Rethinking “pro-GMO” and “anti-GMO” labels

After watching the National Research Council’s recent webinar on Social Science Research on GE Crop Adoption and Acceptance, I am puzzled and disappointed by the criticism of it in GLP’s follow-story by Amber Sherwood, “*Anti-GMO sociologists mute attacks on biotech, urge greater sensitivity to cultural impacts*”. If nothing else, labelling the social science experts as “anti-GMO” underscored the event’s collective argument that we are in need of including sensitivity to culture in the repertoire of science. Perhaps we should be taking these experts’ feedback as constructive criticism, not attacks.

It’s important to first note the conclusions from each speaker’s presentations.

Mary Hendrickson, assistant professor of rural sociology from the University of Missouri concluded that it is not just science’s capabilities, but also social, economic, and political structures that shape the adoption of any technology; as a result, knowledge of actual farmer practice and of the farming systems in which they are embedded is critical to understanding a technology’s impacts. For example, Hendrickson said that patent protection in the United States is a significant barrier to entry. We need to re-think such a system to allow for more public work on GE based on an understanding of real farmer needs.

For Dalhousie University Associate Professor Matthew Schnurr, “context matters!” It is undeniable that in cases like the matoke banana in Uganda (the focus of his extensive academic research), there are biotechnologies able to accomplish successes not possible in conventional breeding. However, as Schnurr points out, values and preferences, including those towards local varieties and colors, very much matter. If scientists and/or NGOs fail to take such ideas into consideration, it can result in lack of acceptance by farmers or consumers.

Associate Professor Abby Kinchy of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Science and Technology Studies department, where I am a student, highlighted the fact that current modes of “science-based” decision-making and governance fail to account for these cultural and economic contexts, often forcing critics to seek alternative venues for defending their voice, including disruptive protests and legal actions. Such a system often stifles discussion, instead of encouraging it.

We don’t need to necessarily agree with these scholars on the nuances of some of these conversations, but it’s difficult to disagree with a single one of these above conclusions if we—the scientific community—are willing to be self-reflexive about our own work.

Maybe it is possible for one to remain critical of corporate culture, of regulatory issues, of consumer choice and ownership issues, etc., without risking being ignorantly labeled as ‘anti-science’ or ‘Luddite?’ If we require everyone who supports biotechnology to abide by this impossible standard we are setting ourselves as “pro-science” and “pro-GMO,” we will quickly lose support for our own causes, and even worse, our credibility.

As advocates for this technology, I’m unsettled by our collective inability to be critical thinkers. Since when does “expressing reservations about the use or potential misuse of the technology,” as make one “anti-

GMO”? Labeling someone anti-GMO simply because we do not like what she has to say is part of the problem; it is the easy way out of a discussion, and is in no way productively influencing the conversation.

By the framing laid out in the GLP article, I might be considered “anti-GMO”. If you know me, or know what I stand for, the problem here will become a bit more obvious if it wasn’t already.

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Amber Sherwood responds:

I don’t believe and nor did I write that any of these speakers attacked GMOs in their presentations. Rather, they were giving their input from a social science perspective, as stated in the article. I referred to them as anti-GMO based on previous statements, which have been very critical of crop biotechnology–indeed their comments often reflect the ‘talking points’ of virulent GMO opponents. They struck a different tone at these hearings, which is constructive, but their past statements are readily accessible.

I appreciate their efforts to bridge science and society, and find it necessary in fact; they are trying to highlight the need to merge science with cultural factors. My most pointed criticism was the clear misrepresentation of data in one talk and a lack of focus on the problems that GE crops are meant to solve. Cultural issues are important, but they are not the only issues at hand and we can’t ignore inconvenient truths if they don’t fit our narrative. I certainly did not, nor would I ever, refer to these sociologists as “Luddites” or anti-science, as you suggested.

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