize in rats has said little about the safety or otherwise of GM crops – but it has said plenty about how the media can be used to push an agenda.**

The study itself has been widely criticised, but at a time when pressure is on reporters more than ever to be the first news organisation to 'break' a story, many members of the public will have read nothing but the initial, scaremongering reports – which reflect exactly what the researchers intended.

There are several issues that bother me here. However, as a journalist, top of the list is the fact that reporters given pre-embargo access had to sign an agreement that they would not speak to any outside experts before the embargo was lifted.

This more or less guaranteed that no early reports would question Séralini's findings – and, worryingly, some pretty well-respected news outlets agreed to this condition. The contract was essentially an abuse of the media, and of the embargo system, to quash early criticism.

It also took advantage of journalists who failed to grasp that the peer review process is not gospel; even published studies need to be questioned.

Nearly immediately, [anti-GM groups started leveraging the reports to push their agenda](#), leading Russian authorities to temporarily ban imports of the crop and the French government to call for an EU-wide ban.

### **Passion and urgency, but a lack of data**

There are few issues in food today that stir up such impassioned – and such ill-informed – views as GM materials in our food supply. As such, Séralini et al knew that many news outlets would take their results as presented, run with them, and never take a second look, and in many cases they were right.

Meanwhile, the researchers have refused to publish their full data set.

Frankly, this is bizarre. It is normal and expected for scientists to make their data available so others can assess their methodologies and attempt to replicate results.

However, even without the full data, there were some glaring faults, [as EFSA and other food safety agencies around the world](#) have pointed out.

### **I smell a rat...**

Some of the most obvious were the small sample size (just ten per group) and that the rats used were genetically predisposed to develop tumours. In fact, the Sprague-Dawley rats have a [70 to 95.8% chance](#) of developing tumours within their two-year lifespan – that's before any treatment of any kind. Especially if they only number ten, these rats were not suitable controls, and it's hardly surprising that five of the ten Sprague-Dawley rats in the control group developed tumours.

In addition, Séralini listed no conflict of interest for this study, but Embargo Watch – which has [an interesting take on this issue](#) – pointed out that he also has a book on GMOs out this week. Coincidence...?

In short, it doesn't matter what your ideologies are, this study was hugely flawed. Nevertheless, it managed to get a lot of publicity with little analysis by taking advantage of the media's desire to be first on a story in a high-speed world.

It actively took advantage of widespread paranoia about GM foods and a lack of understanding of scientific methodologies.

### **So what next?**

We need a cool head to examine what is going on with the safety or otherwise of GM crops, without the baggage of a predetermined viewpoint. Unfortunately, few individuals have that, even researchers, as this study underlines.

My hope is that there are lessons to be drawn anyway; it could lead to better testing of the safety of GM crops, including the development of methodologies that will be acceptable to global food safety authorities...as well as a much larger dose of scepticism among journalists next time someone tells them to whom they can and cannot talk.

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