

# *Canadian Press Coverage of Genetically Modified Foods*

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*Articles discussing genetically modified foods were selected from eleven major Canadian newspapers, all owned by Southam Papers. All the articles were printed between July 2001 and June 2002. The coverage was found to promote such foods and emphasize their potential benefits. The lack of public knowledge about these products was highlighted whereas the lack of such knowledge on behalf of producers was underplayed. All eleven papers seemed to support corporate interests and attempt to undermine the image of the opponents of genetically modified food. Where the potential risks were mentioned, the responsibility for consumer protection was laid on the government, rather than the producers.*

## **Introduction**

Genetically modified (GM) food has been a hot topic in the past couple of years, scientifically and politically. It seems that the public interest in Canada is growing due to the lack of knowledge about safety of such food, and the apparent profitability of GM industry. Furthermore, several events have heavily influenced the increase in both the public interest and the media coverage. These events have been: new discoveries and trials in the GM industry; government dealings with the pressure coming from different groups to implement mandatory GM labeling; conflicts between large GM corporations and farmers; and anti-GM activism pushing for more research and stricter rules for GM industries. These being the main concerns, other issues are also touched on in the articles analyzed in this study.

## **Methodology**

Canadian NewsDisc was used to select the coverage analysis in this study. Canadian NewsDisc contains records of newspaper articles (news, editorials, etc.) from the following papers: The Ottawa Citizen, The National Post, The Gazette (Montreal), The Telegram (St John's), The Guardian (Charlottetown), The Halifax Daily News, The Vancouver Sun, The Edmonton Journal, The Times Colonist (Victoria), The Province (Vancouver), and The Calgary Herald.

Additionally, this database contains transcripts of television segments from the national CBC and CTV programs. These transcripts were not analyzed due to a significantly different format used in television programming. 263 articles discussing genetically modified foods were found in the above mentioned 11 papers that were released between July 2001 and 2002. All 11 papers were owned by Southam Papers at the time the articles analyzed were printed. Many of the articles, however, appeared in more than one paper.

Articles that only briefly mentioned the term “genetically modified” in a different context were omitted.

The Telegram printed only six articles having to do with this topic during the 12 months analyzed, The Guardian 17, twelve articles appeared on the pages of The Daily News. The Citizen seems to show a keen interest in GM foods, 38 articles were found, 32 articles in The Edmonton Journal, 36 in The Gazette 17 in The Sun. Only 13 articles were found in The Province, all but one very brief, 17 in The Times Colonist. The Calgary Herald printed 31 GM related articles over the 12 months, 36 articles appeared in The Post.

## **The Controversy**

Genetic modification of foods has become a common practice in North America. Originally, the discoveries in this area were thought important because they opened doors to creating crops that are more resistant to pests and produce higher yields.

However, their overwhelming presence on the market can also be explained by their profitability – GM foods are patented and created to require certain pesticides and fertilizers (in the case of grains) or hormones (in the case of livestock). These additional requirements are generally available from the same companies that hold the patents, guaranteeing extra sales beyond just the patent. Fox<sup>1</sup> refers to this as “chemically addicted agriculture”

On the other hand, historical experiences with scientific advancements in agriculture (i.e. pesticide use) immediately called for caution among public and scientists alike. Long term consequences of altering nature can sometimes remain unknown for years and decades and often outweigh the benefits. As Suzuki and Dressel<sup>2</sup> describe it, we tend to turn to “scientific reductionism”, trying to define parts of nature outside of the general context, hence ignoring the complexities of the world around us. They refer to the failed experiment at Biosphere II in Arizona, where eight people were sealed into the artificially recreated “ecosystem” to stay there for two years. After a few weeks, the experiment was terminated due to subjects’ jeopardized health. Suzuki and Dressel call this experience a “humbling” reminder of how little we truly understand the planet’s ways. However, the Biosphere II experiment is even less alarming than what we learned from our reckless use of pesticides (i.e. years of DDT use before it was understood what a potent carcinogenic it is) and similar practices. Furthermore, when experiments that alter the natural cycle take place, the unintended consequences are only recognized after they have already taken place. The concept of “species barrier” is occasionally brought up in GM debates and it relates to the idea that if a new gene is introduced to a species’ DNA, it may make that species susceptible to illnesses that have been reserved to the species that the new gene comes from. It may not, but the possibility is still there.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox, M.W.: *Superpigs and Wondercorn* (New York, NY: Lyons and Burford, 1992)

