

Expert and Non-expert Perceptions of the GM Crops and Food Debate: Implications for Policy and Development'

This presentation discusses findings from a one year project examining British press coverage of the UK's genetically modified (GM) foods debate, and associated expert and non-expert reactions. Two pro-GM newspapers and two anti-GM newspapers were analysed for themes and content. This textual analysis was complemented with 12 interviews with experts involved in the communication of GM issues, and 12 focus groups sessions in which members of the public reacted to selected newspaper texts and other GM material. Both in the press and public reaction the issue of GM was found to be intimately associated with other political events of the time, notably the invasion of Iraq. Except among experts, there was little awareness of the official national debate and issues were approached in more general terms. Pro-GM characterisation of the issues as primarily scientific, both by newspapers and experts, was rejected by the anti-GM press and campaigners and by the focus group participants. They assessed the issues in a more global frame, rejecting scientists and companies as unreliable. In addition they linked both US and British GM policy to the invasion of Iraq and by analogy, rejected pro-GM arguments as untrustworthy. The processes examined here illuminates ways in which the public engages with controversial technology, and the presentation concludes with some reflections on implications for policies targeted at the public understanding of science. This may be especially relevant to urban areas in China where studies suggest there is a small but significant resistance to GM.