Discursive Positioning of Global and Local Food Systems in Media and Social Movements: GM Labeling Campaigns

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ABSTRACT

Political actions around labeling of genetically modified (GM) food offer a prism through which to understand media agenda setting, social movements, and concepts of the public sphere. Based upon the campaign to label GM food in Connecticut, this paper lays the groundwork for a study of how social movements and media actors understand the global dimensions of GM food production. Limited content analysis of both old and new media samples confirms the need for further study to better describe the way global hunger and poverty figure in attitudes toward the science of agricultural biotechnology.

This paper advocates for the inclusion of cultural studies theories because these may offer a way out of deliberative stalemates that currently characterize the agricultural biotechnology debate. Traditional science communication approaches go only partway, and may be counterproductive because they rarely include a consideration of culture.

What emerges from the study is the need to make global food security more culturally relevant. New strategies are required for engaging communications theories and practice in the fight against hunger.
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Introduction
Conversations with Per Pinstrup-Andersen over many years, and my residence in the United Kingdom during the late 1990s, a uniquely active period in public debates about food (this was the era of Mad Cow and midnight gardeners), led me to take up the question of agricultural biotechnology for my doctoral dissertation in communication. Though my research was focused on comparing the U.K. and the U.S. media and social movements, it quickly became clear to me that GM food was a proxy for broader concerns about food production (Huey, 2005). Since then, I have had the feeling that attempts to educate the public about genetic engineering miss the mark somehow. Since I can’t help but share my father’s deep concern for the injustice of hunger and starvation, and I respect his conviction that genetic engineering is all but necessary to ensure food security, I wonder if there is a better way.

Recently the thorny question of labeling gained unprecedented traction in my home state of Connecticut, which passed the country's first bill requiring labeling of GM food. It surprised me that there could be such intensity on both sides of the labeling debate. I became curious and formulated a typical "communications" question, namely: What is labeling "about?" Communications scholars drawing from anthropology and sociology like to go into a loosely bounded field armed with deductive reasoning, using what Glaser and Strauss called "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). With this approach, a general question like "what is labeling about" allows unexpected frames and meanings to emerge. It allows the researcher to deconstruct, or unpack, the idea of labeling. Sociological approaches pioneered by Howard Becker (1998) temper what otherwise can become a highly detailed semantic parsing. Becker encourages the operationalization of "why" questions as "how" questions.

In the case of GM food labeling, the question was operationalized as: How is labeling used in a political context? In this way it became a question about the circulation of ideas rather than a psychological question about why people insist on knowing something. In the manner of cultural studies rooted in the Frankfurt School, this led to a critique of how certain ideas are privileged and others are ignored -- in other words, to what labeling means in the context of broader hegemonic structures. But, like more recent iterations of cultural studies borrowing from political economy (Crang et al, 2003), the approach assumes that a critique is most useful when articulated with a practical recommendation.

Narrative analysis uses tools more commonly used in analysis of artistic objects. But they are applicable beyond the domain of fiction. Discourse analysis permits a
critique of the assumptions, metaphors, and myths behind stories told about any particular topic. The premise is that stories are subject to these metaphors and myths, and that what we often refer to as information contains a fair amount of storytelling. Science communication sees media messages as transparent vehicles for communication by encoders of those messages. Frequently, however, narratives help to shape ideas and behavior not in a silver-bullet way but through the use of plot, character, and theme. The basic belief of the cultural studies approach is that words work, but not necessarily in the way intended. They can work to establish hegemony, which upholds political and economic structures. This is not an approach limited to cultural studies. Anthropology has employed literary "readings" since Clifford Geertz (1983) developed the idea of cultures as "texts" that could be deciphered.

The methodological discussion is important in the context of this volume. As Candace Slater points out in her analysis of news coverage of the "Lost Tribe" of the Amazon, there is a policy/interpretive divide (Slater 2010) on global sustainability questions. She advocates the use of all methods that can produce clearer understandings, because this will produce more effective policies (and, I would add, more effective educational campaigns). Slater demonstrates that narratives that seem objective are always cultural texts -- a view that is extensively developed in the large body of literature on the social construction of science, too.