<sup>2</sup> Suzuki, D. & Dressel, H.: *From Naked Ape to Superspecies* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1999)

In 1998, a group of scientist released a document known as Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle<sup>3</sup> which cautioned against unintended consequences of human activities that can potentially be damaging to human health and the environment. The principle states that “Corporations, government entities, organizations, communities, scientists and other individuals must adopt a precautionary approach to all human endeavours.” The Principle itself was defined in this statement as follows: “Where an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.” The statement goes on to say that “In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public bears the burden of proof.” The principle has since been adopted by many including the European Commission that uses it in relation to food safety regulations. (European Union also adopted mandatory labeling of GM foods, as have several other countries including Australia and New Zealand.)

North American reality is somewhat different, though. Cautious approaches and suggested strict regulations of GM products are seen as interfering with the idea (or, rather, the ideology) of the free market. GM advancements are shamelessly promoted as progress, and opposition is portrayed as a leftist movement lacking any understanding of market issues. Frequently, GM foods are placed in the same basket with pharmaceutical developments, therefore leading the public to a more accepting attitude (for illnesses to be cured we must embrace genetic modification and opposing it would mean denying cures to the ill). This false sense of social responsibility takes the onus away from the corporations that profit from such products. North American regulations of this industry (both in the US and Canada - due to our dependency on their market) pertain more to patent issues than to public safety, focusing on the rights of corporations rather than the rights of citizens.

Additionally, the corporations are influencing the agricultural community promising profits to this segment of our society that has been at an economic disadvantage for too long now. Farmers are being told that the new technologies are the only way to survive in the global market. Yet, the Canadian GM food experience was recently studied by the Soil Association and the results showed something much different.<sup>4</sup> The study found that due to a lack of demand for GM foods, Canadian farmers have lost millions in export sales to Europe. Moreover, increased yields and higher profits have not materialized and farmers have become more dependent on pesticides while new weed problems have emerged. Overall, “disaster” appears to be an appropriate term for what has happened.

Still, the Canadian press does not seem concerned. As is seen on the following pages, the risks are taken too lightly and concerns are ridiculed on the pages of major cities’ newspapers. In order to understand this better, the reader must be reminded that the newspapers analyzed here are themselves a part of the corporate world, owned by a single, profit driven mega-corporation. Whereas many will agree that there is no such thing as objectivity (and many progressive media will acknowledge this), the newspapers

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<sup>3</sup> Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle, 1998, [www.gdrc.org/u-gov/precaution-3.html](http://www.gdrc.org/u-gov/precaution-3.html)

<sup>4</sup> The Scoop (Windsor, Ontario): *GE Disaster* (October, 2002)

analyzed are precisely the ones that will dismiss accusations of skewed coverage and insist on factual reporting.

It is no news that media ownership has control over the information given to us. In the first half of the last century, William R. Hearst started out by owning the San Francisco Examiner to eventually take over more than half a dozen major papers across the United States. His sensational approach to news gave him a wide readership, and he used the papers to propagate right wing ideology that significantly influenced the public opinion on issues such as communism anti-marijuana laws. (Hearst was cleverly portrayed in Orson Wells' classic *Citizen Kane*, whereas his role in the criminalization of marijuana is described in Ron Mann's 1999 documentary *Grass*).

State owned media has controlled public opinion for a number of dictatorships around the world. Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, who owns a number of Italian newspapers, radio stations and television stations, has been accused of using his media empire to assist his political career (as well as using his political power to make his empire more profitable). Many (including Herman and Chomsky and their Propaganda Model<sup>5</sup>) would argue that North American media promote capitalism and corporate interests. With media centralization that has been taking place both in the US and Canada over the last couple of decades, the corporations owning media have indeed blatantly promoted free market, free trade, globalization, and other ideas that support the corporate ways. GM food industry is a part of this corporate world where profit comes before consumers, and one would expect that our press would be supportive of the industry. That is precisely what this study found.

### **Overview of Canadian Press Coverage:**

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are a reality in the Canadian food industry. Based on a Statistics Canada<sup>6</sup> study, of 197 food items studied as commonly found in our shopping carts, only 38 percent were GMO free. However, The Gazette claims that only 11 of the remaining 62 percent were "likely to contain detectable levels of proteins and genes related to biotechnology". We are not told what the "detectable levels" mean.

