

Genetically Modified Foods and Consumer Mobilization in the UK

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In the late 1990s “the consumer” became the key constituency in the struggle over genetically modified foods in the United Kingdom. Consumers were represented and mobilized in a variety of strategies of commercialisation and opposition. This article traces one of the genealogies of this process: the effort of the British food industry to produce an accurate image of the consumer of biotechnology foods, and to enlist that image in a successful marketing strategy for GM products. A comprehensive labelling policy was seen as the key to addressing consumer demands and anxieties, but this strategy soon faltered, as companies abandoned the use of transgenic ingredients under pressure from anti-GM campaigners. The article draws attention to the particular epistemologies of the consumer that are produced in the course of disputes over new technologies, and interrogates the emphasis on information and choice as the fundamental elements of a proper “consumer understanding.”

On 27 March 1999, four members of the “genetiX snowball” campaign walked calmly into a Tesco supermarket in London, and “confiscated” foods allegedly containing genetically modified ingredients. When the “snowballers” refused to pay for the foods they had seized – offering to exchange them for organic products instead – they were briefly arrested by the police. One of the activists stated the reason for their action as follows: “Tesco’s are breaking the law by selling food which is not proven to be safe and which is endangering other farmers’ crops in the production process through genetic pollution. I intend to carry on decontaminating supermarkets and I hope others will join in”.¹

GenetiX snowball was a small group formed in the late 1990s by a small number of environmental activists with roots in the peace movement of the previous decade. It initiated its campaign against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the summer of 1998, with

the uprooting of a few dozen plants at the Model Farm that the American biotechnology firm Monsanto owned in Watlington, Oxfordshire. That action resembled many others then taking place against genetically modified crops throughout Britain.² The marked difference between this initial action of “non-violent civil responsibility” and the supermarket decontamination exercise in London less than a year later illustrates an important shift in the tactics of mobilization and protest against the release of transgenic organisms in the United Kingdom. What had begun as a campaign targeting experimental farms and test fields where GM crops were being introduced into the local environment, morphed into an effort to pressure food manufacturers and retailers to abandon the use of genetically modified ingredients and thereby affect the international political economy of agricultural biotechnology. The locus of resistance moved progressively from the country to the city, the farm to the supermarket, and the decontamination of fields to the confiscation of contaminated foods. The change, in the case of genetiX snowball, reflected an ongoing discussion of consumption- versus production-oriented tactics among its members. “So far, genetiX snowball has focused on the production end of GM food – the GM crops in our fields,” a member pointed out in a posting on the group’s website. “But is it really enough to keep the genetic peril from our own field whilst it is being imported from fields in other countries? We also need to pay attention to the consumer end of things – the GM products in our supermarkets”.³

Ultimately, the supermarket was chosen as the location where direct action could meet the international diffusion of genetically modified foods, and certainly the “consumer end of things” became in the late 1990s the central arena in the struggle over the new technology in the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe. If anything, the “snowballers” were rather late in joining a general trend away from traditional forms of environmental activism, and towards the mobilization of consumers at the point of purchase. Large environmental groups had decided to frame the issue primarily in terms of “consumer rights.” Friends of the Earth described the introduction of genetically modified foods in the United Kingdom as “a crime against

consumer choice,” and initiated in 1998 their *Supermarket Challenge* campaign, while Greenpeace published the popular “supermarket shoppers’ guide” to help consumers avoid products containing GM ingredients, and routinely staged protests in front of retailers and manufacturers. Throughout 1998 and 1999 several British newspapers carried regular sections advising readers on how to avoid consuming GM foods, and offered purchasing tips in the style and format of other consumer information campaigns.⁴

The result of this multifaceted campaign was swift and extraordinarily successful. By the spring of 1999, all major UK supermarket chains and food manufacturers had made promises to eliminate genetically modified ingredients from their shelves and products. So effective were the “supermarket challenge” campaigns that, by the time the snowballers carried their decontamination action in London, only two food retail chains – Tesco and Safeway – were still refusing to phase out GM food and ingredients.⁵ The importance of the action of the four “snowballers” in the London supermarket lies less in its novelty or originality, and more in what it says about the trajectory of action of the British environmental movement in its opposition to genetically modified organisms. If a group so deeply embedded in the traditions and tactics of the ecology and peace movement could stage their “decontamination” actions in a supermarket, it was clear that the terrain of the struggle had changed decisively, and that “the consumer end of things” had indeed become the vital arena of action.

