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Will Bad Information Lead to Bad Decisions?

Allison Brown

As a scientist I worry that too much of the discussion of poppy and opium in Afghanistan is based on bad biology, bad economics, and bad horticulture. Can we make good decisions based on wrong information?

Case in point. The other night CNN reported from Helmand on the usual "oh look at all that poppy" stuff that is part of the spring season. It is bad enough that the fields that CNN shows "blooming" are uniform green with not a flower in sight (was it really poppy?), but then the reporter, Chris Lawrence, says, "Every few days or so the Taliban will come by and pick off some bulbs," and the Marine being filmed adds that he and his colleagues have seen the bad guys "hack a few plants that are ready to go and put it on a donkey and just head north." Chris goes on to say that the Marines are not allowed to "slash and burn" the poppy fields.

Poppies don't have bulbs they have seed pods. A single poppy pod or even a whole poppy plant is not particularly valuable, and mown green poppy plants have no value for drugs.

There are two ways to harvest poppy. The traditional method is used in Afghanistan, Laos, Thailand, Burma, etc. and the industrial method is used, with a few exceptions, in the 19 countries licensed to grow legal poppy.

In the traditional method, no pods are collected and no green plants are carried off anywhere. Instead, a highly skilled worker goes into the field of green and juicy plants and slices the pods with a sharp knife in such a way that the latex (sap) oozes out and dries on the surface of the pod. Thus the old name "tears of the poppy" (see demo at 2.20 on a trailer for the 1996 PBS series "The Heroin War"). The dried latex is scraped off and another cut is made parallel to the first to encourage more oozing. In most systems the pods are lanced several times in the spring when the latex is flowing. The plants are then allowed to mature and dry in the field, after which they are cut and threshed. The seeds are used for food and for next year's crop and the straw is used for animal bedding or fodder.

The industrial harvest does not involve lush green plants at all. The plants are allowed to mature and dry in the field and then the pods and a bit of stem are lopped off by machine. The seeds are threshed from the pods for use as food or oil and the remaining dry husks and stems are processed with solvents to extract the drug precursors. The industrial method was developed about 90 years ago in Europe because even then labor was too expensive for lanced opium to be profitable.

The CNN reporter and the Marine are talking nonsense. They do not appear to have accessed proper background information to enable them to report to the audience or to the military chain of command what is happening on the ground.

A similar thing happened last June when British troops greatly embarrassed themselves by crowing over a massive haul of "super poppy" seed which turned out to be a cache of black mung bean, a cousin of the green mung bean of bean sprout fame. *The Guardian* ran the piece front page.

Black mung is one of the several crops that have been good summer-season money-makers for Afghan farmers and the government and other development teams have been promoting them for years in the anti-poppy effort. It seems unbelievable that such a blunder could be made. Poppy seeds are usually black, purple gray, or blue (sometimes white). They are tiny and a bit hollow and easily crushed into the oily paste that is mixed with sugar and used in sweets. Black mung beans are extremely hard and the size of BBs. All beans have an eye, a small bit of cotyledon that shows even in the dry seed. Anyone who had ever looked closely at poppy seeds should know immediately that the seeds in question were not poppy.

Poppy Seeds on the Left, Black Mung Beans on the Right

These mistakes highlight the gaps in the knowledge base of allied forces, journalists and other "experts" and their lack of access to appropriate information and technical resources.

Unfortunately, the young Afghans who go to the field as interpreters are too often urban, Peshawar-educated fellows who would not ever leave their city environment if they had other work. They are unlikely to recognize agriculture crops or know anything about farming systems. Bureaucrats in Kabul, Washington and London suffer similar weaknesses.

Ignorance of fundamentals leads to risible reporting, as in the CNN piece, but left unchallenged and uncorrected, ignorance might also lead to bad decisions.

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