In Ontario, according to The Journal and The Post<sup>7</sup>, more than 25 % of 2001 soy bean crops were GM, 80% of canola and 40% of corn. Both papers only briefly mention this, even though The Post comes out of Toronto. But, it would appear that there is no reason to panic. As many are worried about our inability to control those crops, The Post even admits that for example "...pollen – and genes – from modified canola [are] carried up to three kilometers by the wind and insects"<sup>8</sup> and suggests that zero contamination is impossible. Yet, then comes a disclaimer that "Strictly speaking, the canola tested in the study was not genetically engineered", rather, it was a product of mutagenesis, which is

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<sup>5</sup> Chomsky, N. and Herman, E.S.(1988) *Manufacturing Consent*. New York: Pantheon Books

<sup>6</sup> The Montreal Gazette: *GMO labels should be clear* (December 30, 2001)

<sup>7</sup> The Edmonton Journal: *Biotech crops growing* (July 16, 2001) and National Post: *Genetically modified crop use reaches record levels* (July 16, 2001)

<sup>8</sup> The National Post: *Canola study raises fears of 'gene flow'* (June 28, 2002)

not considered to be GM. Worse yet, Edmonton Journal refers to the same study with the following statement: “Genes from genetically engineered canola are able to spread to other fields but have only a modest effect.”<sup>9</sup> The same article claims that an agricultural scientist (Paul Raymer) “...said percentage of gene flow from the genetically engineered plant was not significant nor a cause for concern.”

So why are consumers so concerned? In September 2000, a market controversy surfaced in the US – a GM variety of corn, known as Starlink and approved only for non-human consumption (animal feed), was found to be present in products sold in the US grocery stores. These products were eventually recalled, but for many this incident became a very important argument in the debate. The Sun<sup>10</sup> mentions this incident a year later in their longest GM related text – it is written by Mark Winston of Simon Fraser University and it “explains” why Starlink corn was declared unsafe for human consumption, downplaying the risks and dismissing any need for worry. Winston states that the corn failed to pass only one of the many allergy tests performed since it secretes Cry9C, “a protein naturally found in bacteria that kills insects.” Winston tells us: “This failure does not mean that Cry9C will cause an allergic reaction, but only flags the remote possibility that it could”. (True, but if we are growing enough non-modified corn for our needs, why take the risk?!) His only concern with Starlink is that the controversy itself cost the industry too much: “We need rational, science-based, and consistently applied regulation for genetically modified foods. We need it now, before another Starlink-like controversy costs the industry a few more hundreds of millions of dollars and the public its confidence in the safety of the food we so copiously consume.” Has the public ever been confident of this safety?

As was seen in the controversial case of Percy Schmeiser, a Saskatchewan canola farmer, crosspollination can be a serious issue. Schmeiser was sued in 1998 by the seed giant Monsanto, after Monsanto found some of their patented canola in his field. He claimed that the pollen was blown in by the wind, but in 2001 he lost the case. In a column by Dan Murphy<sup>11</sup> (which is the only mention of Schmeiser in the above papers), he accuses the farmer of abusing the controversy. According to Murphy, Schmeiser was “lionized” and was not at all opposed to GM foods, “The evidence is that he loved the stuff, just like a lot of other farmers.” Ignoring how irrelevant this is in terms of justice, Murphy also manages to start out with a degrading description of gay bar in Vancouver that held a benefit for Schmeiser: “Mr. T’s Cabaret is a gay, lesbian bi and transgendered bar [...] you get the feeling that you are in a basement of a church gone to seed and its congregation run out of town and its pastor defrocked for installing a hitching post bar. The cabaret has seven formica-topped tables which look like they’re on a lam from a housing project. There are approximately 40 chairs of approximately 39 different types.” Of what relevance to the Schmeiser case is this description? That’s right - why not throw in an anti-gay reference too, anything to please the right wing readership.

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<sup>9</sup> The Edmonton Journal: *Minimal spread found of engineered canola* (June 28, 2002)

<sup>10</sup> The Vancouver Sun: *Public loses food fight*, September 3, 2001

<sup>11</sup> The Vancouver Province: *Your basic, primal, archetypal, David and Goliath kind of thing* (January 27, 2002)

What eventually developed out of the Schmeiser case and the fact that Canadian canola farmers lost the European market (since they cannot guarantee non-GM canola), is that in January 2002, Saskatchewan farmers launched a class action suit against Monsanto and another giant – Aventis. The farmers requested compensation for damages (loss of market) due to crosspollination, and requested that the expected release of GM wheat be delayed. Only three papers<sup>12</sup> (Post, Colonist and Herald) found this case newsworthy – all mentions being brief.

