



Episode 1,174: Science Deniers?

Guest: Cameron English

WOODS: Tell me about DeniersForHire.com.

ENGLISH: Yeah, so it's a project that I've been working on with the American Council on Science and Health for about a year now, and essentially what we're doing is we're going after environmentalist groups that are attacking scientists in agriculture and biotechnology. Typically these groups are very anti-GMO. They're anti really innovation in agriculture, but they can't win the debate on scientific grounds and so they attack these people's reputations. They say that they're corporate shills, they're experts who have been bought off, and so on and so forth. And so if you're an academic, you have to deal with the fallout of an attack like this, and so we're coming alongside these people and defending them against these unjustified attacks and trying to give the public a good resource, so when they read this in *The New York Times* or what have you, there's an effective counter to it.

WOODS: Well, let me just be devil's advocate for a minute. Is there ever a case where you're dealing with an academic whose work is funded by the industry that would benefit from the findings?

ENGLISH: Well, here's the dirty secret in agriculture and even in really any applied field of science: if you're an academic in one of these fields, you have to work with industry. Typically, that's how the granting programs work. So say like the National Science Foundation or whatever, they'll put up 50 cents on the dollar, but then they expect you to go get a project that involves industry to put up the other half of the funding. And that is essentially how you make your name in a field like this. And so when these groups cry about industry corruption and so forth, they don't even understand how the process works. I mean, the schools, the government are really trying to push people into that practice, so it's really not scandalous in any way.

WOODS: So it's not an attempt to say this particular scientist is saying things that are not true and that are widely understood to be not true and simply needs to be disregarded for that reason. It's rather it doesn't really matter what this person is saying; this person is a shill for industry. So that's the level of the conversation that they want to have?

ENGLISH: That's the level. And just for clarification so everybody understands, the vast majority of scientists think this technology, biotechnology, genetic engineering is perfectly safe. And it doesn't matter that they're public researchers or private researchers. Just the number of experts from all over the world, all different political persuasions, they all say that this is safe. And so you have a handful of groups who are funded by the organic food

companies – ironically enough, because they're crying about industry corruption – and they're going to Congress and they're lobbying for really restrictive policies, and we can get into that later. But yeah, I mean, that's really the problem that we're dealing with.

WOODS: Now, I have got no doubt many people who listen in who are going to disagree with you on this particular point on the merits of some of these things, whether it's GMOs or whatever else. And in fact, I think all the way back on episode – who knows? I think it was even before number 200, if I remember correctly. Yeah, I had Joel Salatin on, and he was pretty down on this stuff. I asked Mark Sisson, who's in the paleo/primal community and is a major voice over there, and he's very much in favor of so-called clean eating, but I asked him about this question, and he said, *You know, I don't think anybody really knows. I don't have a firm opinion on it one way or the other.* So I guess I've got people on all different sides of this. Is there a way that you can speak to all of those people?

ENGLISH: Yeah, certainly. Well, let me say I have great respect for both of those guys, and I lost a lot of weight on a low-carb diet and so I'm a big fan of Mark Sisson's work. That being said, I trust experts when it comes to different topics. So when I want to know about American history, I read one of your books or listen to your show because you're a historian. And the same rule applies here. I want to know from the people who are actually in the laboratory or out in the farm literally studying this stuff, and I think we need to keep that in mind. It's really easy to let your biases get the best of you, and we're all guilty of it.

And one other thing I'd say is I don't fault people that like to eat organic food or they live a certain way. I'm a libertarian just like the rest of your audience, and I have great respect for individual choice, and so if you want to do those things, that's fine. My biggest concern and the American Council on Science and Health, their biggest concern is making sure that people understand the science. That's the biggest concern, really.

WOODS: So give me an example of the kind of thing that your Deniers for Hire project is trying to counter. Now, you told me in particular about a group called U.S. Right to Know. Well, that sounds benign enough. What is it that they're doing that you think is interfering with the normal functioning of academic research?

ENGLISH: Yeah, sure. Well, just by the way, they always sound benign, right? Like, Greenpeace, what a lovely-sounding organization. But you know just as well as I do that they're into some, eh, questionable things. But anyways, this group U.S. Right to Know, they've really made a mark by filing Freedom of Information Act requests with public universities to get the emails of these scientists that we're talking about.

And there's one particular example that really got everything going, and it involves Dr. Kevin Folta. He's a plant biologist at the University of Florida. And in 2015, U.S. Right to Know filed a FOIA request with the university, so Kevin turned over something like 40,000 pages of his emails. And this group rifled through them, tried to find any link to Monsanto – and again, as we said earlier, it's very common for researchers to work with private companies. So they found all the scandalous details they wanted and they handed them off to Eric Lipton at *The New York Times*. And Lipton calls up Kevin Folta and he says, "Hey, this watchdog group gave me your emails. There some stuff in here I'm not really sure about. What's going on?" And so Kevin tried to explain the situation to give it context just like I did with you, and then at least he got to give his say so that when the article comes out, maybe it'll be fair and balanced.

