

PUBLIC OPINION AND FOOD SAFETY: A SPANISH CASE STUDY

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Extended Abstract

In the contemporary risk society (Beck, 1999) health concerns related to food safety motivate citizens to take more interest in where their food comes from, who produces it and how. Consumer resistance to innovations such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is contributing to the growth of alternative food networks and agro-ecological farming, as promoted by global social movement La Via Campesina ('the peasant way'). This analysis of campaign message framing by La Via Campesina members in Madrid and the Basque Country reveals how public opinion is mobilised by claims that link GMOs with health risks, industrial agriculture and cultural homogenisation.

In Spain social movement organisations are joining heterogeneous movement advocacy coalitions and networks in joint campaigns against the production and consumption of GMOs or transgenics in agriculture and food production. These coalitions are comprised of workers' unions, student activists, grassroots radicals and professional NGOs. They possess different scales and structures and represent different discourses. Agrarian union Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna (EHNE), situated in northern Spain's Basque Country, is one such organisation.

This paper examines the content and construction of collective action frames in EHNE campaigns that aim to influence public opinion against GMOs. Firstly, the political opportunity structure available to EHNE and its allies is described. Then public opinion regarding GMOs in Spain and the European Union (EU) and actions against GMOs on national, regional and local levels will be explored. Finally, a detailed analysis of EHNE's campaigns provides a case study of the framing of GMO issues through the promotion of consumer sovereignty.

Theoretical approach and method

This study draws on Jaap Van Ginneken's (2003) interpretation of public opinion as a complex adaptive system. Traditional approaches see public opinion as a "static aggregate" (Ginneken, 2003, p.16) when it is in fact a dynamic configuration that defies analysis under reductionist, determinist and causality frameworks. The systems approach adopted in this study reveals insights into the emergent self-organisation of social movements and the role of the media in "widening and deepening" (Vasterman cited in Ginneken, 2003, p.59-60) the public's responses to issues.

Specifically, this study analyses the efforts of the Basque farmers' union EHNE and its partner organisations to influence public opinion about GMOs through collective action frames presented in food sovereignty campaigns. Frame analysis considers the visual images, historical examples, catchphrases and stereotypes that make up the "interpretive repertoire" by which ideological representations are constructed (Steinberg, 1998). Qualitative methods are used to gather information from a range of sources within which a discourse may appear. These sources include interviews with movement leaders and communication specialists, organisational discourse in the form of campaign collateral, the actions of political demonstrators, media materials, slogans and satirical images, reveal the content of frames. These texts are sites where the production of meaning takes place.

The framing of issues on risk communication is central to construction of consumer perceptions of new technologies. In the media this framing is the result of "a compromise between ethical assumptions on the role of the media in modern society (e.g. to inform the public) and the social

responsibility of the press (e.g. not to create virtual risks or give ambiguous information).” (Vilella-Vila, et al, 2005, p.108). The ability to frame messages to resonate with gatekeepers in the media, and with the consuming public, is essential for social movements to introduce their issues into the public sphere.

Journalists and the media coverage they generate frequently reinforce the misperceptions of risk in the minds of citizens and consumers. The real or supposed risks of GMOs to human health, farmer livelihoods and biodiversity have been under reported by U.S. media as the result of “an intensive pro-biotech campaign” (Smith, 2003, p.183) while the same campaigns have been less successful in the U.K. and Europe, largely due to the intervention of organic champions such as the Prince of Wales (Robin, 2008). Data reporting consumer attitudes to GMOs and media coverage of GMO-related issues in Europe, and specifically Spain, will be presented and analysed in this paper. This data includes the results of surveys, opinion polls, personal interviews and content analysis of media (McGarry, Wolf, Bertolini and Parker-Garcia, 2004; Bonny, 2004).

The political context: GMOs in Europe and Spain

The European model of agriculture, based on multifunctionality, provides a basis for policy-building yet a lack of public debate regarding biodiversity protection strategies in Europe leads to uncertainty as to whether public preferences are being met (Potter & Burney, 2002). While the framing of agriculture as multifunctionality resonates with many European citizens who support the social interests of rural areas and environmental protection the ‘turn’ towards quality is not characteristic of all nations. At either end of the spectrum of opinion reside what Philip Lowe, Henry Buller and Neil Ward (2002) call Britain’s “countryside agenda” and at the other France’s “agrarian agenda”. While Britain’s model promotes environmental public goods, marketing, countryside management payments and pluriactivity, France supports family farming, social payments and ecological modernisation (Lowe *et al.*, 2002, p.15). Despite these differences the EU Commission is widely considered pro-transgenic. Transnational biotechnology companies including Monsanto, Syngenta and Pioneer wield great influence. Yet Europe provides a political opportunity for Spanish movements to bypass the ‘closed’ structure of the national government. Spain is considered a strong supporter of GMOs.