Eight out of the 11 papers<sup>13</sup> published the results of a Leger Marketing poll which found that 78.4% of Canadians did not know what GMO stood for, yet the St John's Telegram printed an editorial that asks for less information, claiming that we are bombarded (and "blinded") by science: "Save us from science. It's just too darned scary, and it's coming at us from all directions."<sup>14</sup>

Public lack of knowledge extends beyond just basic GM information – we know little about what the industry is doing. A good example of this is the secret Monsanto experimentation with GM crops on Prince Edward Island. In March 2001, PEI's Agriculture Minister was informed by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) that a seed/pharmaceutical giant Novartis (now Syngenta Seeds) would be experimenting with GM wheat in the province but the locations of this experiment were not disclosed. In the Charlottetown Guardian the majority of the articles (12 out of 17) discussed the issue but focused in on the blame aspect of this issue. The provincial government, Ag Canada, Health Canada, and to a lesser extent the company itself are alternately blamed. We are comforted by CFIA in that "there [is] little chance of crosspollination and that they continue to monitor the field"<sup>15</sup>. Only one paper outside of the province (Edmonton Journal) reported on the secret GM trials on P.E. I.

The blame game is present in all the papers. Apparently, if we are still unsure of GM food's safety, Health Canada is responsible for our fears. According to The Daily News, Ottawa's poor action plan on GM foods "allows an already skeptical public to believe the worst about GM foods"<sup>16</sup>. Or, according to The Post, it is actually Greenpeace that is responsible for public confusion over GM foods: "Here's how Greenpeace's dual anti-biotech strategy works: First, if you throw enough darts at genetically modified foods, one may eventually stick. Alternatively, the collective effect produced by all false scares may sink the industry"<sup>17</sup> Edmonton Journal quotes a retired University of Alberta professor saying "There is no evidence yet that any transgenic products are in fact harmful to anyone."<sup>18</sup> The paper fails to wonder about the "yet" part of that statement.

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<sup>12</sup> The National Post: *Organic farmers sue biotech firms* (January 11, 2002), Victoria Times Colonist: *Organic farmers sue seed giants* (January 11, 2002) and Calgary Herald: *Organic farmers sue modified canola makers*. (January 11, 2002)

<sup>13</sup> Calgary Herald, National Post, Vancouver Province, Montreal Gazette, Edmonton Journal, St John's Telegram Charlottetown Guardian and Ottawa Citizen, all on July 23, 2001

<sup>14</sup> St John's Telegram: *Blinded by science: can you know too much?* (June 29, 2002)

<sup>15</sup> Charlottetown Guardian: *Hunter River area: GM wheat site remains unknown* (August 9, 2001)

<sup>16</sup> The Halifax Daily News: *Ottawa's GM food plan turns critics' stomachs* (November 27, 2001)

<sup>17</sup> The National Post: *The latest phony biotech scare* (September 1, 2001)

<sup>18</sup> The Edmonton Journal: *Labeling for altered foods urged* (December 16, 2001)

On the other hand, GM discoveries are praised. The papers repetitively glorify the so-called enviro-pigs that are being genetically engineered at the University of Guelph to metabolize differently which will supposedly decrease pollution and stench, and the “naked chicken” which is a featherless version of the bird we know. The list goes on: pork with spinach genes, super-tomatoes full of nutrients, GM salmon, cornflakes that do not go soggy in milk, allergy free peanuts, etc.

Little or nothing is known about possible long-term consequences of consuming such products, however, the press seems enthusiastic about them. Only two papers mention that GM experiments can and have gone haywire. The Calgary Herald and the Vancouver Sun tell the story of a German biotech company’s bacteria experiment at Oregon State University that was nearly disastrous. The bacteria severely altered soil properties killing soil fungus necessary for plants to grow.<sup>19</sup> “More frightening, the genetically modified bacteria persisted in the soil. Had it been released, it could have become virtually impossible to eradicate [...] ‘It could have ended all plant life on this continent’, geneticist David Suzuki says...”

