

**Parallel Session 17: Scientists and science institutions as PCST agents:  
responsibilities**

**HOW PRESS COVERAGE ON TRANSGENIC FOOD HAS EVOLVED  
IN COLOMBIA?**

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Transgenics have been controversial throughout the world, and Colombia is not the exception. This year, for the first time, the Colombian government approved Monsanto's BT cotton and it has been a red-hot issue in the national and regional press. The media, through editorialists, columnists and journalists, has taken on the task of informing, and sometimes misinforming, the public.

The approval of the BT cotton crop has managed to change the journalistic speech and the speech of government sources. The print media, that was indifferent to these matters, now publishes related articles; others who had positions against plant biotechnology now tend to be neutral on the subject. Although opinions and columns harshly questioning the benefits of genetically modified organisms, GMO, are still being published, the media is now more cautious than it was 5 years ago when transgenics were recorded by the Colombian media for the first time in 1999, on occasion of the Biosafety Summit held in Cartagena de Indias.

An analysis of the media coverage since then up to the present day, allows us to confirm that the Colombian press coverage of transgenic food has evolved positively for those who endorse these new technologies.

We found that the articles analyzed were written mostly by science journalists, editorialists and columnists, each one in their own journalistic style, but, what about social responsibility? The journalist must try to find the truth, show the public the different angles of the news; explain the controversy and provide arguments, so the public can take a stand on this issue. Editorialists and columnists must act based on knowledge, recognize the power of the pen and be aware that their comments affect the public opinion. However, in 1999, we found comments like this, from an editorialist opining on biotechnology: "a genetically modified product: a monster that nature by itself would never produce...".

With the objective of analyzing the print media's stand on this issue, we reviewed information published by 26 national and regional circulation newspapers in Colombia. We defined three analysis categories, as follows:

1. PRO articles: those that show a positive angle of the news, from a single source.

2. NEUTRAL articles: those that examine different angles of the news, from several sources.

3. CON articles: those based on a single source against GMO's.

These same categories were applied to columnists and journalists to define their stand on the issue.

How does the transgenic issue should be covered? Although there are many ways to do science journalism, we established that a good article must have: journalistic rigor, suitable sources, different angles of the news, plain language and responsibility.

Considering all the above, we established the evolution of the news coverage on GMO's from the point of view of reporters, sources, the media and the public.

We concluded that in 1999, with the Biosafety Summit, the media was characterized by its immediacy, aggressive headlines, unbalanced visual resources and the importance of the subject, which made front page news.

We found front page information with no further follow-up, as the newspaper did not have the complete news story. This is the case of a ship supposedly loaded with transgenic corn from the United States, arriving in Santa Marta. The news was published as a front page headline with a one-fourth page photo, but no further information.

Headlines such as "*Terminator* protocol to be signed...", "*Frankenstein* Food..." and "Genetic curse", are samples of the aggressiveness with which the media published the information.

News reporters did not research the issue and arrived in Cartagena without a clear understanding of the Summit dimension and the implications of what was to be defined there. As days passed, the quality of the news articles improved, as news reporters steeped themselves in the subject.

Although reporters made efforts to keep the public informed, journalistic flaws were exposed with the publication of inaccurate data, influence on the part of the sources and lack of follow-up to the news generated.

GMO's were new to the sources, so, some were emotionally passionate about it and others preferred not to talk about it. Greenpeace took advantage of the Public Officials' lack of knowledge and organized a protest in Cartagena to grab the media's attention.

By the end of the Biosafety Summit, the public was left confused. The public's perception on the subject was based more on the headlines than on contextualized information.

In 2001, no notable coverage event occurred. There were no scandals about transgenics, but the subject was discussed in the media, considering social, political and economic aspects. The issue didn't make front page, but editorials and opinions were published that have influenced the public opinion.

Columnists, in some cases, explained better the scope of plant biotechnology than the journalists who wrote the articles. The difference was the colloquial language used to talk about transgenics. This situation showed the need for training writers in the handling of these matters: So, the Colombian Association of Science Journalism, with the support of Colciencias and AgroBio, carried out regional science journalism workshops aimed at students and journalists.

Sources consulted, including government representatives, private businesses, scientists, etc., are now more knowledgeable, as compared to 1999.

This time, the public took part in the debate through letters that were published by the media. This is a good indicator of the audience's interest in biotechnology issues.

2003 was a key year for biotechnology. The Colombian Ministry of Agriculture approved the sowing of BT cotton in the Cordoba Province and included transgenics in the government plan as an alternative to save the agricultural sector. This brought press coverage from the approval of this initiative to the first cotton harvest.

Journalists, now more familiar with the subject, decided to rely more on government officials to write their articles. The economic aspect is evident. The reports are now more comprehensive and contextualized than they were in 1999. The journalistic speech is more neutral and the sources consulted are more in favor of biotechnology. In other cases, some personalities who oppose GMO's, are the same who always appear in the articles to balance the information, as it is the case with Germán Vélez, of the "Grupo Semilla".

In conclusion, transgenics will continue to be present in the Colombian and international press for a long time. For this reason, it is necessary to conduct coverage studies for specific cases to give the journalistic community the tools to judge their rights and wrongs in relation to the information delivered to the public. It is important to have qualified journalists to cover this subject with responsibility and journalistic rigor.

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