While closer to France in attitude Spain possesses a strong export orientation. Agro-ecological products including organics are promoted outside mainstream marketing channels and enjoy little support from public or institutions. The organic sector in Spain reports consumer confusion over ‘bio’ products (González, 2004). The Popular Party (1996-2004) has supported the interests of transnationals involved in biotechnological research and production. In contrast to France and Italy opposition to GMOs is weak in Spain, a fact attributed by Kurzer and Cooper (2007) to late industrialisation and late entry to the EU, circumstances leading to a drive to modern productivist or industrial agriculture.

Public opinion regarding GMOs poorly understood (Morris, 2001). The complexity of the issue is a major challenge and the scientific arguments of “white coats” carry weight. The debate over the labelling of GMOs by the European Union is seen as an opportunity to influence public perceptions of agricultural biotechnologies. Analysis of Eurobarometer data surveys suggests that pro-GMO campaigns may not be as successful as proponents expect, and support of GMs is likely to be linked to citizen’s trust in government (Durant and Legge, 2005). Consumers rely on “trusted information advisors” in their decision-making about GMOs and their participation preceding the adoption of communication policies is essential ; “lack of consumer acceptance prior to market introduction has acted as an ultimate obstacle for the adoption of GM food” (Vilella-Vila, et al, 2005, p.116).

Public opinion: the ‘quality turn’ and demands for transparency

In France in 2001 direct action against Novartis, and later McDonald’s, the latter culminating in the widely publicised trial of Josè Bovè and Rene Riesel, successfully highlighted the potential homogenisation effects of the agri-industrial system on culture and agriculture. Campaigners framed GMOs as the products of international capital and as symbols of *la malbouffe* or “bad food”. Bovè and others have elevated “the farmer” as an international symbol of “cultural expertise, identity and international resistance to global capital” while the GMO debate has become a “collision between competing frames, stakes, and forms of expertise among a wide range of actors and networks “ (Heller, 2004, p.96).

In Spain, mobilisations in Madrid against Monsanto and Syngenta, held on April 17 in 2011, promoted resistance to artificial growth hormones and GMOs on health and cultural grounds. According to Robert Falkner (2001, p.150) the GMO debate between the US, Canada and the EU reflects “differences in societal values and preferences” beyond commercial interests. The transatlantic conflict over GMOs is focused on the EU’s moratorium on the commercial release of GM crops into the environment and a ban on imports. This has been interpreted as protectionism despite arguments that the campaign is motivated by the concerns of consumers.

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety resolved that nations hold the right to err on the side of caution in accepting GMOs on the basis of “lack of scientific certainty due to insufficient relevant scientific information and knowledge regarding the extent of the potential adverse effects of a living modified organism on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity” (Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, n.d.). This case raises questions of science-based regulation versus consumer sovereignty. In Europe, countries can create separate laws and approval procedures for GMOs but must abide by strict labelling and tracing procedures.¹ The 1996 outbreak of Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) coincided with the arrival of Monsanto’s Ready Roundup soybeans. The subsequent Greenpeace campaign against GMOs gained particular salience, attracting media headlines including “Warning: Mad Soybeans” (cited in Robin & Holoch, 2010, p.229).

Throughout Europe smaller producers are resisting the commodification of food and favour a retreat to multifunctional agriculture, away from industrial agriculture, a trend that resonates with European consumers who share concerns about food safety. However in Spain, where GMOs have been accepted since 1998, understanding about the issues is low. Agro-ecological products including organics are promoted outside mainstream marketing channels and the sector reports consumer confusion over ‘bio’ products. Yet as may be expected in a country with a strong tradition of food as culture, consumers exhibit negative benefit perception while risk perception has increased. This may be attributed to increased media coverage of GM food in Europe. Consumer sovereignty is damaged when information, and therefore knowledge, is insufficient for the making of “reasoned judgements”. This increases reliance on “key information stakeholders” such as consumer and environmental organisations (Vilella-Vila, et al., 116). Literacy in scientific developments is lower in Spain and media reporting limited (Vilella-Vila, 2005; Todt and Luj, 2000). By far the majority, up to 85 per cent, of organic products are exported (wine and olives).