The issue of labeling is frequently visited – as it was in Ottawa during this time. Mandatory labeling was called for and, in November 2001, the federal government rejected it. There are several reasons for this, the main being that had we chosen mandatory labeling, trade with the US would have been jeopardized – south of the border the labels are not even a possibility and are certainly not wanted anywhere else. It seems that pleasing the US once again comes before consumers. We would not want to violate any trade agreements even if the rest of the world finds labels necessary and we have already lost much of the European market. As the Post informs us, the U.S. can take legal action against EU (for refusing GM products)<sup>20</sup> and mandatory labeling comes from countries that don’t produce GM foods and really serves only as a non-tariff trade barrier.<sup>21</sup> (Granted, judging by how trade disputes have played out in recent years to favour corporations, Canada would be likely to lose any potential battle over this issue. Profits of US corporations in a hypothetical GMO case would be more important than our country’s attempt to protect its citizens. In the last several years of the so-called free trade such a scenario has become too familiar.)

The opposition to GM foods is not much favored in the press. Times Colonist describes them as follows: “On the other hand there are people who dismiss food produced using biotechnology as ‘Frankenfood’. This group includes the deep thinkers responsible for shoving a cream pie into the face of Joyce Groote, one of the leading scientists in this field, at a conference in Montreal a couple of years ago.”<sup>22</sup> Anti GM activists are also seen as delaying progress: “Activists continue to fight a well-organized holding action. So long as they do, much of the world and even North America will be denied the

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<sup>19</sup> The Calgary Herald: *Writer deplures scary science* (march 28, 2002) and Vancouver Sun: *Food for thought* (January 7, 2002)

<sup>20</sup> The National Post: *US may fight EU over GM crops* (June 21, 2002)

<sup>21</sup> The National Post: *Engineered for success* (March 14, 2002)

<sup>22</sup> The Victoria Times Colonist: *The mysteries of biotechnology* (December 16, 2001)

wonderful bounties of biotech”<sup>23</sup> . Nothing like a guilt trip to manipulate consumers into accepting GM. Times Colonist also reports on environmentalists’ disappointment in the UN dealings with world hunger. The paper, however doesn’t fail to remind us that using biotechnology can solve the hunger problem.<sup>24</sup> Based on an editorial in the Montreal Gazette: “Beneath the debate in industrial nations over biotechnology foods lies a tragic irony: those who have the most might deny this promising technology to those who need it the most.”<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Zimbabwe, the Post chose to blame president Mutambe for the country’s hunger problem.<sup>26</sup> Mutambe’s responsibility can be debated, but it likely has little to do with his refusal to accept GM grain. What is omitted in these and a number of other articles but is actually noted several times by the Edmonton Journal is that the problem of world hunger is a social justice issue. Food is not lacking on this planet just yet, but is unfairly distributed. Yet, the problem of hunger has been used to promote the GM products. The National Union of Public and General Employees recently announced: “Under the guise of helping millions of starving people the offer of food aid is a part of a 10-year campaign intended to introduce U.S. developed GM crops into Africa.”<sup>27</sup>

Patrick Moore is a former Greenpeace director and the president of Greenspirit (his own self-proclaimed environmental group, with somewhat unclear mandate). His opinion letters were printed in both The Citizen and The Post.<sup>28</sup> The letters trash Greenpeace (as the group has openly campaigned against GM foods) and remind us of all the possible benefits of genetic modification. As the Citizen letter says of Greenpeace: “I also had no idea that after I left in 1986 they would evolve into a band of scientific illiterates who use Gestapo tactics to silence people who wish to express their views in a civilized forum.” Greenpeace’ credibility aside, what other ways do the opponents have to express their views but public protest? And why is protest less civilized than the conniving tactics the industry has used to promote and sell the product?

The Edmonton Journal overall seemed the most cautious about GM foods and gave some room to opposition. They also report on Shiva Vandana’s visit and describe her concern for biodiversity and how it may be endangered by GM technology.<sup>29</sup> Although Vandana warns against the hazards of modification, the story’s focus is more on biopiracy, companies’ practices of taking traditional knowledge (i.e. about medicinal properties of plants), converting it into science (that Vandana calls still crude and primitive) and putting a patent to it only to profit from this. Nevertheless, this story is refreshing in the midst of pro-GM propaganda. There is also a story about Alberta’s Crop Diversification

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<sup>23</sup> The National Post: *‘Frankenfood’ activists failed to scare the public* (June 11, 2002)

<sup>24</sup> The Victoria Times Colonist: *Five years after pledge to cut hunger, not much has changed* (June 10, 2002)

<sup>25</sup> The Montreal Gazette: *World’s poor need biotechnology* (August 28, 2001)

