

Portrayal of Vandana Shiva as ‘credible’ spokesperson for GMO labeling crusade promotes anti-science ‘false balance’

Writing in Knight Science Journalism Tracker, Faye Flam [puts in perspective](#) the emerging debate over how New Yorker reporter Michael Specter portrayed popular anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva in his recent profile, [Seeds of Doubt](#). Anti-GMO activists have been critical of his story, but no science minded journalists have come to her defense.

... Specter gives a textbook lesson in how to write about someone who is misguided in some science-related arena without succumbing to the perils of false-balance. The story ... is a good counter example to a major feature that ran recently in the Dallas Morning News. That story, Dallas researchers out to scientifically prove biblical version of creation, has already been criticized for false balance, naïve reporting and for allowing creationists to make unchallenged claims. My Tracker colleague Paul Raeburn discussed that piece [here](#). Another criticism appeared here in io9.

The negative fallout from the creationist profile should not discourage anyone from profiling subjects who spout nonsense, illogic, or pseudoscience. There is a right way to profile people who are wrong. Specter’s enlightening piece illustrates how it can be done.

Contrast Flam’s take with the spin on Specter’s piece by food activist [Marion Nestle](#) in her Food Politics blog. Nestle is a long time critic of GMOs, appearing side-by-side at events with anti-science activists such as Jeffrey Smith. Yet she occasionally acknowledges the science: every major independent science organization in the world has issued statements supporting the safety of GMO foods. And she did view with [skepticism](#) the research by French scientist Gilles-Erich Seralini, whose flamboyantly promoted paper supposedly documenting the health hazards of GMO corn was eventually [retracted](#) and republished without peer review in a pay for play journal.

But in this case, she is misguided. Rather than acknowledging Specter’s (and Flam’s) central point—misrepresenting basic facts about the science of crop biotechnology is not only misleading but potentially catastrophic from a global food perspective—she turns the issue into a discussion of post-modernist views of social justice.

[T]he gist of the [opposing] arguments comes from two apparently irreconcilable views of GMO foods:

1. **The “science-based” position:** If GMOs are safe (which they demonstrably are), there can be no rational reason to oppose them.
2. **The “societal value-based” position:** Even if GMOs are safe (and this is debatable), there are still plenty of other reasons to oppose them.

Those who hold the “science-based” position would do well to take societal values more seriously. Seed patents, monoculture, weed resistance, and other such concerns trouble people who care about food systems that promote health, protect the environment, and provide social justice.

Labeling, right from the start, would have acknowledged the importance of such values. Until GMO foods are labeled as such, the same arguments are likely to go on endlessly, with no reconciliation in sight.

Nestle misses the mark entirely. No scientist or journalist writing about genetic engineering ignores the issue of what our food system should look like. That’s just arrogance on her part to assume that scientists and journalists who take empirical data seriously are less attuned to the plight of the poor than professional activists.

The issue is not just “acknowledging” the values of ‘social justice’; it’s actually acting on them. Nestle appears to see the debate as a mere scrum between two equally legitimate points of view. That’s false balance. Crop biotechnology offers solutions, imperfect as they may be. It provides added tools in the agricultural toolshed, which she is determined to lock and throw away the key. As Specter [notes](#) in one of many examples scattered through his piece, as Shiva globe hops bemoaning the problems of inequality, she actively lobbies against advance after advance that could help desperate farmers and the poor.

For years, in Tanzania, a disease called brown-streak virus has attacked cassava, a critical source of carbohydrates in the region. Researchers have developed a virus-resistant version of the starchy root vegetable, which is now being tested in field trials. But, again, the opposition, led in part by Shiva, who visited this summer, has been strong.

As Flam observes, journalists do no service to the public by presenting paper Ghandi’s such as Shiva (she may indeed believe her own misleading propaganda, but that does not mean the rest of us have to ignore facts) as legitimate spokespeople for a point of view.

Scientists often get upset when we reporters talk to creationists, pseudoscientists, UFO nuts, climate change deniers or various conspiracy theorists. The scientists have a point, since more often than not the resulting story gives a free ride to the flakes and their falsehoods. But that doesn’t have to be the case. Characters promoting irrational beliefs are part of our reality and a story may not be complete without them. Shiva is a major figure in the drama swirling around transgenic organisms. She belongs in Specter’s story. If a writer does enough digging,

approaches the subject critically and writes carefully, the truth will emerge.