

GMO debate entrenched in 1980s narrative of ‘synthetic monsters’ and ‘mad scientists’ in Hazmat suits

I’ve explored the genesis and amplification of varied media narratives, from Jared Diamond’s collapse meme and Paul Brodeur’s power lines/cancer connection reportage to Vandana Shiva’s GMO/Indian farmer suicide storyline.

One interesting pattern, as these cases suggest, is that sometimes the emergence and staying power of a particular narrative owes to an influential science writer, well-placed journalist, or popular activist. In other cases, a narrative coalesces around a stock villain, such as Monsanto as the great Satan, or a phrase like the “new normal,” a term that associates severe weather events with man-made climate change.

Let’s revisit a chapter from Dorothy Nelkin’s classic 1987 book, *Selling Science: How the Press Covers Science and Technology*. She discusses the early coverage of GMOs in the 1980s:

Opposition to the bioengineered Flavr Savr tomato gained substantial media attention—as much it seemed, on account of its irresistible potential for puns as for real evidence of risk. The genetically engineered tomato, introduced by the biotechnology firm Calgene in late 1991, was initially welcomed in the press as a fruit that would not rot on the way to the market. The product generated media stories on the “wonders” of high-tech foods—leaner meat, celery sticks without strings, crisper and sweeter vegetables—and the press supported Calgene’s effort to classify its product as a food rather than a drug that would be subject to FDA regulations. But then, as critics of biotechnology moved in, skepticism became fashionable, and journalists began to write about the tomato as a “ Frankenfood,” a “killer tomato.” There was a “tomato war” and a “tomatogate.” The idea of injecting mouse genes into food, the spectacle of chefs boycotting a tomato, the concern about “safe soup,” attracted reporters who covered this product as an example of the risks that were bound to emerge from biotechnology.

Nelkin goes on to note that the images pervading media coverage of biotechnology became “remarkably similar to those that had been projected during the nuclear power controversy—the synthetic monsters, the mutant animals, the mad scientists, and an industry out of control.”

It is hard to undo a narrative once it becomes entrenched.

Read the full, original article: [The Entrenched GMO Narrative](#)