<sup>26</sup> The National Post: *Mutambe withholding food aid* (June 5, 2002)

<sup>27</sup> National Union of Public and General Employees: *NUPGE condemns famine exploitation to sell GM foods* (October 9, 2002) at [www.nupge.ca/news\\_oc02/n09oc02a.htm](http://www.nupge.ca/news_oc02/n09oc02a.htm)

<sup>28</sup> The Ottawa Citizen: *Greenpeace often doesn’t care about truth* (October 24, 2001) and National Post: *Children blinded by Greenpeace* (October 20, 2001)

<sup>29</sup> The Edmonton Journal: *The Second Coming of Columbus* (May 4, 2002)

Center that does research, seed collection and marketing assistance for farmers, and no work whatsoever with genetically modified crops.<sup>30</sup> The Center is portrayed in a very positive light, although the author (Mike Sadava) couldn't help reminding us that the Center's funding mainly comes from the taxpayers' pockets.

Another refreshing story comes from the pages of the Citizen<sup>31</sup> and it is a thorough description of a community in Bangladesh that approaches life in the ways of sustainability and refuses to introduce GM crops. They recognize the dependency on fertilizers and pesticides that comes with it, and prefer to stick to organic farming. As a community member pointed out: "A fertilized plant jumps up fast and falls right over. Our plants are strong and healthy".

In the tradition of profit oriented news, the Post's focus, on the other hand, was on the economic aspects of GM industry. Stock value, market standings, and how wonderfully the industry is growing. According to Powel and Kastner<sup>32</sup> (March 14, 2002), the industry is growing "because the crops work". And if we are to believe a Monsanto chief executive: "People are listening and more people are agreeing with the benefits."<sup>33</sup>

## **Discussion**

Some of the articles have considered the real issue – our safety and the right to know vs. profits of multinational corporations flooding the world market with insufficiently tested GM foods. The majority of articles, however, put emphasis on the lack of public knowledge about the issue; highlighting the "benefits" of genetic engineering applied to food production so as to sell the ultimate GM lie that GM foods will save the world; and identifying anti-GM activists with environmental and special interest groups thus creating a "tree-hugger" image of anti-GM movement, a stereotype which often encourages dismissal.

Virtually all tell us about how wonderful enviro-pigs and naked chickens could be and assure us that GM food is harmless. The fact that Canada is one of the leaders in biotech is also celebrated. Apparently, they all worry about world hunger, forgetting that even in Canada (one of the leaders, remember!), thousands of people are malnourished, and GM foods are not any more accessible to them than non-GM ones.

263 articles were looked at in this study. Yet, these articles were drawn from eleven papers over a period of year. This averages to less than one article per paper every two weeks. Is this enough coverage for such a topic? GM foods are such an important issue on so many levels. Economics, consumer rights, farmers' rights, politics, health, and environment are all a part of this debate. The poll results published by almost all the papers show that the public knows very little about GM foods. What is our press doing to

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<sup>30</sup> The Edmonton Journal: *Not your average garden* (July 9, 2001)

<sup>31</sup> The Ottawa Citizen: *An alternative route to progress* (September 9, 2001)

<sup>32</sup> The National Post: *Engineered for success* (March 14, 2002)

<sup>33</sup> National Post: *Acceptance growing for GM foods* (April 5, 2002)

change this? Not much it seems – they are downplaying the problems, vilifying the opposition and keeping the public out of the debate.

Biotechnology is overwhelmingly praised, repeatedly called “beneficial”, “advantageous”, “wonderful”, “revolutionary”, “having fantastic potential”, and considered a solution for world hunger, better nutritional value and most of all – more profitable. We are constantly reminded that there are no known long-term effects. “No known” does not mean none at all, and the technology has not even been around long enough for us to be talking about long-term consequences. When Thalidomide was first prescribed in the late 1950’s and 1960’s to pregnant women to treat morning sickness, they were all assured that there were no long-term effects of this drug. Dozens of victims of severe birth defects resulting from Thalidomide in Canada, are a painful reminder that “no known long-term effects” is not enough of an assurance.<sup>34</sup> Are the consumers simply going to be guinea pigs, experimental subjects that even pay to be a part of the experiment?

