

SCIENCE IN THE MEDIA

PRESS COVERAGE OF GM FOOD



Recent years have seen intense media interest in genetically modified (GM) foods. POST and the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee¹ commissioned research to investigate media coverage of GM foods over the first six months of 1999.²

*This note summarises the findings of this research and considers the conclusions drawn.*³

THE RESEARCH

The research examined the content of national tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (**Box 1**) between 8 January and 8 June 1999. This was complemented by scrutiny of some broadcast media coverage⁴.

Data gathered on newspaper articles included, where available:

- Basic information: newspaper name, type, date
- Prominence: page type, headline, size of article
- Journalistic features: newspaper section, type of journalist
- Content: whether the article defined the term GM, the focus of the article, whether it referred to BSE, or to organic farming.

The number of press articles on GM issues during the period considered is shown in **Figure 1**. Although the issue had been on the public agenda for a considerable time beforehand⁵ and has continued to be an area of public concern subsequently, the research found the media debate peaked in mid-February 1999. For 7-10 days the subject was a front-page news story in the press and a lead story on radio and television. The researchers named this period 'The Great GM Food Debate'.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research suggested that the debate in February 1999 was 'triggered' by a letter to the Guardian on 12 February. This was from a group of 22 scientists, supporting the (then unpublished) work of Dr Arpad Pusztai on allegedly harmful effects of GM potatoes fed to rats. However, the researchers proposed that this 'trigger' was not the sole or even necessarily the most important influence on the subsequent debate. The range of factors influencing the debate is discussed on page 2.

BOX 1 PRESS AND BROADCAST MEDIA SOURCES⁶

NEWSPAPERS

Campaigning		Non-campaigning
Explicit	Implicit	
Daily Mail	Mail on Sunday	Times
Independent on Sunday	Independent	Sunday Times
Daily Mirror	Guardian	Daily Telegraph
	Observer	
	Sunday Mirror	

RADIO AND TELEVISION

Programme	Channel
Today	Radio 4
9 O'Clock News	BBC1
Newsnight	BBC2
Question Time	BBC1

Six distinct periods of debate were identified by the researchers, including:

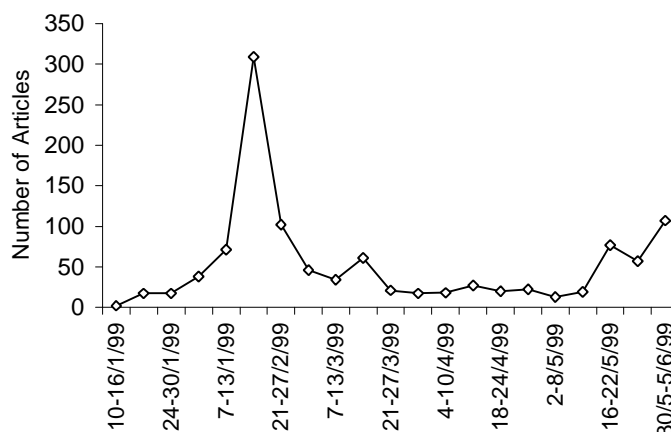
- 1-10 February 1999 - GM food became a party political issue and media coverage increased.
- Breaking of the story, on 11-12 February.
- 13-20 February - GM food was front page news.

The press and campaigning

According to the research, newspaper coverage of the GM issue was of prime importance in shaping the debate. Broadcast media (especially Radio 4's *Today Programme*) frequently took their cue from press headlines.

The researchers suggested that a number of national newspapers – all the tabloids studied, and several of the broadsheets – chose to adopt a 'campaigning' rather than a 'reporting' stance on GM food. A further distinction was made between those which launched an explicit campaign, and those where the campaigning style was implicit (see Box 1).

FIGURE 1 NUMBER OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES ON GM ISSUES, JANUARY – JUNE 1999



¹ House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, 3rd Report, Session 1999-2000, *Science and Society*, HL Paper 38, February 2000

² Professor John Durant and Ms Nicola Lindsey, two Specialist Advisers to the House of Lords sub-committee, conducted the research.