1 Tracing the genealogies of consumer mobilizations

We must ask how the consumer emerged as the key constituency in the GM food debate, and what kind of consumer was mobilized in the disputes over food biotechnology. It is perhaps difficult to retrieve the problematic centrality of consumer rights and interests, now that “consumer choice” has become an incontrovertible axiom in the policy and politics of genetically modified organisms. The right of consumers to choose is a political truism – the kind of unsailable cliché that fills the speeches of government officials, corporate CEOs and activists alike. However, we need to recuperate some of

the strangeness that this idea should evoke, and to trace its particular genealogy in the debates over GM foods. Not that long ago, Raymond Williams found the very idea of “consumer choice” paradoxical. It was a “curious phrase,” he argued, because historically the term ‘consumer’ is a product of the age of mass production and of increased corporate control over the market. Contrary to the traditional concept of ‘customer,’ which used to denote a personalized and regular relationship between a buyer and a seller, the ‘consumer’ was by definition an abstract actor, who operated in an abstract market over whose internal functioning he had very little knowledge or control. “Consumer choice” is in this sense a paradoxical slogan, for it brings together elements that are historically divergent. The emergence of the notion of “the consumer” went hand in hand with the individual’s loss of actual control over market forces and exchanges (Williams [1976] 1983, p. 78-9).

I use the term “consumer mobilization” to describe the process of developing a particular image of “the consumer” and inserting it into the strategies of market actors. I borrow the expression from Miller and Rose’s study of psychological knowledge in the advertisement industry of the 1950s. Mobilization is a process of producing knowledge about and making statements on behalf of a certain public, thereby linking it to other actors’ strategies. This is, Miller and Rose argue, “less a matter of dominating or manipulating consumers than of ‘mobilizing’ them by forming connections between human passions, hopes and anxieties, and very specific features of goods enmeshed in particular consumption practices” (Miller, Rose 1997, pp. 1-36). If the actor entitled to “consumer choice” is construed as an abstract entity, and positioned vis-à-vis abstracted market forces, the process of “consumer mobilization” is a concrete practice of inserting particular understandings of consumer motivation and behaviour into market strategies.

The following sections will address one example of such mobilization. Rather than focusing on the tactics of “consumer power” used by the “snowballers” and others to oppose the introduction of GM foods, I would like to consider the other side of the coin: the articulation and enlistment of a particular understanding of the consumer in the marketing strategies

of the British food industry. This genealogy of consumer mobilization has been relatively neglected, which is surprising given that the food industry tried to develop an operational view of the consumer of GM foods even before biotechnology became a “public issue” in the late 1990s. The industry deployed for this purpose a variety of consumer research tools – surveys, focus groups, and “stakeholder consultations” – to develop a coherent commercialization strategy for GM foods. The purpose was to find the “path of least resistance” to the British consumer, to preempt as far as possible a damaging public controversy, and to articulate a “food chain” approach, or a single industry strategy towards the marketing of GM foods.

As demonstrated below, the image of the consumer that the industry developed is not radically different from the constituency that would later be mobilized by the likes of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. In both cases the discourses centered on the right of consumers to know, and the responsibility of companies to provide them with informed choice. Yet, while the industry hoped that these principles would allay consumer fears and gain acceptance for the new technology, in the hands of activists they became the battle cry of an increasingly unruly constituency.

2 Producing “Consumer Understanding” for the Food Industry

It would be easy to infer from the industry’s rapid retreat in the face of the anti-GMO mobilization that the arrival of GM foods, and the responses generated in the British public, took the industry unprepared. Nothing could be farther from the truth. From the early 1990s strenuous efforts had been made by the industry to predict the likely consumer response to food biotechnology, and to develop a coherent strategy of commercialization for the food sector as a whole. The possibility of serious consumer opposition to GM foods was always present in the minds of leading industry executives, who had experienced, throughout the 1990s, a series of “food safety scares” culminating in the BSE crisis in 1996. Drawing from these experiences, the industry tried to find the antidote to a crisis of consumer confidence and

to plan well ahead of the arrival of GM products into the British market.

Two elements were central to this planning: a process of consultation among key companies, and a program of consumer research designed to map out the anxieties, fears and desires of the future consumer of GM foods. Both elements were centralized at the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD), the research arm of the largest UK retailers and manufacturers. It was the IGD Policy Issues Council who, in 1994, began to address the issue of food biotechnology and created a Biotechnology Advisory Working Group encompassing the largest retailers, key international manufacturers (i.e. Unilever, Nestlé), a British biotechnology company (Zeneca), and interested stakeholders (i.e. the National Farmers Union, the Consumers’ Union). The goal was to develop an understanding of “consumer attitudes and consumer requirements” which would help identify both a “strategy for the introduction of products of biotechnology in order of consumer acceptance,” and the “retailers and manufacturers with the customer profile most likely to accept the new technology” (Brown 1994, p. 72).

