



Power, discourse, and news media: Examining Canada's GM alfalfa protests

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ABSTRACT

The 'Day of Action to Stop GM Alfalfa' was a Canada-wide protest that took place in 38 different cities on April 9th, 2013. Organized by a coalition of farmers and activists, these rallies protested potentially adverse impacts to markets, the environment, and society, and were picked up by news media outlets across the country. Despite the protestors' focus on a range of concerns, news outlets tended to cover particular issues, such as economic and market impacts while broader social, political, and environmental issues received only peripheral attention. This article contributes to literature on GMO protests and media analyses by offering an explanation for the news media's focus on economic over other concerns, and the power relations embedded in this focus. Based on a discourse analysis of 88 news reports on GM alfalfa published over a four year period, this article identifies under-acknowledged power relations that influence (largely inadvertently) the direction of reporting. Specifically, GM alfalfa news coverage is influenced in two key ways: (1) news values and media culture shape the report writing and editing process, privileging 'newsworthy' topics while side-lining others; and (2) neo-liberal normative assumptions act as underlying hegemonic discourses that re-embed dominant knowledges—common sense values and assumptions regarding market mechanisms and privatization go unnoticed, or at least uncriticized.

1. Introduction

On April 9th, 2013 over 100 people peacefully gathered at the Kitchener-Waterloo Constituency Office of then Member of Parliament Peter Braid to protest the release of genetically modified (GM) alfalfa in Canada.¹ Farmers, families, and students from all over the Waterloo Region joined together to make their concerns over GM alfalfa visible. The Kitchener-Waterloo protests were just one of 38 that took place across the country, with the protestors presenting a united voice against GM alfalfa outside government and corporate offices. These protests are part of an important trend in Canadian GMO² activism; previous efforts against GMOs include recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) in the early 1990s and GM wheat in the early 2000s. Research on these past campaigns usefully examines the roles of farmers, consumers, and health organizations in building coalitions to oppose new GM products. However, much less attention has been paid to the role of news media discourse³ in the context of GMO activism in Canada.

Protests against GM alfalfa successfully attracted the attention of news media outlets across the country. The protests can be considered a success insofar as the event itself was covered extensively by the news

media; the substance and length of this coverage, however, deserves further examination. Not only does news coverage on GM alfalfa appear sparse before and after the time of the protests, it focused heavily on the potential economic/market impacts of introducing GM alfalfa to the Canadian market. By prioritizing dominant issues like market impacts, the press gave broader social, political, and environmental issues only peripheral attention.

Protestors and protest organizers have an interest in gaining attention from the news media, a key source of widely distributed public information, and an important player in the development of public perspectives regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and other issues in Canada's food system. As Bauer and Gutteling (2006) explain, "the mass media have a limited and varied, but definite impact on public perception of biotechnology" (p. 126). This impact is important because members of the public may first learn about a topic such as biotechnology through the mass media, and the development of opinions and attitudes becomes based on information mediated in this way (Bauer and Bonfadelli, 2002). Bauer and Gaskell (1999) reveal the complexities of researching social representations of biotechnology, and Maesele and Schuurman (2008), focusing on Northern Belgium,

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¹ Personal observation (April 9th, 2013).

² GMO is the initialism for "genetically modified organisms", but it should also be noted that GMO is now commonly used as a noun in contexts such as this, where the full spelling of the word is not effective/suitable.

³ The terms 'discourse(s)' and 'discursive' are used extensively through this article, in reference to news media discourses, discourse analysis, and discursive power. Discourse, for the purposes of this article, refers to messages, writings and articulations as well as the processes, histories and contexts in which their meanings are constituted.

explore the hegemonic power of the scientific-industrial complex on the media coverage of biotechnology, showing a long-term decline in its influence. The present study approaches the representation of biotechnology in the media through an examination of embedded, underlying forms of power.

Traditional power theories tend to focus on agency; powerful actors actively try to impose their will onto others. In this case news media are not directly involved in disputes over GM alfalfa, so we need to consider other lenses to analyze the power relations in such contexts. Constitutive power offers a means to conceptualize such circumstances, focusing on the historical and cultural development of norms and discourses, as opposed to the immediate power relations of individual actors and/or organizations (see *Digester, 1992*). Put differently, constitutive power offers a conceptual workaround for an analysis of power relations within news media discourse, particularly because news reports are written by actors (reporters, editors, etc.) who are not directly involved in GM alfalfa debates, so focusing on the actions/agency of these actors would be largely ineffective. Furthermore, constitutive power offers a tool for understanding the role of news reporters (and editors, copyeditors, etc.) through subjectification (see *Haugaard, 2012; Ryan, 2014*); the construction of subjects/individuals within news media settings influences the way some events are viewed as newsworthy, and others are not. This article uses the concept of constitutive power to look beyond the power of actors, focusing instead on the creation of media actors acting out their roles, and the interplay of historically developed norms, values, and discourses that influence, and are influenced by, news report coverage and content.

