

CULTURES OF APPREHENSION

Food Scares and the Media in Great Britain and Germany

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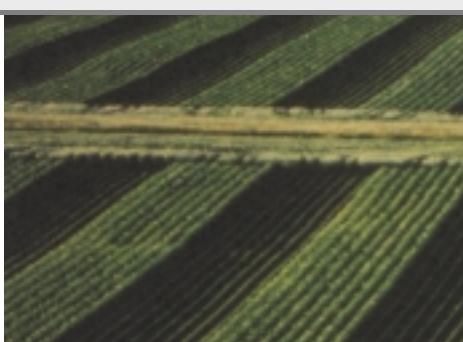
GM Food and the British Public (1998-2000)

- Dr. Arpad Pusztai, senior researcher at the Rowett Institute says in interviews with the BBC and ITV "he won't eat GM potatoes" on the base of his tests with rats. He got suspended.
- The press reveals that the science minister Lord Sainsbury profits from biotechnology patents held by his blind trust Diatech Ltd.
- The "big five" of Britain's food retailers exclude GM products from their shelves. 3 out of 4 customers demand the labelling of GM food.
- The biotech industry is unable to find enough British farmers willing to grow GM crops for field trials.
- PM Tony Blair makes an U-turn on this issue when he conceded "There's no doubt that there is potential for harm, both in terms of human safety and in the diversity of our environment, from GM foods and crops".
- Relations of distrust between the public and politics but also between the public and science.



The Pusztai-Story

- The research anchors at a specific sort of event, the release of a scientific artefact from the hidden realm of laboratories and its translation to the noisy, picture-loaded, and omnipresent networks of media "news".
- Dr. Pusztai has informed the government about his preliminary findings and has also ask for permission to give a TV interview. That didn't save him from being suspended. Consequently, there must be a decisive difference between saying "I won't eat GM potatoes" to the media and writing about an "elongation of a rat's stomach section" as a consequence of being fed with GM potatoes in the medical journal "The Lancet".
- Other ideas: the semantic development of terms such as Frankenstein Food, substantial equivalence, and precautionary principle.



Conserving Complexity

- The main lines of research in media studies are driven by modernist approaches and tend to gush into large piles of quantitative data, time phase structures, cultural indicator analysis etc., and speak in categories such as true/false, agree/disagree/don't know or – from a journalist perspective – editors change the submitted reports not at all/in minor ways/often in problematic ways/qualified.
- I rather like to embark on what Latour calls "science of the particular", to devote my research to the hybridity of real, imaginative, and metaphysical interweavings of actors in the fabric of biotechnology.

The Role of the Media

- These moments of "making public" are capable of producing disarray on the scale between micro and macro, important and less important, laboratory and legislation and by this they dissolve the permeation of what sounds so neatly separated "science", "politics", "media", and "public".

The Relation between Scientists and the Media

- "Scientists have been (...) scared away from public engagement by the media frenzy around GM technology in 1999 (...). The reduction of a complex branch of biological engineering to "Frankenstein Food" was typical of media hopelessly ill equipped to discuss scientific progress rationally. And into the vacuum stepped big business. What inflicted the greatest damage on GM science was that the case for the defence was fronted by the bio-tech groups Monsanto and AstraZeneca".

"Pressure groups talk in the black-and-white language loved by reporters; academics are usually more diffident". (*The Independent* 20-11-2001)

What Can Actor-Network Theory Contribute to Media Studies

- "(...) there are four things that do not work with actor-network theory; the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen!"
Latour B. 1999. On Recalling ANT. In: Law J., Hassard J., editors. Actor Network Theory and After. Oxford, Malden: Blackwell. p 15-25.

- Actor-network theory aims to explain the world as relations of humans, non-humans, and things without a neglect of the complexity and variety of these relations but regarding them as fluent and always changing.
- With regards to the media, particular attention is paid to the routines of media production, the interweaving between "the journalist" and "journalistic practice" such as time contracts, deadlines, publishing technology, news distribution, economic and political entanglements.

Approaching the Routines of Making Public

The complexity of this medial processing will be addressed by four subsequent steps of research.

- 1. It is intended to conceive a characterisation of the scientific release detailed in journals such as Nature, Science etc., in official press releases and talks of concerned scientists.
- 2. I will conduct an analysis of corresponding articles in the quality press.
- 3. An apprenticeship with two of the newspapers is intended, in order to get an in-depth view of the impacts which touch, direct, shape the information on the way from the laboratory to the news outlets.
- 4. Semi-structured interviews in which concerned scientists and other relevant actors are asked to judge the accuracy, tendency, and representation in the press articles analysed before.

■ Additionally, these steps will have a country-comparison component, as it appears that news coverage in the UK and Germany differs quite profoundly in terms of their agenda but also of scope, weighing, and register what contributes to a re-enforcement of national spaces of thinking and discourse.



pictures from: GDV [Ed.] 1999: Gentechnik : Grenzzone Menschlichen Handelns? Berlin