

Parallel Session 22: Public Perception of GMO's

**THE PLACE OF POLEMIC: THE NEED FOR
POLITICALLY-ENGAGED SCIENCE COMMUNICATION
RESEARCH**

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Abstract

Over the past decade, the UK has experienced several periods of intense media debate about the development of GMO's. Concerned at the possible effects on public perceptions of GMO's, scientists and politicians alike have criticised this coverage as hysterical and sensationalist. Academic studies of the media coverage have reached more complex conclusions. Yet in some ways these studies are also framed by the values of the dominant actors in the controversy. In this paper, I hope to open up a space for science communication scholars to examine the assumptions which are often embedded in research in this field and to reflect on the political dimension of our work.

Key words: Media, Research, GMO's

Text

Studies in the sociology of science have demonstrated the ways in which science is informed by the wider culture. In this view, science is a social structure shaped by particular politico-economic conditions: science, politics and industry are not distinct spheres but overlapping and entangled activities. This is particularly apparent in the case of biotechnology. Experiments to develop herbicide-resistant crops or field trials into the ecological impact of such crops simply would not take place if it were not for an industrialised system of agriculture able to generate large profits from such technologies. The very concept of GMO's is predicated by the socio-economic culture in which it has emerged.

Yet the dominant players in scientific controversies frequently appeal to a view of science and society in which science is seen as an 'objective' enterprise entirely distinct from political or commercial interests. In a period of intense UK media coverage of the GM controversy in 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair stated that: 'the worst way to proceed would be to raise fears in the public mind before the evidence is put to the people.' The best way forward, he said, was 'on the basis of scientific evidence' (*The Sunday Times*, 14 February 1999, p.16).

At one level, this is entirely sensible advice. But at a deeper level it implies

that the concerns raised by the public are irrational fears, that the only issues at stake are technical ones, and that the relevant evidence can be generated without reference to public concerns. In other words, it assumes a strict demarcation between science and politics. It delegitimises social responses to questions such as what constitutes a sustainable approach to agriculture or how we can safeguard food security worldwide, and instead promotes technically-framed questions about how to grow cash crops most efficiently without jeopardising public health. Blair's demarcation of science from politics and his prioritisation of a technical framework was repeated by many other actors, including scientists and journalists, in the media coverage of the debate.

We might expect academic analyses of the media coverage of the GM controversy to expose implicit assumptions such as these. Yet several significant studies have failed to adopt a critical position. For instance, Durant and Lindsay's analysis of the 1999 media coverage, which was extensively cited in the influential Lords' Report on Science and Society (House of Lords, 2000), found that certain newspapers explicitly decided to campaign on the GM issue. Durant and Lindsay concluded that this 'was a decision to politicise coverage of GM food' (p. 21). Like Blair's statement, this assumes a prior state in which GM food is unpoliticised; a time in which the science and politics of GM were clearly demarcated.

Further, Durant and Lindsay reproduce the concerns of dominant actors about 'sensationalist' headlines (p. 47), failing to discuss instead the ways in which such headlines draw on humour and intertextual references to caricature events; they refer to the acts of environmental protestors as 'vandalism' (p. 10); and they problematise the increase in media coverage rather than the media compliance which suppressed coverage of earlier events.

Durant and Lindsay's report is not without merit. Their content analysis shows that certain events triggered an increase in media coverage and that certain papers played a leading role in the subsequent debate. But, like other content analyses, they do not present any close reading of the actual contents of the texts they analyse. In failing to do so, they are unable to reveal the ways in which the debate might have given voice to a deep-seated (and entirely legitimate) public unease about corporate influence, the globalisation of food supply, and the reliance on technocratic approaches to farming. Even the impressive longitudinal study of European media coverage of biotechnology co-ordinated by Durant, Bauer and Gaskell (1998) suffers from similar problems. The identification of media frames, such as 'progress', 'economic' and 'global', suggested by the media texts themselves, eclipses the frames which are absent altogether. Such an approach accepts the dominant framing and looks at variations within such framing, rather than challenging the framing itself and the implicit demarcations upon which it is based.

All analysis is an act of interpretation. In content analysis, the interpretative act is hidden behind a screen of numbers which conjure an aura of objectivity. When science communication researchers aspire to objectivity, they mimic the positivist claims of science – the very thing they should be exposing. As scholars we have a duty to use our intellectual resources to uncover the ways

in which our conceptual landscape is delimited by dominant powers. We must expose the ideological forces which structure the institutions of science and the media and we must be aware of, and honest about, the ways in which our own work is ideologically informed. Collecting numbers is not enough. We must produce rational evidenced arguments which challenge injustices and protect the things we care about. We must be political.

References

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