



# Framing public engagement: A critical discourse analysis of GM Nation?



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## ABSTRACT

The shift towards more democratic and 'engaged' processes of public participation in the governance of science and technology owes much to a deepening crisis of trust in experts and a crisis of legitimation surrounding institutions of modernity. However, previous research has neglected relations of power and domination within national level public engagement exercises. The paper employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine these issues as they pertain to the case of the GM Nation? exercise held in the UK in 2003 on the possible commercialisation of GM (genetically modified) crops. CDA is concerned with the ideological effects of texts – the effects of texts in creating, sustaining and transforming ideologies. The analysis suggests that the GM Nation? debate reproduced and reinforced a structure which stabilised around a neo-liberal economic discourse. The implications of this for policy and practice relating to public engagement in science and technology decision-making are identified.

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## 1. Introduction

The shift of attention towards more democratic and 'engaged' processes of public participation in the governance of science and technology owes much to a deepening crisis of trust in experts and a crisis of legitimation surrounding institutions of modernity (such as science, the nation-state, and mass democracy). This change in the policy discourse from expert-based governance of science and technology to governance based on public dialogue, transparency and democratic engagement has partially been influenced by sustained criticism of the 'deficit theory' (Irwin and Wynne, 1996) and the emergence of deliberative models of democracy originating from the works of Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls (Durant, 1999; Elam and Bertilsson, 2003). The assumption is that increased public participation in

decisions over science and technological development will help eliminate, or at least reduce, opposition to technological change by achieving broad consensus, resulting in 'socially robust' technologies.

Irwin (2006) argues that the current proliferation of public engagement exercises has, generally, not been accompanied by a simultaneous change in the attitude of policy makers towards the status of expert knowledge. Rather, these democratic forms of influence over science and technology policy seem to be undermined by the 'dominant culture', which reinvents itself in the face of sustained critique and public mistrust (Wynne, 2002). Thus the limitations of these new public engagement initiatives are more a matter of the rigidity of cultural and epistemological assumptions about science-led progress rather than the mechanisms of the way these public engagement exercises are organised (Irwin, 2006). As a consequence, the current environment of science and technology governance is marked by a struggle between the 'old' discourse of public deficit and the 'new' discourse of democracy and public

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engagement. These struggles are played out in specific arena such as debates on controversial technologies such as nuclear power and biotechnology.

Concurrently, the New Labour government in the UK set about reconfiguring social democracy in the New Labour version of neo-liberalism, underscored by Giddens' 'Third Way' (Giddens, 1998). This involved the New Labour Government undertaking a process of 'marketisation' of the public sector. For example, the 'public-private partnership' became a required condition for all public contracts (Hall, 2011). This version of the neo-liberal discourse has promoted the discursive figure of the 'customer' and consumer choice. Central to this conception of neo-liberal discourse is the idea that citizens withdraw from active public participation and civic engagement and into more privatised, consumer-led lives (Bauman, 1999). Rayner (2003, drawing on Sagoff, 1990) considers that: "...our consumption patterns are likely to have a greater impact in shaping our lives than our ballots. Thus, popular choices about governance seem to be increasingly made in the marketplace... the consumer is displacing the citizen in political importance" (p. 165).

The governance of biotechnology, especially those areas of biotechnology relating to food, has been the subject of much controversy in the UK over the recent decades, though it represents only one case exemplifying a longstanding concern to assert 'social control' over 'runaway' technology (Collingridge, 1980; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Winner, 1977). The years 1996–1999 were agricultural biotechnology's 'watershed years' in the UK (Gaskell et al., 2003). Public trust in science, politicians and regulators was at its lowest ebb, following the 'mad cow' BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy)/variant CJD (Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease) crisis. Surveys showed increasing scepticism towards GM (genetically modified) foods, for example, leading policy makers to recognise that technological innovation could no longer ignore public opinion. The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee recommended public consultation as a remedy to the unaccountable nature of the traditional policy-making process that relied on expert opinions. What seemed like a new era of open governance in the UK saw the establishment in 1999 of the Human Genetics Commission (HGC) and the Agriculture and Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) and, in 2000, the Food Standards Agency (FSA). Soon afterward the AEBC launched and coordinated the GM Nation? debate, which took place in 2003. More recently, plans for a UK public debate on the uses of genetic modification in food, which was to have been held in 2011 were scuppered after Professor Brian Wynne resigned from the steering group set up for the purpose of organising it, citing concerns over the framing and scope of the public debate. In 2012 the controversy was re-ignited following comments by Conservative politicians, including environment minister Owen Paterson, regarding the benefits of genetic modification for the UK economy, industry, science and innovation, and the natural environment, and of the UK leading a 'global revolution' in food, plant yields and consumer choice (BBC, 2012; *The Telegraph*, 2012). The conduct of the study reported here has been informed by such developments.

Although there is a growing body of literature on the evaluation of public engagement exercises, the aspect of relations of power and domination and ideology embedded in such public engagement exercises has been largely

neglected. The relationships between discourse and other social elements and the role that discourse plays in the establishment, reproduction and transformation of unequal power relations is not transparent. The analysis of discourse is essential to illuminate these relations (Fairclough, 2010). The paper employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the 2003 GM Nation? exercise held in the UK on the possible commercialisation of genetically modified (GM) crops. CDA aims to study 'power abuse', social inequality and domination and how they are enacted, and reproduced or legitimised by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions (van Dijk, 2008). Related to this and in connection with GM Nation? the paper seeks to answer the following research questions: (a). what are the effects of texts in creating, sustaining and transforming ideologies? (b). how are these ideological effects embedded in the organisation and, in particular, the framing of the GM Nation? public debate; and (c). how are they implicated in the deliberations of the participants?

This paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on public engagement. Section 3 specifies the methods employed to collect and analyse data, and outlines the CDA methodology that governs the overall approach taken. It also describes the site of the case study under scrutiny – the GM Nation? public debate. The analysis of the data is presented in Section 4, whilst Section 5 provides a discussion of findings set in the context of previous literature on related topics. Section 6 offers some concluding remarks regarding the contribution of the research to exposing salient issues of context and framing affecting the conduct of national level exercises seeking to engage the public in science, technology or environmental matters. (We shall refer to 'publics', to recognise that citizens are not a monolithic, homogeneous mass but rather should be thought of as heterogeneous groups having differences of ethnicity, culture, interests and so on). The following section reviews previous research related to these issues and, more specifically, state sponsored public debates regarding the commercialisation of GM crops.

## 2. Literature review

The theoretical literature on science and technology-related public engagement ranges from calls for 'technological citizenship' (Frankenfeld (1992), Laird (1993), Zimmerman (1995)) to discussion of specific modes and techniques of public engagement (Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Renn et al., 1995) and overarching approaches, such as constructive technology assessment (Schot, 1992; Schot and Rip, 1997). Chilvers (2008) and Richards et al (2007) stress the need to avoid a 'toolkit' (or 'technocratic') approach to public engagement with science, technology and environmental issues. Such approaches are concerned with, for example, the representativeness of exercises (Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000; Gaskell and Bauer, 2001; Goven, 2003; Irwin, 2001, 2006; Pidgeon et al, 2005). Instead there should be greater attention to elucidating constraints on engagement, including a focus on the role of the wider political context in framing the issues to be debated and the processes governing the exercise (Eady et al, 2008; Street, 1997).

How have public debates fared in enabling participants to question the assumptions about science, technology and society? Rogers–Hayden and Hindmarsh view New Zealand's

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