How much do we know? Likely, not enough. We rely on mainstream media to tell what is going on with the world. “The journalistic paradigm defines what biomes part of our secondhand reality received through the news media.<sup>35</sup> Many still assume that *if it was on the news it must be true*. GM experimentation has already had many unwanted consequences. Loss of market is becoming greater every day. As the Post reports: “The European Union has recently banned imports of Canadian honey because Canadian producers cannot guarantee their honey is free of pollen from GM plants not yet approved by the EU.”<sup>36</sup> The Journal suggests that there is no such thing as organic foods anymore<sup>37</sup>, and although this is only to say that buying organic is really no different from buying GM, it remains a scary thought. No Saskatchewan canola is considered GMO free anymore and “escaped rapeseed (or canola) is now Canada’s 18<sup>th</sup> worst weed.”<sup>38</sup>

Opposition, however, is usually called “skeptical”. Not “cautious”, “concerned” or “careful”. They are accused of shaking the public’s trust, promoting unjustified resistance, and, of course, acting savagely. Protesters are always savages in our press, so this should come as no surprise. There is no doubt that we should be cautious, we truly do not know what kind of a disaster we can create through biotechnology. When back in the 1970’s a researcher at Stanford University decided to put genes from a monkey virus into E-coli bacteria Dr Pollack from Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island “was horrified. The virus she planned to use contained genes that could cause cancer in rodents, he reminded her. Strains of E-coli live in human intestines. What if the viral genes created a cancer causing microbe that could spread from person to person – the way unmodified E-coli can.”<sup>39</sup> Fortunately, the experiment failed, but the threat remains.

What truly is confusing is that the supposed benefits are really not worth taking such risks. So why is it that we find our press so supportive of GM industry?

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<sup>34</sup> For more information see Thalidomide Victims Association of Canada’s website <http://www.thalidomide.ca/en/index.html>

<sup>35</sup> Reese, S.D. in Berkowitz (ed.): *Social Meaning of News* Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage, 1997)

<sup>36</sup> The National Post: *Genetic threats blowing in the wind* (June 7, 2002)

<sup>37</sup> The Edmonton Journal: *The rush for organic* (February 27, 2002)

<sup>38</sup> The Montreal Gazette: *Trouble down on the farm* (August 23, 2001)

<sup>39</sup> The New York Times: *Biotechnology food* (January 25, 2001)

As mentioned earlier, these major papers are members of the corporate family. They are consistently used to promote corporate interests. According to Hall: “the media’s main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies.”<sup>40</sup> Promoting their own interest under the guise of informing the public is therefore to be expected. As Cromwell points out: “corporate ownership of the media can – and does – shape editorial content. The sheer size, concentrated ownership, immense owner wealth and, and profit-seeking imperative of the dominant media corporations could hardly yield any other result.”<sup>41</sup> The fact that the papers analyzed in this study are major city dailies is also important. Beyond the financial powers of the ownership “we [...] find that access to specific forms of discourse, e.g. those of politics, *the media* or science, is itself a power resource.”<sup>42</sup> (italics added) Hence, promoting the industry in these dailies likely significantly affects the public opinion on the issue.

What we find in these articles is that the accountability and responsibility to consumers is shifted away from the GM giants and laid on the government. This is not to say that our government should not be held responsible, but the government itself has little to gain – dealing with regulations, labeling and public concern is only extra work and extra expense. Corporations, nonetheless, can and do gain from biotechnology, and as the Precautionary Principle calls for, should be cautious and liable. The 11 Canadian papers would disagree and leave us under the impression that if anything gets out of hand it is the government’s fault.

## Conclusion

Although many of the articles analyzed do acknowledge the magnitude of public concern, they mostly deny that this concern is justified. Canadian press (yet again) seems to be more interested in facilitating corporate interests than informing the public. What was beyond the scope of this study, but nevertheless would be of interest is looking into how press tycoons could benefit from promoting GM foods. Are their investments related to the food industry? Are their ties to the industry’s magnates a possible explanation? Or are they simply defending free market principles?

The GM debate is portrayed as a political issue not having much to do with our health or our rights for that matter. Politicizing such issues leaves the public in the position of a spectator - with a sense of helplessness and the impression that any developments are beyond our control.

