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The War on Genetically-Modified-Food Critics: Et tu, National Geographic?

Timothy A. Wise

Since when is the safety of genetically modified food considered “settled science” on a par with the reality of evolution? That was the question that jumped to mind when I saw the cover of the [March 2015 National Geographic](#) and the lead article, “Why Do Many Reasonable People Doubt Science?” The cover title: “The War on Science.” The image: a movie set of a fake moon landing. Superimposed: a list of irrational battles being waged by “science doubters” against an implied scientific consensus:

“Climate change does not exist.”

“Evolution never happened.”

“The moon landing was faked.”

“Vaccinations can lead to autism.”

“Genetically modified food is evil.” WHAT?

Genetically modified food is evil? First of all, what business does “evil” have in an article about scientific consensus? Sure, some people think GMOs are evil. But isn’t the controversy about whether genetically modified food is safe?

More important, what was such an item doing on a list of issues on which the vast majority of scientists would indeed have consensus? How in the world does author Joel Achenbach define “scientific consensus?” How about 95 percent of the peer-reviewed literature, as in the case of climate change? Near 100 percent, as in the case of the lack of any link between autism and vaccines, or on evolution, or the reality of the moon landing?

There is no such consensus on the safety of GM food. A [peer-reviewed study](#) of the research, from peer-reviewed journals, found that about half of the animal-feeding studies conducted in recent years found cause for concern. The other half didn’t, and as the researchers noted, “most of these studies have been conducted by biotechnology companies responsible of commercializing these GM plants.”

In other words, those studies are tainted by the same conflict of interest that the article itself denounced in the case of anti-climate-change research commissioned by oil companies. The only consensus that GM food is safe is among industry-funded researchers.

So why would the respected National Geographic make such a scientific error? And why would respected Washington Post science writer Joel Achenbach include GM safety on his list of “settled” science?

Product placement for GMOs

Call it product placement. You know, the nearly subliminal advertising technique in which Coca Cola pays a movie producer to have the characters all drink Coke. Biotechnology companies and their powerful advocates, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are succeeding in a well-planned campaign to get GM safety declared “settled science.”

The article itself hardly touches the GM controversy or the science. It focuses on the interesting and important question of how people, including scientists, interpret scientific evidence in a way tainted by “confirmation bias,” the tendency to more readily believe evidence that confirms one’s existing beliefs. Achenbach could have added science writers to the list. And magazine editors.

Achenbach focuses on climate change and evolution and vaccines, mainly. GMOs? In what amounts to a throw-away paragraph, after he’s made justifiable fun of anti-fluoride scare-mongering, he writes:

“We’re asked to accept, for example, that it’s safe to eat food containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) because, the experts point out, there’s no evidence that it isn’t and no reason to believe that altering genes precisely in a lab is more dangerous than altering them wholesale through traditional breeding. But to some people the very idea of transferring genes between species conjures up mad scientists running amok—and so, two centuries after Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, they talk about Frankenfood.”

What? “The experts point out?” Some do, some don’t. “There’s no evidence that it isn’t” safe to eat GMOs? What kind of science is that? Many experts would disagree, and they would certainly object to a safety standard for a new technology that is content with the epidemiologically shabby construct that if there’s no evidence something isn’t safe, it must be safe.

Thalidomide, anyone, with a pinch of DDT? What’s going on here?

Are we “depolarized” yet?

What we’re seeing is a concerted campaign to do exactly what *National Geographic* has knowingly or unknowingly done: paint GMO critics as anti-science while offering no serious discussion of the scientific controversy that still rages.

An indicator was a quiet [announcement in the press last summer](#) that the Gates Foundation had awarded a US\$5.6 million grant to Cornell University to “depolarize” the debate over GM foods. That’s their word. The grant founded a new institute, the Cornell Alliance for Science.

“Our goal is to depolarize the GMO debate and engage with potential partners who may share common values around poverty reduction and sustainable agriculture, but may not be well informed about the

potential biotechnology has for solving major agricultural challenges,” said project leader Sarah Evanega, senior associate director of International Programs in Cornell’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS).

Got it? The Gates Foundation is paying biotech scientists and advocates at Cornell to help them convince the ignorant and brainwashed public, who “may not be well informed,” that they are ignorant and brainwashed.

“Improving agricultural biotechnology communications is a challenge that must be met if innovations developed in public sector institutions like Cornell are ever to reach farmers in their fields,” added Kathryn J. Boor, the Ronald P. Lynch Dean of CALS.

It’s kind of like depolarizing an armed conflict by giving one side more weapons.

So what you’re seeing in *National Geographic* is the product of improved “agricultural biotechnology communications.”

And not just there. In the last year we’ve seen the [New Yorker’s slimy takedown](#) of anti-GMO campaigner Vandana Shiva, and prominent opinion pieces by scientists, researchers, and journalists painting GMO critics as anti-science, the food policy equivalents of climate deniers and creationists.

I saw the PR machine in action in Des Moines in 2013 at the World Food Prize awards, which went that year to three biotech scientists, one from Monsanto. (It was of course pure coincidence that Monsanto had underwritten the renovation of the beautiful old building that houses the World Food Prize empire.)

At a panel discussion there the audience got heavily depolarized. Ann Glover, a European Science Advisor and designated GM bulldog, actually called anyone who still questioned the safety of GM crops “brainwashed.” Journalist Mark Lynas, who has made a career of such demonization, added his own insults.

I was sitting next to former World Food Prize winner Hans Herren, who won the prize in the 1990s for his innovative, cost-effective biological pest-control campaign that saved the African cassava crop. Brainwashed?

The consensus: There is no consensus

The consensus on the safety of GM food is perfectly clear: there is no consensus. That’s what the independent peer-reviewed literature says. And that’s what the *National Geographic*’s beautiful exhibit on its food series, in its Washington headquarters, says: the “long-term health and ecological consequences are unknown.” And that is an accurate statement of the consensus, or the lack of it.

The paid shills for the petroleum industry undermined a growing consensus on climate change that was inconvenient for industry, backed by a well-funded PR campaign sowing doubt about that scientific consensus. In this case, the biotechnology industry and its allies are declaring a consensus where there is none in order to silence their critics.

The debate is over what level of precaution we should apply before allowing the large-scale commercialization of this new technology. And anyone stating that there is a scientific consensus on GM safety is coming down squarely against precaution. Reasonable people disagree, and that does not make them “science doubters.”

Are you feeling depolarized yet?

Timothy A. Wise is Director of the Research and Policy Program at the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University.

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