From popular books such as Michael Pollan's bestsellers to academic inquiries describing how identities are shaped through food consumption (see, e.g., Bell and Valentine, 2013), food requires all the analytical tools available, be they from economics, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, or other disciplines. Both symbolically and materially, "food is the quintessential test of our collective capacity to fashion sustainable communities" (Morgan et al, 2008: 197). Food labeling belongs squarely in what Crang, Dwyer and Jackson call "commodity culture," and requires what Schiller et al (1992) calls a "reconnection between the study of cultural representations and the exploration of structures of inequality" (Schiller, 1997). Put another way, it may benefit from a rapprochement between cultural studies and political economy.

Because it lies at the nexus of practically all human activity, and powerfully shapes institutional structures and regimes, food is a topic of use to many scholars. This study employs Narayan's rich concept of "thinking with food" (Narayan, 1995), and has a dual relationship to food. Not only does it attempt to understand a contemporary food debate out of a desire for improved outcomes related to food itself (food security), but it demonstrates that the contemporary food debate reveals more general trends and tendencies that exist in other realms as well. Specifically of relevance is the way food offers a window for understanding our relationship to "social Others" (Narayan, 1995: 64).
Labeling

Eighteen states in the U.S.A. are currently pursuing legislation mandating labeling of food containing genetically modified ingredients. In July 2013, Connecticut became the first state in the U.S. to pass a bill requiring labels on any product containing GMOs.

Through purposive snowball sampling that began in my local food co-op, I determined that the central activist organization in this campaign was called GMO Free, so this is where I began. I looked at all the web site, emails, and tweets, as well as interviews with the founder of GMO Free. The message of GMO Free was plain: labeling equals choice. Food safety and environmental risk were downplayed, in favor of the question of choice. In making the individual voter conscious of his or her choice, GMO Free, like other social movements, emphasized the importance of autonomy and democratic processes. As will be discussed later, these were local or national in scope, as most democratic processes are, no matter how global other systems become.

What follows is a description of how GMOs, and labeling, have become a proxy for knowledge about, and power in, the global food system, and for mismanagement of agricultural practices more broadly. Biotechnology itself plays a minor role discursively. "You don't blame crop dusting on airplanes" says science blogger Kevin Bonham. In a response to a comment posted about his blog, Bonham writes:

Yes, market forces have spoken, but I think a lot of the concern (a concern I share) is that there aren't sufficient regulations in place (or at least, enforcement of those regulations) to prevent really terrible outcomes. It's easy to see how many actors all working in their own self interest could cause serious problems w/r/t food security, the environment etc. (www.kevinbonham.com).

Here we have someone actually mentioning food security! This is rare. Still, the main thrust of this posting is the "actors working in their own self-interest." In the context of ineffective regulation, choice is imagined as a weapon and the consumer as the appropriate warrior.

Monsanto may be able to screw up elections, but it can't stop me from voting with my dollars. (Silenus7 posting on Scientific American.com)

In an interview, the leader of GMOFree states:

GMO labeling is also a symbol of taking back our government from corporate interests. It's about people taking back power and getting lawmakers to take action in the interests of the people and not corporations. (Tara Cook-Litman, www.non-gmoreport.com).
In 2012, the organization "Just Label It" urged recipients of its mailing list to contact their representatives regarding the 2013 Agriculture Appropriations Bill, in particular, the so-called Farmer Assurance Provision. Just Label It's campaign director used three bullet points to explain what was at stake: SLIDE

This policy rider would:
• eliminate fundamental and constitutional safeguards of our judicial review system
• undermine the USDA’s oversight and approval process, and weaken protections for consumers
• allow powerful chemical companies to dodge reasonable safeguards against potentially hazardous GE crops

The mailing continues to state that "without the appropriate supervision and safeguards, large corporations will continue to control our food safety, with a high cost to both our health and environment." (Just Label It, 26 June 2012). Just Label It is a part of the Center for Food Safety.