Frame analysis of EHNE campaigns

The decentralised administration of 17 Autonomous Communities, a regional model that replaced the Francoist regime (1939-1975), has contributed to the strategic focus of social movement organisations on local and regional campaigns that aim to influence public opinion about GMOs. These campaigns are centred on local supermarkets, local cultivations and local ports receiving

¹ GMO products with 0.9 per cent transgenic content must be identified, and an audit trail of sales maintained for five years by handlers in the food chain (Paarlberg, 2010).

shipments of transgenic products. They promote short supply chains through direct selling initiatives. Local public and local media are the targets of these campaigns. Key publics are farmers, consumers and families. The aim of store protests, magazine features and public meetings is to move people from passive acceptance of GMOs to an informed and open criticism of the GMO market and its potential impact on health and livelihoods.

EHNE and its allies promote agro-ecological approaches as alternatives to commercial agriculture through an “identity-based economy” frame (Itcaina and Cadiou, 2007). Peasant-based farmers unions such as EHNE are driving a shift to small-scale farming that integrates ethical values, fairness, solidarity and participative democracy. In response to calls for transparency, EHNE’s direct marketing initiatives focus on provenance, framing issues of food quality and food safety as symbols of the crisis of commercial agriculture. Its Nekasarea initiative involves the direct sale of weekly produce to consumers throughout the Bizkaia Province. Inspired by the French Association pour le Maintiend'une Agriculture Paysanne (AMAP)² the Nekasarea project “promotes and disseminates a [local] model of agriculture” that counters traditional corporate structures. The network implements partnership initiatives that facilitate short chain supplies in production and distribution. In doing so, it seeks “new ways of interaction between people as producers and consumers about the effects of different agricultural and consumer models” (Red Nekasarea, 2010).

European members of La Via Campesina including EHNE frame the GMO debate in terms of food quality, linking GMOs to industrial agriculture and cultural homogenisation (Heller, 2004). The hybrid identity of peasant and worker enables this discourse to work on national and global levels. The slogan “to produce, to employ, to preserve” makes salient links between global capital, science and labour (Haller, 2004) and promotes peasant work as the active stewardship of meaningful and productive landscapes.

EHNE extends the frame to GMOs as a symbol of the industrial agricultural model and a threat to traditional culture and livelihoods. In doing so it has created a wide societal network and formed institutional relations and alliances with like-minded ecologist groups, consumer organisations and scientific services across Europe in countries including Austria, Italy, France, Germany and Great Britain (Barcena, 2005). EHNE members identify “the hegemonic commercial control that big companies and transnationals have on great distribution of supplies, such as fertilizers and seeds” as “good reasons to be aligned with social and urban movements” (P. Nicholson, personal interview, 14 July, 2010). Similarly, “if a vigorous eco-farming or regional food specialities sector exists, environmental and consumer associations can cement a strategic alliance with small farmers’ organisations.” (Kurzer and Cooper, 2007, p.1035).

European members of La Via Campesina such as EHNE and their networks promote agro-ecological approaches as alternatives to commercial agriculture through an “identity-based economy” frame (Itcaina, 2005). The shift to small-scale farming integrates ethical values, fairness, solidarity and participative democracy. These values reflect the global master frame of food promoted by La Via Campesina - “the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity” (La Via Campesina, 1996). The relationship between this philosophical paradigm and the collective action framing of EHNE campaigns is thoroughly analysed in the complete version of this paper.

Conclusion

Issues concerning GMOs involve complex scientific arguments that require campaigns that raise awareness and educate consumers. EHNE recognise the importance of “the active, relational and political” consumer (Goodman, 2004, p, 13) to the success of its campaigns.

² Association for the Maintenance of Family Farming, also described as community-supported agriculture.

In response to calls for transparency, and in line with its direct marketing initiatives and focus on provenance, EHNE frames issues of food quality and food safety as symbols of the crisis of commercial agriculture. La Via Campesina members including EHNE challenge the hegemonic risk frame of food safety “science” by establishing farmers as legitimate experts on food culture and sustainable agriculture. Solutions include a return to traditional short food supply chains that reconnect consumers to producers, facilitating mutually constitutive relationships that reflect the multifunctional nature of agriculture.

Cosmopolitan European consumers are concerned with tradition, taste and culture. The reassertion of nature and quality against globalisation and the standardisation of products resonates with, and mobilises, publics. In the Basque Country, the heritage of the *baserría* (country estate) and all it represents contributes to a uniquely rural character. ENHE’s alternative food network aims to gain support from multilevel governance systems that regulate the agri-food system, making mobilisation more than a local matter. However, whether concerns over food quality enable the exercise of a new type of power in food networks and a “return to nature” (Murdoch & Miele, 1999) in re-emerging food circuits may depend on the possibilities of the progressive food justice movements and the radical food sovereignty movements working together, possibilities that will be explored further in this paper.

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