But we're talking about *The New York Times*, so that didn't happen. And the article is online. If you just Google "Eric Lipton GMOs," you'll find the article I'm talking about. And so Lipton painted this picture of an industry that has totally corrupted agriculture, all these experts have been bought off, and they're lying about the dangers of GMOs. And nothing could be further from the truth. And the article was so bad that Folta is now suing Lipton and *The New York Times* for attacking him.

And so what we're doing with Deniers for Hire is documenting all of the mistakes. So we have an article on Eric Lipton up there taking apart his article, showing you all the scientific errors, the contradictions, and so forth. And just put yourself in one of these people's shoes. It's just not acceptable.

WOODS: The idea then is that these groups are going to claim that these individual scientists are guilty of some kind of scientific malpractice because they're operating in the service of some industry. But it looks like they themselves in their own practice of science are guilty of exactly what they're accusing others of but to the nth degree. So talk about that.

ENGLISH: Yeah, certainly. So there's a couple of points that are important to mention here. So like we were just talking about, Eric Lipton made all these insinuations about these companies paying for science, but what we've been doing in the science community is we've been filing counter FOIA requests on these groups. And when you read their emails, you find that they are actually doing the things that they're criticizing people for. And so they are paying other academics, the guys on the fringe – I mean, they're qualified, but they are way outside the mainstream. They're paying them to publish studies in really low-quality journals, which these groups can then promote on social media and they can get their friends' different newspapers and different websites to promote.

And then there's a really big issue going on with the International Agency for Research on Cancer, which is a sub-agency of the World Health Organization. And we can talk about that if you want. that's a big, big issue.

WOODS: Yeah, let's so that. Give us some background there.

ENGLISH: Yeah, so for anyone that isn't familiar, IARC is this international cancer research body, and what they've done for the last 50 years is they review different substances for its ability to cause cancer. And they've done some truly ridiculous things in the last few years. I mean, this is the group that said red meat will cause cancer, working night shifts causes cancer, certain kinds of hot tea cause cancer, coffee causes cancer. They did reverse that one, but they did say that at one point too. And so this group has kind of lost credibility over the years.

And in 2015, they put out what's called a monograph for your listeners that don't know, and they reviewed this chemical called glyphosate, which is the active ingredient in Roundup, a real popular weed killer. And *Reuters* reported on this, but this organization had edited out studies of their monograph that didn't meet the conclusion that Roundup or glyphosate causes cancer. And so they're deleting data. The research that they do include, they're misunderstanding, sometimes willfully it sounds like. And there are researchers, at least one that we know of for sure, who was involved in that IARC process who is now consulting lawyers in California, where I am, who are suing Monsanto. And so I don't know about you, but that sounds like a tremendous conflict of interest to me.

WOODS: All right, let's talk about what exactly the political agenda of these groups is. I think they would say that all they want to do is bring about transparency for the public. They want the public to know that there's such-and-such ingredient in such-and-such product or this product is genetically modified and this one isn't. All they're trying to do is educate the public. What can you have against that?

ENGLISH: Certainly, and if that was really what they were after, then we'd all be on the same page. There'd be no argument to be had, because everybody wants the public to understand this technology. So if you look up some of these researchers who are being attacked, they'll talk to you. They'll answer your messages on Twitter or Facebook. My podcast is all about getting these people to communicate with just average people like me. And so we all want transparency, if you will, but the problem is these people are using transparency and your "right to know" to create a scandal that just doesn't exist.

WOODS: But is there any of this going on outside of this narrow question of agriculture? I mean, surely they're doing this to people who have dissenting views on climate change, for example.

ENGLISH: Yeah, and I mean, in fairness to people in climatology, I think that has been really well defended. Like if you're an oil company and you attack a researcher in climatology because you don't like the results of their work, the media will pounce on you, and I'm sure you're very familiar with this topic. But in this field, for whatever reason, some of these media outlets and these environmental groups especially, they don't have any sympathy for science.

And I know I had mentioned to you Naomi Oreskes, who is a historian at Harvard University. She's made a career out of defending climatologists and so-called scientific consensus, but when it comes to this issue, for example, consensus isn't that important to her and she's a little more wary of technology and she's even in favor of FOIA requests because she likes it. So it's just a strange case of hypocrisy, because she's against FOIA requests when it comes to climatology, for example, but when it comes to this study, she's fine with it. She thinks these are public employees; they really need to open up their email accounts and let people see what's going on. And so you've got to pick one or the other. You can't have, *I'm for FOIA sometimes but against it sometimes. I like consensus sometimes, not all the times*. You know, it really destroys your argument.

WOODS: All right, I want to get from you the sense that this is an absolute bloody outrage, that what's being done to these people is just horrible. I want to hear the worst case you can throw at me, and I want to just walk away with my blood boiling with moral outrage.

ENGLISH: Well, I want you and your listeners, think of the bigger picture here. So these people have a political agenda and they're trying to deny you food choices. They don't care what the science is. They don't care what your opinion is as a consumer. They want to push the government to enforce particular policies. And then think about this in the developing world. This is a really big deal. It's not just a matter of: do I buy organic bananas or do I buy normal bananas for 12 bucks versus 8 bucks. This is a matter of: can I feed my family this month? And so in the developing world, they're trying to block this technology from being implemented, and this really is the difference between life and death in the third world. So that's a tremendous issue.

