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## Scientific research under the influence of private interests (Season 2) : sugar and physical exercise.

In 2016, we had already drawn the attention of our readers on the growing influence of private interests on scientific research and on the need for mobilising more public resources to secure independent public research. We had then encouraged our readers to use their critical thinking when confronted with certain scientific publications, in case they have been funded by private money. [\[read\]](#)

Since then, evidence has grown of efforts made by powerful private interests to orient scientific research in a direction favourable to them. For example, Coca-Cola, the multinational that is irrigating the world with enormous quantities of sugar responsible for the increase of obesity and liver diseases (among others), finances a group of researchers in the framework of the [Global Energy Balance Network \(GEBN\)](#) whose purpose is *"identifying and implementing innovative solutions – based on the science of energy balance – to prevent and reduce diseases associated with inactivity, poor nutrition and obesity."* Thus, these scientists are used for influencing consumers through a reassuring pseudo-scientific discourse that makes them believe that there is a way - in particular by more physical activity - to continue drinking large quantities of sugar drinks without bearing any health consequences. This is the case, for example, in China where Coca-Cola influences nutrition policies through the Chinese branch of the ILSI, [The International Life Sciences Institute](#), that it is funding [\[read\]](#).



In France, according [a recent article](#) (in French) published by Le Monde, Coca-Cola has watered French scientists with 8 million euros to get their cooperation to disguise marketing operations into scientific research.

In the US, Coca-Cola has, among other things, funded a recognised scientist whose work formed much of the basis of federal guidelines on physical activity during the past 25 years, while several companies such as Kraft Foods, McDonald's, PepsiCo and Hershey's funded the American Society for Nutrition and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics) [read].

In fact, this is just a continuation of an old tradition that dates back to more than 50 years during which the sugar companies have done everything to deceive consumers and influence public health guidelines in their favour [read].

A paper published recently in the Journal of Public Health Policy shows, taking as an example Coca-Cola, how multinationals, through research agreements with public institutions in the United States and Canada, exercise control or influence on research. The authors found that Coca-Cola used these agreements to have *“the right to review research in advance of publication as well as control over (1) study data, (2) disclosure of results and (3) acknowledgement of Coca-Cola funding. Some agreements specified that Coca-Cola has the ultimate decision about any publication of peer-reviewed papers prior to its approval of the researchers’ final report.”* In some cases, Coca-Cola also has the right to prevent the publication of results that may be unfavourable to the company.

It is quite clear from this that research funding agreements signed by multinationals may include provisions that influence research results by limiting researchers' freedom. Considering the importance of the number of their publications in peer-reviewed journals for the career of researchers, it is difficult to imagine how these researchers could take the risk to use their time for projects that may produce results that may not be publishable because of the agreement made with the private company that funds them. Researchers' interests therefore lies in publishing results that support the interests of those who fund them, with the hope of benefitting of more funding in the future, all the more if multinationals also are in a position to influence journals: this influence could even, in some cases, go as far as ensuring that these journals would no more accept to publish a particularly “misbehaving” researcher.

We can here only repeat once more how important it is to have sufficient publicly budgeted resources for public research to ensure its independence and, at least, that governments develop rules and standards specifying authorised standard funding agreements so as to protect the quality and independence of research conducted under private funding.

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To know more:

- Boseley, S., Coca-Cola influences China's obesity policy, BMJ report says, The Guardian, 2019.
- Horel, S., Enquête sur la science sous influence des millions de Coca-Cola, Le Monde, 2019 (in French).
- Steele, S., *et al.*, “Always read the small print”: a case study of commercial research funding, disclosure and agreements with Coca-Cola, Journal of Public Health Policy, 2019.
- Foucart, S., La lente prise de conscience du poids de l'argent sur la recherche, Le Monde, 2018 (in French).

- O'Connor, A., Coca-Cola Funds Scientists Who Shift Blame for Obesity Away From Bad Diet, New York Times, 2015.

Selection of recent articles on [hungerexplained.org](http://hungerexplained.org) related to the topic:

- The wheelings and dealings of the sugar industry revealed by three Californian researchers, 2017.
- Opinions : Sweetened Research, Sugared Recommendations, by Jomo K. Sundaram and Tan Zhai Gen, 2017.
- Scientific research under the influence of private interests, 2016.
- In the US, the industrial food and agriculture sector spent hundreds of millions on communication to influence the media, consumers and policy. What about in Europe? 2015.