

NESAWG 2015 *It Takes A Region* Conference

Name of Session or Discussion/Work Group	Food Censorship and Misinformation 1 and 2
Presenters	Ruth Katz, Joan Gussow

Notes

Food Censorship and Misrepresentation Session 1
11/13/2015

- Introductions
 - Ruth - rBGH stories and misinformation
- Agenda
 - Watch video about information suppression, censorship
 - Discussion
 - Examples of censorship experiences
 - Tomorrow: myths that exist in our field
- Video (10 mins long)
 - rBGH video
 - changes milk from cow
 - suggests rBGH may increase risk of cancer
 - report/story about Monsanto was dropped from FOX News affiliate's schedule because of Monsanto's disapproval of report (thought it would be damaging)
 - hormone actually severely sickened a lot of cows upon administration by farmers
 - reporters won the whistleblowing case against the news channel initially.
 - These reporters won Goldman Prize
 - From pre-recorded Skype following Goldman Prize videos:
 - advertising dollars are the main concern
 - might lose some advertisers, might gain some advertisers if you report/expose a controversial story
 - sacrifice news for advertising?
 - Reporters want to keep their jobs
 - "Censorship" is not an easy decision
 - Can editorial boards think differently?
 - Yes, but can't forget that it's a business
 - At the end of the day, have to pay the bills
 - It's a problem

Discussion

- How would you describe this type of censorship?
 - Corporate censorship

- Other kinds of censorship that occur in our field?
 - **Academic censorship**
 - Studies that don't get done or funded because their findings may be controversial. Funding decisions and priorities are shaped largely by agro-chemical companies that favor industrial agriculture.
 - Pay-to-read articles leads to inability for some people to access original studies.
 - Public vs private/required membership information
 - Stopping some studies and funding other studies to prove a point (or even promote a production)
 - **Self censorship:** Fear of conducting a study or doing a story that might harm image of industrial agriculture, because of fear of negative repercussions on one's career.
 - **Distortion**
 - How the studies are set up in the first place
 - Example – side by side studies of organic versus conventional
 - Timeline is very important → if don't wait long enough, the "results" are misrepresentative
 - **Governmental, including congressional censorship**
 - Dietary Guidelines – told Advisory Committee not to say anything about the environment and sustainability
 - Congress told the USDA to take out everything about sustainability from the dietary guidelines because it would negatively affect the meat/beef industry
 - Industry-appointed (slanted) panels
 - Special interests
 - DARK Act (disallow GMO label)
 - Problem with doing scientific research about GMOs? It's very hard to find a control group that hasn't been exposed to GMOs because there's basically no way to know who has/hasn't been exposed, due to lack of labels
 - Other information blocked
 - Not allowed to publish information on impacts of fracking on human health (chemicals, effects, etc)
 - GAG orders
 - Doctors not able to diagnose some poor health of patients due to chemicals from fracking
 - **"soft censorship"** of editorial boards (for example, deciding something is not "newsworthy.")
 - **Conflict of interest**
 - Flipping this to pertain to public interest groups
 - Public interest groups have a conflict of interest – very convoluted
 - AC 21 (Biotechnology of 21st century)

- False equivalency – one representative from the organic industry compared to many representatives from conventional/pro-biotech, etc.
 - *“Intelligence Squared”* – a debate with a set-up audience distorts public perception when they have the audience “vote” on a scientific debate
 - “Genetically Engineered food” topic that Joan attended
 - Pro-GMO side “won” – whole center section was filled with pro-GMO people. This is a rigged audience.
 - “Is it worth paying extra for organic?” – someone who witnessed this session noted:
 - doesn’t help journalism at all
 - when we go to something like this, we need to be very outspoken, call them out on it at the get-go!
 - *Alliance for Science at Cornell*
 - Goals: to educate the public on the values of biotech
 - Funded by the Bill Gates Foundation
 - Installed professors to teach undergrads about pro-biotechnology
 - Really good messaging by the Alliance; NOFA is trying to address this.
 - Funding that usually goes to NGOs, young farmers, etc. is now being blocked by Cornell
 - UVM student interested in alternative biofuel research
 - Lack of funding influences what gets researched – “pre-imposed censorship”
 - *“Spinning Food”* – executive summary
 - some groups that are really PR machines but disguise themselves as public interest groups
 - industry front groups
- Example from one scientist who has written about some concerns over genetic engineering:
 - How has he felt like he has been censored?
 - Reporters not adequately reporting what he said
 - Distorted what he said to be able to claim what they really wanted to, underrepresenting his position
 - Positions are greatly underreported – amounts to classical censorship although it is not necessarily the same thing
 - Dismissing criticisms of biotech industry, making it sound like there is a consensus on genetic engineering
 - Simply not accurate but it has been widely accepted
 - What do we call this?
 - Bad reporting
 - Smear campaign?
 - Guilt by (unfair) association
 - Creating a sense of balance when it is not balanced