At the time, the view put forward by IGD consumer researchers was already dominated by the perception that “consumer confidence in the food industry has been rocked,” and that consumers were proving to be “far more aware and less trusting of developments in food production” than the industry had thought (*ibid.*, p.v.). Given the general lack of trust, and a concern with avoiding the mistakes of the recent past, the industry focused on accurately anticipating and addressing the possible consumer pitfalls of GM foods:

We have learnt from our experience with food irradiation that consumers will not accept new technology without sufficient information and time to evaluate the new technology. In order to meet consumer requirements for information on biotechnology and to ensure that food products of biotechnology are introduced appropriately it is essential to fully understand consumer awareness, understanding and acceptance of biotechnology (*ibid.*, p. 33).

On the basis of these preliminary views, the Working Group issued its first public statement on biotechnology in October of 1995. The dec-

laration did not include specific commitments, but it did introduce some key terms that would dominate the industry's discourse throughout the 1990s:

As an industry we are committed to a policy of openness and facilitating understanding as a means of addressing any concerns about the new technology. We believe that the provision of information is essential to enable customers to make an informed choice about food products. The industry will endeavour to make information available in the most effective manner to give an objective and balanced view of genetic modification (IGD/PIC Biotechnology Advisory Working Group, October 1995).

Terms like “openness” (or later, “transparency”), “understanding,” and, more crucially, “informed choice” would dominate future public statements on food biotechnology. Labeling, though not explicitly mentioned in the statement, was the central issue under discussion. The absence of a clear position on this issue was indicative of the uncertainty about the position of North American producers of agricultural commodities on the segregation of GM crops, and of the divisions that this uncertainty generated among different sectors of the food industry. Supermarkets were keen to make a comprehensive commitment to labeling, but the large manufacturers were skeptical of its feasibility. The main opposition to labeling, however, came from companies and sectors not represented in the IGD working group – biotechnology firms selling transgenic seeds to North American farmers, and international providers of raw materials and food and feed ingredients.

Partly to bridge the differences within the industry, the IGD initiated its consumer research program. Between 1994 and 1997 this generated an increasingly consistent image of consumer attitudes and behavior, particularly on consumers' opinions on labeling. According to the reports of the IGD, consumer attitudes to GM foods were characterized by a low level of awareness of the issues at hand, combined with a very strong desire for adequate “information.” The consumers interviewed in the focus groups seemed fundamentally ambivalent about the risks and benefits of the new technology, but decisive and demanding as far as their right

to proper information was concerned. “There was,” an IGD report points out, “little unprompted mention of the process and when asked about genetic modification the participants expressed no knowledge.” Yet, as soon as the researchers provided “a simple explanation of the technology,” the participants in the focus groups began to express tangible views on the issue. On the crucial issue of labeling, the IGD's research subjects offered a clear heuristic of labeling and trust:

Product labelling was seen as an essential route to providing information. (...) If information was not made available consumers would presume that the industry had something to hide. On the other hand, if industry was perceived to be open and honest about genetic modification, this conveyed industry confidence in the technology and this would be conveyed to the consumer (Sadler, 2000, p. 147).⁶

On the basis of this interpretation, the IGD began to formulate a more precise position, specifying the kinds of information that would satisfy the consumers' demands. Of all the products containing or consisting of GMOs, which ones should be labeled, and how? The evidence produced in the focus groups suggested that “the important issue for consumers would be the presence of *modified genetic material*, a novel entity that would be perceived to present a potential risk.... Consumers would be unable to differentiate between genetic material that is viable (intact; active) and non-viable (degraded through processing; inactive)” (Sadler 2000, p. 45). This suggested a labeling regime based on the ability of the food provider to *know* whether transgenic material had at any point been involved in the manufacture of the product. The consumers represented by the IGD thought that “product labeling is independent of the concentration or format of GM ingredients; if the company knows an ingredient from a GM crop is present, however small, then the product should be labeled” (ibid., p. 180).