In Connecticut the labeling movement gained traction from a farmer interest group that provided a handy foil and motivator. Farmers especially were an important interest group in this issue, on both sides. NOFA, the Northeast Organic Farming Association, recruited farmers to a rally at the Hartford capitol, making sure to ask them to "bring a farm sign" (email, 20 May, 2013), demonstrating savoir-faire with regard to media practices. As with the consumer-oriented labeling movement, NOFA used the negative history of corporations to rally their supporters. These were told

You should be at this rally if you have concerns about putting our food supply in the hands of the folks who brought us PCBs, Agent Orange, Astroturf, Roundup, lead in gasoline, and CFCs. (This labeling legislation is an important step in fighting the money and power that Monsanto and Dupont wield to keep us ignorant)

and, using the rhetorical tool of Devil’s Advocacy, that "you don’t need to attend this rally if you don’t care about the corporate takeover of the food system" (email May 20, 2013).

In the Connecticut case, a coalition emerged consisting primarily of: Northeast Organic Farmers Association of Connecticut; Sierra Club; Food Democracy Now; Institute for Responsible Technology; Organic Consumers Association; Alliance for Natural Health; Center for Food Safety. Interest groups in other parts of the country were also part of the network. The Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund, which states its purpose as "defends the rights and broadens the freedoms of family farms and artisan food producers while protecting consumer access to raw milk and nutrient-dense foods," shared its mailing list by forwarding an announcement about
Occupy Monsanto, the 2-day event at Monsanto headquarters. Also called to participate in this coalition were chefs and restaurateurs. They were asked by NOFA to bring food samples because there would be tables and tablecloths set up outside the Capitol. Chefs and restaurateurs were told that "even if you cannot bring food to taste, let’s all be there in solidarity (in our chef whites) to take back control of our ingredients from Big Food!"

The success of the labeling movement in Connecticut was ascribed by the leader of GMOFreeCT to the effective creation of a coalition and the use of social media. Indeed, communication tools and messages highlighted common interests while eliding disjunctures. They kept it simple, sending another email urging recipients to call state senators in Washington and the speaker of the state house, and providing all the necessary contact details. The message here was simple, as recipients were urged to: "state the following: 'I am calling to ask that you please support our right to know what is in our food.' " GMOFreeCT, driven by an entrepreneurial leader whose primary concern was allergens, promoted the idea of choice first, and food safety second.

The labeling bill being prepared in Washington State at the same time (and which ultimately failed in November 2013), also focused on the simple message of "the right to know. In a video advertisement sent to Connecticut activists, the Washington group "YES on 522" focused strictly on the sound bite of the right to know. Visually, however, the b-roll focused on apples and salmon, two major exports from Washington state, and one brief sound bite featured a man standing by a fishing boat stating "we already label farm-raised fish. If salmon is genetically engineered the label should say so too."

Given their iconic use in this ad, salmon and apples could really be said to be a part of Washington state’s identity. Yet from an activism point of view, the Washington and NOFA part of the Connecticut movement collaborated simply to preserve an idea – the idea of the local. The local is never clearly defined, but appears to have flexible boundaries depending upon the uses of the message. In the case of labeling campaigns, the boundaries are those of the United States. Not the globe. For example, in the fall of 2013, as the Washington state bill came up for a vote, GMOFreeCT, encouraged its mailing list members to change their Facebook and Twitter profile pictures to an image they provided:

IMAGE HERE

The coalition campaigning for the labeling law was an ecumenical group, and not all local. Yet they supported one another. Elements of globalization, food safety, and environment are ever more tightly bound together discursively. The submerged networks (Melucci, 1989) that existed separately on each of these topics may have been precursors to a new social movement centered on participation and
accountability. The big irony here is, of course, that food movement(s) in the North were fueled by rising incomes during the late 1990s and early 2000s, while the global south did not reach the same levels of food security. Even after the recession began in 2008, the movements had taken hold in the North and the recession did little to diminish its ideological strength. To the contrary, perceptions of growing disparity may have strengthened the resolve of activists by adding new energy to the corporate depredations frame.