As we are becoming more aware of the irreparable damage we inflict on the environment, many are trying to find ways to change this. Supposedly, we are attempting to move towards more sustainable practices. Even the United Nations Organization has somewhat participated in this (for example, the Rio+10 Sustainability Summit earlier this year), some corporations are starting to implement environmentally sound programs, and many

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<sup>40</sup> Hall, S. in Dives and Humez (eds.): *Gender, Race and Class in Media* (Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage, 1995)

<sup>41</sup> Cromwell, D.: *Spotlight on the media* (John Carpenter Publishing, UK) at [www.private-planet.com](http://www.private-planet.com)

<sup>42</sup> van Dijk, T.A.: *Critical Discourse Analysis* (at [www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm](http://www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm))

organizations are promoting more conscious individual lifestyles. Unfortunately, a lot of it seems to be just “greenwash”, actions that keep environmentalists quiet while maintaining the economic status quo. Worse yet, our newspapers do not even do this. Canadian press does not try to tell us that wrong will be corrected. They tell us that there are no wrongs with the GM food industry and there is really no need to worry. What is omitted is that there appear to be no benefits to consumers whatsoever. Whereas pharmaceutical discoveries can be exciting, in food production genetic modification simply does not seem necessary. Traditional ways of producing food are more than sufficient to feed the world. The only thing that consumers get from GM foods is the potential and unknown risk. The industry falls short of benefiting farmers as well. We know now how catastrophic chemical practices (pesticides and artificial fertilizers) have been to soil quality in the last several decades, the damages outweighed the benefits. Beyond this long term risk, it seems that GM products fail to provide even short term gains to Canadian farmers (see Soil Association study on pg 7).

The only ones gaining seem to be the corporations who invent, patent, produce and sell GM food products (grains, livestock, necessary chemicals). It is in their interest to downplay the dangers and exaggerate the benefits, and our newspapers are doing just that.

## **Appendix 1: Independent Science Panel on GM Final Report Released June 15, 2003**

Only months after I finished writing this paper a major report on genetic modification was produced by the Independent Science Panel. This Panel was formed when 25 scientists from seven countries came together early in 2003 with the intention to assess GMOs, mainly GM crops. These 25 scientist brought their expertise from a variety of disciplines such as agroecology, agronomy, biomathematics, botany, chemical medicine, ecology, histopathology, microbial ecology, molecular genetics, nutritional biochemistry, physiology, toxicology and virology. In June of 2003, they delivered a 136-page report that was scathing to the industry to say the least.

Some of the highlights of this report included findings such as:

- no increase in yields or significant reduction in herbicide and pesticide use
- massive crop failures
- extensive transgenic contamination
- there can be no co-existence of GM and non-GM crops
- GM crops have not been proven safe - crops engineered with ‘suicide’ genes for male sterility, promoted as a means of preventing the spread of transgenes, actually spread both male sterility and herbicide tolerance traits via pollen; Glufosinate ammonium and glyphosate, used with herbicide tolerant GM crops that currently account for 75% of all GM crops worldwide, are both systemic metabolic poisons; the most insidious dangers of genetic engineering are inherent to the process; it greatly
- enhances the scope and probability of horizontal gene transfer and recombination, the main route to creating viruses and bacteria that cause disease epidemics
- possible risks of infections and cancer associated with transgenic DNA

The Panel stated that: “In conclusion, GM crops have failed to deliver the promised benefits and are posing escalating problems on the farm. Transgenic contamination is now widely acknowledged to be unavoidable, and hence there can be no co-existence of GM and non-GM agriculture. Most important of all, GM crops have not been proven safe. On the contrary, sufficient evidence has emerged to raise serious safety concerns, that if ignored could result in irreversible damage to health and the environment. GM crops should therefore be firmly rejected now. “\*

Additionally, the Panel contrasted their findings with the advantages of sustainable agriculture, including increased yields (especially in the “Third World”), improved soil and environmental conditions, decreased pesticide use, support for biodiversity, and more. “Sustainable agricultural practices have proven beneficial in all aspects relevant to health and the environment. In addition, they bring food security and social and cultural

well being to local communities everywhere. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive global shift to all forms of sustainable agriculture.”\*

(The complete report as well as a brief summary are available for download at <http://www.indsp.org>).

This report appears to be one of the most significant documents on GM crops in recent years; yet, mainstream media completely ignored it. My numerous searches turned up references to this Report only in alternative media. Southam Papers made no mention of the Report whatsoever. This, once again, confirmed my suspicions that Southam Papers support GM industry, and treat GM opponents as irrelevant. Such information seems crucial for our safety, health, economy and especially agriculture. Southam Papers apparently didn't find it worth reporting on.

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\* Quoted from “The Case for GM-free Sustainable World” report by the Independent Science Panel, available on-line at <http://www.indsp.org/>, accessed December 2003.