³ A full report of the research is available from POST - see details on page 2.

⁴ Funding and other constraints prevented an exhaustive coverage of all press sources and a wider range of television and radio programmes.

⁵ POST Report 115, *Genetically Modified Foods – benefits and risks, regulation and public acceptance*, April 1998

⁶ In some cases, web-based versions of the newspapers were used in the analysis, not the original printed versions.

While the absolute amounts of coverage of the GM food issue were similar in campaigning and non-campaigning newspapers, the research showed that the form of the coverage was radically different. The campaigning newspapers entered the debate first, raised new issues first, made use of more dramatic headlines, and devoted a larger proportion of their coverage to commentary (rather than news or features), especially in the early stages of the debate. In this way, they set the agenda for the public debate, whereas the non-campaigning newspapers simply reported it.

In general, the research found that differences between campaigning and non-campaigning newspapers were larger than the differences between tabloids and broadsheets.

ISSUES

The report examines why so many British newspapers decided to campaign (rather than solely report) on the issue. Relevant factors cited include:

- the steady erosion of public confidence in the UK food industry following the BSE incidents, particularly after March 1996.
- the further erosion of public confidence in GM food following the import into Europe in autumn 1996 of the first batches of unsegregated commodity crops (soya and maize).
- the emergence in the period 1996-1998 of a broad, powerful coalition of critics of GM food, including several leading environmental organisations; the Soil Association and other supporters of organic farming; consumer groups (including the Consumers' Association); and the Vegetarian Society.
- the existence of a small number of prominent individuals, including a member of the Royal Family and media figures, who were personally identified with, or at least strongly sympathetic towards, the critical campaign.
- competition in the press, which attracted several newspaper editors to the idea of campaigning on what they took to be a populist cause.

Other findings detailed in the report include:

- the acronym 'GM' emerged in general parlance during the course of the debate.
- 13% of all press articles on GM food mentioned BSE (even more in the early phases of the debate).
- 13% of all press articles on GM food mentioned organic food/farming.

TABLE 1 PERCENTAGE OF ARTICLES BY DIFFERENT TYPES OF JOURNALIST, AVERAGED OVER THE PERIOD STUDIED

Type of journalist	News articles (%)	Feature articles (%)
Political	32	16
News	14	15
Science and Technology	10	18
Consumer	10	11
Environmental	17	10

Articles by non-scientific (i.e. general, political, or environmental) correspondents were prominent (**Table 1**), particularly in the campaigning newspapers. In particular, during the two days when the story broke (February 11 and 12 1999), in the newspapers surveyed, no news articles on GM foods were written by science and technology journalists: 45% were written by political journalists. The researchers concluded that the press did not see GM food as primarily a science or technology story.

SUMMARY

The researchers suggested that, in early 1999, the issue of GM food was rising up the public agenda and likely to become front page news. The combination of the preceding inadequate handling of BSE and the rapid introduction of GM commodity crops into the UK market over the previous 2-3 years had sensitised the public to the issue. It seemed that a gap had opened up between governmental and industrial policy and practice, and public opinion. In this situation, a single event - particularly one involving scientific dissent from the consensus view that GM foods were safe to eat - was sufficient to trigger a debate.

In considering the research, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee concluded that one of the main problems was the handling of science aspects of news stories by journalists who are not specialist science correspondents. They identified two ways of meeting this challenge:

- changing the behaviour of scientists in dealing with the media, towards open and positive communication;
- changing the way the media deal with scientists, as set out in the Royal Society's recent suggested guidance for editors.

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This is a summary of Report No. 138, "The Great GM Food Debate". For the full report Parliamentarians should contact the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA, tel: [020] 7219 2840. Available to the public from the Parliamentary Bookshop, tel: [020] 7219 3890, price £12+pp. See also www.parliament.uk/post/home.htm