But the global voices, the arguments for considering consumers at the other end of the food system, were conspicuously missing, except in discourse about Monsanto’s domination. For example, GMO-Free Midwest, organizers of the 2012 Occupy Monsanto day, promised that the event would offer education about, among other things, "the use of GMOs to dominate the globe." (GMO-Free Midwest Flyer, September 2012).

There is a disparity between global rhetoric and local engagement. One study of website linking patterns among GM-skeptical social movement organizations demonstrated that global/local discontinuities persist (Huey 2005b). In other words, the globals don’t go local and the locals don’t go global. The real farmer or consumer in other parts of the world rarely appears as anything but a shadow of concern -- even when concepts generated in the global south are taken up, as in NOFA’s use of the Via Campesina’s idea of "food sovereignty" in their communications:

Food sovereignty is a rapidly emerging hot topic globally. On May 25, tens of thousands of activists around the world will "March Against Monsanto." Marches are planned on six continents, in 36 countries, totaling events in over 250 cities, and in the US, events are slated to occur simultaneously at 11 a.m. Pacific in 47 states.

If there is global solidarity in new food movements, it appears to be solidarity against Monsanto.

Other corporations are providing additional agonistic energy to the drama of food movements. In an interesting twist, when Monsanto introduced its sweet corn in 2012, Food and Water Watch began a campaign focused not on labeling, but rather putting pressure on Walmart to reject the corn. Walmart, it is well-known by now, has tremendous market sway on everything from prices to content (as in music). Food and Water Watch sought its political pressure point on the market jugular, exploiting the PR chink that in corporate armor that makes direct-to-consumer retailers more vulnerable than a B-to-B company such as Monsanto, which has proved itself impervious to such strategies precisely because its products go through several middlemen before reaching the consumer, dissipating the force of leverage available. Thus the introduction of genetically engineered sweet corn for human consumption provided an unusual opportunity for activists. Indeed Walmart
and Monsanto were cast as a celebrity love match, as "Walsanto," in a campaign designed to drive traffic to Food and Water Watch's social media platforms.

**IMAGE HERE**

Two megalithic corporations, Walmart and Monsanto, merged -- is this simply funny, or is it prescient?

It did not matter that Monsanto is not the entity accountable to label food; it nonetheless figured prominently in the food labeling campaign. The labeling campaign is as much a fight against a dominant globalized and technocratic food regime as it is about some kind of individual ontological or political right to know, or a concern over the safety of biotechnology. Monsanto, with its tens of millions of dollars for advertisements against labeling bills and propositions, continues to provide a convenient antagonist in this drama. The plot of the story continues to be that, not only are consumers at the mercy of a multinational, unaccountable conglomerate, but they are also at the mercy of unintelligible forms of knowing: biotechnology instead of farmer knowledge.

"Why should we as the consumer need an advanced degree in identifying GMOs?" asked Tara Cook-Littman, in testimony given to the general assembly of the CT state legislature in 2012.

### Organics and Local

The underdog hero of the drama is organic and/or local food. In this narrative, the scales of ignorance are pulled from the eyes of the consumer by the promise of "knowing where the food came from and products that are "naturally" produced, using centuries-old technology.

The term organic has always been a highly contested one. One thing is certain, and that is that official certifications of organic products require that product to be free of genetically modified organisms. For this reason, the large movement behind organic food got behind California's Proposition 37 (to require the labeling of GM Food). One nationally influential food coop produced a poster that they distributed to all coops on their mailing list. The poster lists food companies either as "organic heroes" or "corporate charlatans" -- all based on whether or not the company in question was supporting Proposition 37.