It was at this time, a couple of years into the launch of the IGD Biotechnology Initiative, that the food industry achieved its first, and groundbreaking success in the commercialization of GM foods, a success that helped solidify the emerging views on the link between labels and consumer acceptance. The product in question was a tomato purée derived from a

genetically modified tomato developed by the British firm Zeneca. In 1996, two supermarket chains – Sainsbury's and Safeway – agreed to commercialize cans of the tomato purée under their own labels. The cans, sold at a comparatively cheaper price than conventional alternatives, were clearly labeled as “produced from genetically modified tomato.” Following the premise that “the more publicity the better,” the launch included an intense media campaign (see Harvey 1999).⁷ Sainsbury's and Safeway sold 1.6 million cans of the genetically modified tomato purée.

It is now easy to forget that the first experience of the British food industry with a GM product was, by their own standards, highly successful. Consumers seemed perfectly happy to purchase a genetically modified food, provided it offered some direct benefit (in this case, a better price) and was clearly labeled. To many in the food industry, this represented the validation of a theory of consumer behavior that linked the acceptance of food biotechnology to the provision of clear and unambiguous labels and information. Nigel Poole, who was then group manager for external and regulatory affairs at Zeneca, emphasized the exemplarity of the tomato purée case in testimony to the House of Lords. “Listening” to social concerns and providing consumers with “choice,” he argued, were the key to the successful marketing of a GM product:

You need many other things to come together, not just to bring the product out but to make a commercial success. The stakeholders are an essential part of that. When we started the launch of the tomatoes we communicated – and, I want to emphasize, we listened to – many different parts of society from the media to civil servants, to Members of Parliament, Lords, members of the European Parliament, local people and consumers. We tried our best to build their thinking and their thoughts into the way we behaved. When we came forward we thought this would be the first such product in Europe. It is easy for us: it is our culture, but we wanted to make sure that there was choice. That was never a question. The reason we labelled our tomato puree was not for safety reasons at all. It was simply because we wanted to give information to the consumer.⁸

Soon after the launch of the tomato purée, the IGD Policy Issues Council issued in March 1997 its final recommendations on the labeling of genetically modified products. Ross Buckland, then president of the IGD, urged the food industry to adopt the regulations in order to “demonstrate a positive commitment to consumer understanding and choice”.⁹

“As we have seen with food irradiation,” the guidelines document reminded its readers, “new technologies are not always readily accepted by consumer. The provision of freely available, objective information and, where practicable, informed choice are key to the successes of these products” (IGD 1997, p. 18). To meet the demand for information, the guidelines proposed labeling criteria that were stricter and more inclusive than the rules of the European Novel Foods Regulation. They called for the labeling of *any* foods “known to contain modified genetic material, whether active or not” (ibid. pp. 7-19),¹⁰ which, for the first time, made labeling independent of whether the new products were substantially different from their conventional counterparts. The IGD recommended labeling even of foods where the modified DNA or protein was no longer “intact,” on the basis, once again, of the consumer's alleged inability to appreciate the distinction between different types or degrees of modification.

The inclusiveness of these labeling criteria corresponded to a very particular understanding of the relationship between consumer confidence and the inscription of information in food products. In the thinking of the IGD, labeling was first and foremost a marketing instrument. Labels were expected to provide consumers with choice, but also to generate a familiarity with products that might otherwise generate suspicion. Rather than a warning sign, the industry hoped, labels could be a way of earning the confidence of the public. “When purchasing products for consumption at home,” Michele Sadler, consumer preferences manager at the IGD argued, “consumers wanted products to be labelled as this conferred that the food producers had nothing to hide about use of biotechnology” (Sadler 1998, pp: 306-309). This position resonated with the corporate philosophy of several major players in the UK food industry, particularly retailers trying to build a brand identity around their ability to “listen to the consumer.”

Enshrining consumer choice as the key to success was appealing to retailers and other industry sectors who, at this stage, had no direct investment in the success biotechnology, and who would very likely be able to shift the technical burdens and labeling to their suppliers.