Food Censorship and Misrepresentation Session 2
11/14/2015

- Introductions
 - The term “people” versus “consumers”
 - “armed with information”
 - Spinning Food – Friends of the Earth
 - Interest groups versus PR groups
- Overview/Review of yesterday
 - Talked about propaganda and misinformation and kinds of censorship that exist
- Add this type of censorship to the list: **“Astro-turf”**
 - Fake grassroots, impersonation, copycat website run by industry
 - Front group
 - Farmnextgeneration.org → Monsanto created this website to look just like another organization’s website (National Young Farmers Coalition)
 - Merchants of Doubt movie – recommendation
- Five (false) myths (perpetuated, we see them all the time) → edited to say “conventional wisdom”
 1. We want to use only the best science to make our decision (that money can buy)
 2. GMOs are environmentally beneficial. They reduce the need for pesticides.
 3. Farmers use whatever kind of seed or feed they want. If they choose GMOs it’s because they want them. It’s a free market.
 - Non-GMO seed not available in the market.
 - Farmer with less money makes you more vulnerable
 - Eg. poor cotton farmer in the South said he didn’t have a choice about purchasing non-GMO seed because cooperative extension told him it was what he was “supposed to do” – actually had really poor/low yield
 - Eg. farmer in the Midwest – wanted to use GMO seed and did for a number of years but then the price shot up and he wanted to switch back to non-GMO seed but was not able to find enough supply
 - Eg. livestock farmer at well-resourced nonprofit farm – could not find non-GMO feed for his livestock even with all the resources from the well-financed nonprofit
 - There’s a very small number of people who are developing non-GMO corn and soy seeds. Organic seeds are available but more expensive (decreases access to organic seeds)
 4. We’re going to have to use our best technology to feed 9 billion people.

- Are there enough GMO seeds for 9 billion people to have diversified diets?
- Our best technology does not necessarily imply GMO
 - GMO is the assumption
 - Imperialist concept at its very core
 - Localizing the issue, “feeding the community” versus “feeding the world”
- Language is very tricky
- Do we need to worry hard about feeding these 9 billion?
 - Growing the food versus ability to distribute it
 - Solution to world hunger would be a technological solution – is this how we should reword the myth?
- Feeding people versus allowing them to feed themselves
- Joan refocused group: remember, we aren’t recreating the myth. These myths are thrown around all the time.
 - 2 definitions of a myth: a false statement or something central to a culture. Which one are we talking about when referring to these 5 myths? Something that is false and gets perpetuated.
- Need to figure out ways to act on this, not dwell on the definitions, specific wording – running out of time!

5. The consensus is settled; GMOs are safe to eat.

- Concept of confirmation bias.
 - If you believe something, you want to confirm it. → further affirm our world view
 - Example of a conversation with a journalist who relies heavily on Monsanto reps and speaks to them frequently, off-the-record and on, and in-depth; but admitted to never having an in-depth, off the record conversation with scientists who raise concerns over GMOs. The journalist’s articles, unsurprisingly, reinforce many of the Monsanto reps messages. This is an example of “confirmation bias.”
 - “The consensus has been settled”
- Difficult times for news media – too many cuts: Journalists are generalists trying to cover complicated topics; there used to be more science reporters (trained scientists)
 - Newsrooms aren’t giving journalists enough time and space to do more thorough and more accurate research and writing
 - But what is the consensus? GMOs being safe?
 - Congress members have a letter from 300 scientists saying GMOs are safe
 - Consensus does not equate to safety
 - Mark Lynas’s NYTimes article, “Europe turns against science”

- Letter to the Editor
- According to the article, debate on this topic is “over”
- But clearly there is not consensus!
- We have the list of more than 300 scientists with specialties in molecular genetics, biochemistry, cancer research, environmental sciences and other disciplines have signed on to the following statement from the European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility:

As scientists, physicians, academics and experts from disciplines relevant to the scientific, legal, social and safety assessment aspects of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), we strongly reject claims by GM seed developers and some scientists, commentators, and journalists that there is a "scientific consensus" on GMO safety and that the debate on this topic is "over".

- The statement shows what disciplines they are in – genetics, molecular biology, etc.
- There is always an outlying group to every scientific consensus
 - Bangladesh and GMO eggplant
 - Nobody has proved that a GMO product is unsafe – but there would not be a control group
 - As used, are GMOs safe? That’s never what the argument is about
 - Everybody is being exposed to glyphosate
 - Climate change
 - Statistics: when they say 90% of scientists believe ...
 - How do they even know how many scientists there are?
 - Mark Lynas is funded by the Cornell Alliance for Science
 - How did the Gates foundation become so pro-industry?
 - Good intention, but who do you surround yourself with?
 - University of Colorado offering to return \$1 million back to Coca-Cola
- Let’s narrow down a task – how could we do it so it’s not too much work (we are all very busy)
 - Ruth – Personal opinion: for better regulation and better studies – not about being “pro” or “against” GMO
- What to do? How do we start researching this topic?
 - Define “consensus” – conceptual integrity around use of the word “consensus”
 - Numbers of those scientists
 - Qualifications, diverse qualifications
 - Affiliations, who funds them (influenced by industry money?)
 - What question is the scientist being asked?

- Write letters to the editor, comment sections, sign on petitions, websites hosting this info
 - Do people actually directly write/email the authors of the articles?
- Studies funded by industry – how many studies turn out positive and negative?
 - Marian Nestle’s website
- **Proposal of tasks**
 - Reporting exercise
 - Interview 5 people and ask what they mean by consensus and how do they back it up?
- Sign-up – Discussion and work groups, www.nesawg.org

Other:

- “Safety by decree”
- **“Taking the con out of consensus”**
- When you see an article and attack it, then you get more publicity about the issue
 - take on something where the media has to defend itself
 - more visibility, want to get coverage about what you’re doing
 - eg., soda tax
 - make a controversy go viral
- Science, Technology and Human Value article
 - PDF copy of article will be on website in discussion workgroup session
- Right to know – DARK Act
 - Label DARK Act as right to know, may get more support

Summary for wrap-up:

Kinds of censorship (will post on website)

Spoke about 5 perpetuated false myths/conventional wisdoms

Decided to focus on the word “consensus”