

# The Food World's Three Stooges

*A None-Too-Sweet Story of Disinformation, Conflict of Interest and Misdirection*

*"I used to work in a bakery as a pilot" "A pilot?" "Yeah. I used to take  
the bread from one corner and pilot in the other."*

*Curly Howard and actress Phyllis Crane*

*By Eric R. Gustafson*

When Moe, Larry and Curly ruled Hollywood – or at least Saturday mornings – physical comedy and slapstick got a rise out of audiences. The Stooges were classic icons of misdirection.

Fast forward a few generations. The latter-day troika of Ancel, Big Sugar and Unilever are managing to evoke the 1930s trio, minus the *nyuk, nyuk, nyuks*. It's a story of food "science" reading much more like science fiction, with decidedly unfunny consequences for consumers, legitimate science and entire industries.

"Ancel" would be pioneer food propagandist Ancel Keys, Big Sugar the multi-billion dollar juggernaut that threw truth under the bus while fingering animal fats as culpable for America's health woes, and Unilever the latest conglomerate to enlist academia in subverting research. As Daniel Engber understates in his review of Gary Taubes' new book, *The Case Against Sugar* in *The Atlantic*, "In the past few years, the dangers of dietary fat have begun to look as though they were overstated, and the risks of sugar underplayed."

Talk about fake news. There is a pattern here that predates the current media meltdown by generations, and it speaks to a lack of discernment among those both inside and outside the "food establishment" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8WA5wcaHp4>).

When few were looking closely, Minnesota pathologist Keys played a shell game with science and with competing sectors of the food processing industry, as Taubes recounts:

*Sugar companies formed a research foundation in 1943 and soon began a concerted effort, through hefty grants to scientists and seven-figure ad campaigns, to counter claims that sugar causes cavities... It was, in effect, the Big Tobacco strategy: Amplify uncertainty about what causes what, put the skeptics on your payroll, kick the can of scientific proof ever further down the road. According to Taubes's ... research, some of the most important figures in the field of nutrition -- Ancel Keys, for one -- took money from Big Sugar and at the same time made a point of doubting sugar's role in chronic illness.*

For his part, Keys was just warming up: his “Seven Countries Study” in the 1950s compared the health and diet of some 13,000 middle-aged men in the U.S., Japan and Europe, concluding that populations that consumed large amounts of saturated fats in meat and dairy had high levels of heart disease, while those who ate more grains, fish, nuts and vegetables did not.

Keys left out huge swaths of the planet (think: cheese-devouring France, oddly not part of his European sample) that didn’t fit his hypothesis, but it was enough to earn him the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1961. Fifty-three years – and a whole lot of margarine and sugar – later, *Time Magazine* recanted, with a cover emblazoned with the dictum: “Eat Butter. Scientists labeled fat the enemy. Why they were wrong.”

This past September, the sugar industry again was caught with its hand in the proverbial cookie jar when the [\*Journal of the American Medical Association \(JAMA\) Internal Medicine\*](#) reported a new University of California finding that, in the 1960s, the industry paid scientists to produce research downplaying the link between sugar and heart disease -- and playing up saturated fat’s role.

The Sugar Research Foundation invested \$50,000 in the three Harvard researchers who issued the 1967 report linking nutrition and heart health with ingestion of saturated fats in meat and dairy products rather than to sugar intake. Although the payment was hush-hush when the study was published, the findings influenced nutritional recommendations from public health officials and the supposedly rock-solid U.S. Dietary Guidelines.

In a postscript to the *JAMA Internal Medicine* article, Marion Nestle, a public health professor at NYU and the author of *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, described the findings as “a smoking gun” implicating those who fund research with supporting junk science.

Sadly, this misdirection didn’t wither away in the late ‘60s along with sideburns and bell-bottoms. Around Thanksgiving, a new study broke in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*. Asserting an association between intake of individual saturated fats and the risk of coronary heart disease, researchers – from, of all places, Harvard -- recommended that consumers “switch out saturated fats for healthier alternatives.”

Left unsaid was that four of the study’s co-authors work for Unilever – the world’s largest supplier of margarine and other food spreads, under the brands *Country Crock*, *I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter*, *Mazola*, *Rama* and *Best Foods*. One industry trade grabbed this tasty admission from *BMJ* editor-in-chief Fiona Godlee: “The *British Medical Journal* stopped publishing research funded by the tobacco industry a few years ago because of strong evidence that it couldn’t be relied upon. We have no such restrictions on research funded by the pharmaceutical or food and drinks industries... The fact that four of its eight authors receive funding or are employed by Unilever, which is a major manufacturer of vegetable oils, is one of the many uncomfortable realities of 21st Century medical research.”

Which immediately made me nostalgic for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Incredibly, barely a month later, in late December 2016, the sugar partisans were back at it. According to *The New York Times*,

*A prominent medical journal [has] published a scathing attack on global health advice to eat less sugar. Warnings to cut sugar, the study argued, are based on weak evidence and cannot be trusted. But the review, published in The Annals of Internal Medicine, quickly elicited sharp criticism from public health experts because the authors have ties to the food and sugar industries. The review was paid for by the International Life Sciences Institute, a scientific group that is based in Washington, D.C., and is funded by multinational food and agrochemical companies including Coca-Cola, General Mills, Hershey's, Kellogg's, Kraft Foods and Monsanto. One of the authors is a member of the scientific advisory board of Tate & Lyle, one of the world's largest suppliers of high-fructose corn syrup.*

And so it goes.

From my POV, this is only tangentially about sugar itself. The big takeaway – the “Three Stooges moment,” if you will – concerns a brazen and sustained, if *sub rosa*, campaign to point the finger at animal fats and away from some pretty toxic stuff in America’s cupboard.

The story -- if you can call decades of disinformation "a story" -- is that one industry slandered another in the interests of profit and in total disregard of consumers and their health. We who speak on behalf of "healthy fats" consumption can now make an even better case that people need to think critically about claims that don't comport with their own experience.

The exclamation point on all this is Michele Hozer’s award-winning documentary “Sugar Coated” (<http://sugarcoateddoc.com/>), on Netflix, a brilliant expose of “sugar politics.” “Sugar Coated” may not be as funny as “Beer and Pretzels” or “Ants in the Pantry” from the Three Stooges – it’s actually not funny at all – but there’s not a moment of misdirection in it.

Would that the disciples of Ancel Keys had been as circumspect.

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