**IMAGE here**

Like the attempted shaming of Walmart, this effort attempts to shame any companies that donated to advertising against Proposition 37. But this message adds another twist. In order to make the honor roll of organic heroes, a company had to support actively Proposition 37 in favor of labeling. In other words, organic food manufacturers could not be content with producing GM-free food; rather, they
were expected to enter into the political fray around labeling. The creator of the graphic, a cooperative owner in the Midwest, sent this infographic, as he called it, because,

The organic industry, and cooperatives, inextricably married, have always been values-based movements. The fact that many cooperatives, and organic companies for that matter, are financially successful is because we have always promoted and maintained an ethical alternative approach to food production and marketing” (Mark Kastel, Cornucopia.org, 6 September 2012).

The words "ethical alternative" here match up with what Pinstrup-Andersen and Sandøe argued in 2007. They argued that ethics can bring out the assumptions in policy options. I would argue it is not ethics so much as a deeper appreciation of the cultures around food production and consumption, that will help bring out the assumptions and potentially improve policies. "Ethics" cannot be used as a general term describing externalities. To use ethics successfully requires entering into the "other’s" ethics. In agricultural development organizations "the other" appears to be anyone who advocates a radical departure from the current food system. I propose that a deeper use of ethics requires understanding that ethical food production, to many individuals, means doing away with the business models and regimes dominated by Monsanto, Walmart, and other large corporations in the food system.

A similar critique can be leveled against the farmer-activist. In the message above, there is no room for dissent about what it means to be organic, but moreover, there is no room for dissent on the topic of labeling -- a very hard stance indeed, given the lack of discussion about the scientific evidence and the merits of employing GM technology in some scenarios.

The involvement of organic food producers and consumers in the labeling debate underscores the importance of seeing opposition to agricultural biotechnology as a political problem, not a scientific or science-education problem. The tag line of the Organic Consumers Association says it all: "Campaigning for Health, Justice, Sustainability, Peace and Democracy." Preliminary evidence suggests that most of the activists in the labeling movement seek for one reason or another a greater transparency of markets and supply chains, to combat the global food system. The consumer of locally produced, GMO-free food is posited as a re-embedded (Starr, 2010) bulwark against the food corporation’s "ability to partition and distantiate itself from the natural and organic geographies for which it is responsible" (Morgan et al, 2008: 69). Unfortunately, while labeling campaigners implicitly endorse democratic processes they elide the fact that democracy and accountability are two distinct phenomena (Fox, 2007).

Absent a public sphere and mode through which to deliberate the costs and benefits among stakeholders globally, labels on food become the only rational response to competing claims. But how do you build a better public sphere? Obviously that is
beyond the scope of this paper, and further research is required to describe the media landscape that must be cultivated in any attempt to build a public sphere capable of ethically considering the social other.

Preliminary Discussion

Food labeling is a key site of 'the quality battleground' in the contemporary food chain (Marsden, 2004b). Genetically modified food controversies are a key expression of unease with global systems that do not overlap with democratic ones. Yet it is far from given that food labels would result in the accountability sought by campaigners.

Furthermore, it seems reasonable, from an ethical standpoint, to expect the North to try to understand that GM technology is not evil per se, and that its use to solve food security challenges is pertinent, ethically. Yet even new media, for all their lauded promise, do not appear to expand the identification of stakeholders that earlier may have been ignored.

The GM food controversy is a prism through which to view globalization’s discontents -- that is, the central problem of how to determine the future of the planet absent institutions answerable to citizens. GM food offers an opportunity to study how political structures are validated and rehearsed, or re-imagined, through public discourse.

While science-centered rhetoric emphasizes universality, movements to label GMO food embrace the rhetoric of particularity and contingency. Cultural studies can help identify the gaps and elisions, the taken-for-granted concepts, and point the way to new forms of dialogue. The local and natural may not be able to answer problems of food security, but neither can science answer the problem of politics -- specifically, the weakening of decision-making structures exacerbated by globalization (Huey 2005).

Contrary to the critiques often leveled at them, and despite ostensibly irreconcilable differences, food-related social movements should be considered an ally of food security organizations. Activism on behalf of greater transparency of the labor processes and channels of production and distribution can only benefit the cause of hunger and poverty alleviation.
References