But I had mentioned IARC a little bit earlier. I mean, that's a huge case of corruption. That's an international organization that taxpayers in America are on the hook for. They've sucked something like \$40 million out of taxpayers' pockets over the last few decades, and they're not even doing what they're supposed to be doing. I mean, it's clearly an organization that's been infiltrated by a lot of these activist types. And I'll send you something for the show notes page, but I mean, this comes right out of the transcripts from the court cases against Monsanto. They have to admit this under oath. I mean, this is really terrible corruption and it's just not acceptable. I don't think anybody would be okay with it.

WOODS: You know what? Speaking of big-picture, why don't you take a couple of minutes to explain what you see as the correct way to think about these particular scientific issues and why you believe yours is the correct way? Because again, you're going to meet quite a lot of resistance from a lot of quarters, including from a good chunk of my own listeners. Explain what the case is that these scientists are trying to make and that you yourself would want to make.

ENGLISH: Sure, so the case in essence is that we're trying to develop technologies that make food safer, that make it cheaper, and make it more affordable, because as you know, the population around the world is exploding. It's not slowing down, especially in these developing countries, and that's going to put pressure on food supplies. And so it really is a matter of feeding the world. And then personally – and this isn't necessarily a scientific point, but just as a consumer, as someone who wants to be able to provide for my family, I find it extremely irritating that there's all this scaremongering and all this fear around technology that is really safe and has been tremendously effective. And so that's why I'm involved in this project. But to the scientific question, I mean, really, just go look at the science, and if people have questions, they can email me. I'm glad to chat. If there's anything in particular that they want to know about, I can put them in touch with experts. But there's just nothing to be afraid of. There's no conspiracy being hidden.

WOODS: Couldn't somebody say that, at the very least, though, perhaps we ought to be agnostic about it given that we have relatively, geologically speaking, very little experience with it so far?

ENGLISH: Yes, absolutely, and if someone is new to this topic, if you jump on Google or you're just trying to learn for the first time, then yes, I think you should go in with the mindset and say, *Okay, I want to be shown the facts. I want to know that this is safe.* And if you go in with an approach like that, with an open mind of course, but just with your guard up, I think you'll be convinced. If you go into it like these groups do that we're documenting and you're looking for a conspiracy and you're looking for malfeasance, you're going to find it because that's what you want. But if you go in looking just at the data and you ask questions, I think you're going to come out realizing this technology really isn't harmful and it's really a boon for everybody.

WOODS: When you say that the third world depends on it, give me some specifics.

ENGLISH: Yeah, well, especially in Africa, for example. We have cases where there are staple crops that people live on that are very, very susceptible to different diseases, different viruses, and then they have no recourse. They have to try and plant them, and then the crops get destroyed, and then they can't produce any food. So if they're trying to bring it to market, they can't make a living, and if they're just trying to feed themselves, I mean, then they're

literally dying. And so this happens. There's dozens and dozens of examples. I'll give you some to link to. But these groups are blocking the technology. I mean, it's a tremendous, tremendous problem, and again, I just don't think it's okay. We can't stand by and allow that to happen.

WOODS: You've just launched DeniersForHire.com, so it's got some good information on it in terms of it's got a lot of stuff on it, but it could have a lot more. What are your ambitions for this project?

ENGLISH: We're going to keep going after people who wrongly attack scientists and people who put out conspiracy theories around these topics. And it's just not going to stop, as far as I can see. Until this I guess counterinsurgency or whatever you want to call it, this anti-science movement really dies down, I just don't think we're going to stop. Because there's a ton of money behind this. I mean, you have groups like Greenpeace who are hardly fans of humanity, if you want to put it that way. They're always afraid of technology, and so they're always fighting against this stuff, and so it really does need a pushback from scientists and from people like me and even people in your audience.

WOODS: Well, I'm going to of course link to DeniersForHire.com at TomWoods.com/1174. I'll put your Twitter up. It looks like you're pretty active on Twitter, so we'll get you up there. What's your Twitter handle?

ENGLISH: It's @CamJEnglish.

WOODS: @CamJEnglish. Okay, so that's your Twitter. You don't actually want to give your email address out to the audience. I can't imagine you want that. Is that what you're saying you want to do?

ENGLISH: Well, I don't know; you made it sound like people might try to put me down so [laughing] —

WOODS: No, it's not like they're going to do anything bad; it's just that you're going to hear from a lot of people [laughing]. Yeah, no, I don't mean they're going to use it to find out where you live or anything. I just mean you're going to get a bombardment of emails.

ENGLISH: Sure. I'm half joking. If they go to my website — it's CameronJEnglish.net — you can email me through there. And if you go to the website, you can see my podcast. It's called *Cameron Talks Science*. And again, it's just me talking to experts in different fields. I actually had Mary Ruwart on over the weekend, so I'm going to put that one up pretty soon.

WOODS: Great, great, great. Yeah, she's really tremendous. Okay, well, best of luck with the project and thanks for your time.

ENGLISH: Thank you, Tom.