This article provides an examination of Canadian news coverage on GM alfalfa for a period of four years surrounding the April 9th, 2013 “Day of Action to Stop GM Alfalfa”. Sociological discourse analysis is performed on 88 individual news reports, and two distinct patterns within this coverage are representative of constitutive power relations. First, news values and media culture shape the report writing and editing process, privileging particular ‘newsworthy’ events and content. News media discourses tend to be “dominated by certain rhythms and certain forms of speech” (*Derrida, 2002, p. 89*). As a result, some ideas, voices, and perspectives are highlighted by the news media while others are marginalized. Second, the presence of neoliberal normative assumptions in the news reports analyzed help to re-embed dominant knowledges regarding market mechanisms and private property rights. Neoliberal discourses play an important role in food and agricultural politics (see *Andrée et al., 2014; Guthman, 2008*) and appear to impact the news media coverage on GM alfalfa protests in Canada.

The lens of constitutive power is necessary for examining how particular norms and discourses are produced, reproduced, and prioritized by the news media, while at the same time considering the ways that certain norms and discourses are forces with their own effects, capable of infiltrating and influencing the news media. This extension of traditional power theories incorporates insights from Foucault and like-minded scholars to capture the interconnected and co-constructed nature of news media discourse. This study is the first examination of GM alfalfa activism in Canada, and highlights important new insights regarding the development of GMO activism in relation to the news media. Additionally, this article shows how a comprehensive examination of GM alfalfa news coverage in the Canadian context is instructive for understanding the effects of constitutive power.

2. Power theory and news media discourse

What forces direct the content and extent of news coverage? And, how are norms and discourses articulated in such power relations? Power, as a concept, has been extensively (re)defined, reviewed and categorized (see *Lukes, 1986; Clegg, 1989; Haugaard, 2002*), as well as deployed in methodological discussions of news media analysis (see *Fairclough, 1998; van Dijk, 1995*). An effective conceptualization of power is essential for capturing the varied ways in which news media

are imbued with influence. To achieve this, the concept of *constitutive power* is utilized, based significantly on *Digester's (1992)* “fourth face of power”, which applies the work of Foucault.

As theoretical understandings of power have developed, useful categories for conceptualizing power relations have emerged. *Dahl's (1957)* conception of power focuses on the capacity of actors to influence other actors and/or events through their own actions. This has been termed the first dimension of power, and referred to as instrumental power in global governance literature—the influences of lobbyists in law and policy formation, for instance, fit into this category (see *Fuchs, 2007; Clapp and Fuchs, 2009*). *Bachrach and Baratz (1962)* extend Dahl's conceptualization to include a second dimension of power, which involves the “mobilization of bias”; actors exert power by “creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process” (p. 948). *Fuchs (2007)* discusses this type as a structural approach to power, or structural power. Closed-door policy consultations fall into this category, limiting the scope of actors involved. *Lukes (1974, 1986)* extends the discussion of power by adding a third dimension to explain how subjects being influenced can act voluntarily, as a result of modifications to actors' values and beliefs. This has been discussed as discursive power, which considers the role of media and other public relations mechanisms in framing political issues (*Clapp and Fuchs, 2009*). One such discursive strategy is the promotion of a positive narrative regarding GM food/crops by the biotechnology industry (e.g. minimized pesticide use) (*Smythe, 2009*). These three dimensions of power are useful tools of analysis, and have been effectively applied by *Fuchs (2007)* and *Clapp and Fuchs (2009)* to examine business power, particularly in the agri-food sector.

The challenge with applying these approaches to an analysis of news media coverage lies in their focus on agency. These visions of power are well-suited for examining the capacity of actors (such as corporations and farm organizations) to control news media outlets, as well as expressions of bias (political and otherwise) in the news media. Not only are such analyses challenging in terms of feasibility, examining actors/agency within news media discourse will uncover an incomplete picture of power relations. As such, this article looks beyond agency-based approaches to power, focusing on constitutive power which enables the examination of historically developed norms, ideas, and values that become embedded in news media coverage.

Power literature outlining what I refer to as *constitutive power*⁴ offers a conceptual tool for moving beyond an analytic focus on actors (individuals, businesses, governments, etc.) and their actions. As outlined by *Foucault (see 1977, 1978, 1980)*, *Digester (1992)*, *Haugaard (2002, 2012)*, *Ryan (2014)* and others, the addition of constitutive power captures key aspects regarding the underlying historical and normative influences that shape actors' capacities to exert power. Constitutive power diverges significantly from the first three dimensions of power because it focuses on how actors are created (‘subjectification’) instead of how they (inter)act (*Haugaard, 2012; Ryan, 2014*). In other words, certain normatively and historically perpetuated ideas, practices and values create actors that are influenced by these embedded understandings. This form of power exists outside the actions of agents operating towards their own ends, operating as ‘regimes of truth’ that privilege certain ideas, and predispose the actions of individuals.

For *Dean (2012)*, common (agency-based) approaches to power imply a ‘zero-sum’ relationship that focuses on power as a possession—the actions of powerful actors subtract power from others.

⁴ This term is consistent with the language used to describe this form of power (see *Digester, 1992; Haugaard, 2002*), but has also been used in numerous, yet inconsistent, instances. Some authors contribute to constitutive power as possessed and deployed by actors, such as the state (see *Browning and Christou, 2010*), while others view it as a process of subjectification and an embedded, underlying influence based on norms and discourses (see *Ryan, 2014; Rye, 2014; Trowler, 2001*). The present study adopts the latter view.

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