3 Market Failure

It is well known how the story developed after this. Soon after the food industry announced the new labeling guidelines, what had been a planned concerted strategy towards the managed introduction of GM foods turned, under increasing consumer pressure, into a series of individual and uncoordinated avoidance actions, as company after company tried to limit the impact of the controversy on their brands by promising to eliminate GM ingredients from their products. By the spring of 1999 the GMO issue had become, according to the industry's own polls, the main "food safety concern" of British consumers, surpassing pesticides, food poisoning, or even BSE. Supermarkets began to offer "GMO-free" products, thereby violating the IGD guidelines, which had urged that "under no circumstances should negative claims, such as 'free from genetically modified [ingredient]' or 'contains no genetically modified [ingredient],' be used." Iceland, a medium-size retailer that had not participated in the IGD initiative, was the first to publicize its products as "containing no GMOs," but very soon all the major supermarket chains, as well as the largest food manufacturers, announced similar policies of avoidance. By the spring of 1999, following the decision of Tesco and Unilever to cave in to the anti-GM campaign, *The Independent of London* could publish a triumphant paean to the power of consumer mobilization:

What a good week this has been for those who believe in the power of the consumer. Nothing, we had been told, was to stand in the way of the progress that was genetically modified food; only Luddites and hysterics, we were led to understand, had doubts about health implications; why wait for further testing, said those who know better, when the technology was available now? The consumers didn't accept any of this, and made it clear that they wanted more information before buying new foods. One by one the supermarkets, which had started selling geneti-

cally modified products without so much as a blush, began to change their tune.¹¹

Despite strenuous attempts to anticipate the reactions and anxieties of the virtual consumer of GM foods, the particular form that consumer mobilization took in the late 1990s seemed to take the IGD by surprise. Suddenly, the consumer appeared as an unruly constituency. Several culprits for the failure of the industry's consumer management efforts were readily at hand. The media was blamed for its sensationalistic coverage of the GMO issue, which replaced the consumer's legitimate demand for "meaningful" information with irrational fear. On the other hand, the introduction of unsegregated transgenic soybeans and maize from North America had made the labeling recommendations largely unfeasible. Since companies had no way of knowing whether the ingredients of their products were conventional or modified, but had reason to assume that a majority of their products would contain at the very least traces of transgenic organisms, the strict application of the IGD guidelines would lead to the labeling of all food products. The culprit in this case was also easy to identify: the American company Monsanto, which had failed to heed the warning of the British food industry and had refused to segregate genetically modified crops from conventional commodity streams. The uncontrolled introduction of Monsanto's soybeans violated all the axioms of the IGD's understanding of a successful commercialization strategy, which rested on careful management and piecemeal introduction of products. As an IGD review of the events of the late 1990s argued:

The inclusion of a GM soya variety in the commodity stream was in contrast to the UK industry's desired approach to introducing GM products. GM soya had no direct consumer benefit, and without segregation, consumers would not easily be able to exercise choice. With soya ingredients used in an estimated 60% of processed foods, the possible presence of GM soya ingredients in a wide range of products would give consumers the impression of a very fast introduction of the technology (Sadler 2000, p. 27).

Many things have changed since 1999, when most food companies decided to avoid transgenic ingredients in their products. New European regulations have strengthened the labeling

requirements for GM foods, and some new transgenic organisms have been authorized for commercialization. Theoretically, then, the food industry could proceed with the marketing of GM foods. Yet, no company seems willing to attach the stigma of a GM label to its products.

One could expect that the market failure of GM foods in the UK would lead to a reexamination of the model of consumer behavior that the British food industry applied in their commercialization strategy of the mid-1990s. The model put forward by the IGD and adopted by the food industry was predicated on the existence of an “epistemic” consumer, an actor whose competencies and behavior are defined in terms of “understanding” the issues – or, more frequently, *not* understanding them – and whose fundamental demand, precisely because he does not understand, is an abstract “right to know,” to be satisfied through product labeling.

There are signs that this peculiar epistemology of consumer behavior has lost some of its appeal, and future controversies over new technologies will probably see the mobilization of a different sort of consumer. An IGD report published after the onslaught of anti-GM consumer boycotts already insinuated that perhaps what really concerned consumers might not be information and the provision of choice between products, but rather a “lack of control” over the introduction of new technologies (Sadler 2000, p. 81).¹² An inkling that suggests a form of consumer mobilization less focused on the epistemology of shopping behavior and more attentive to the politics of technology development and control; an understanding of consumers that centers less on the choice between products and more on the legitimization of processes of technological innovation.

Notes

- 1) Genetix Snowball, Press Release, 27 March 1999
- 2) For an analysis of this form of action, see Iain A. Boal, 2001, pp. 155-185
- 3) GenetiX snowball, “The principles for supermarket decontamination.” At <http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/gs/shopping.htm>, retrieved 20 August 2001.
- 4) Several “consumer guides” appeared in the late 1990s, among them Sue Dibb and Tim Lobstein, *GM Free: A Shopper’s Guide To Genetically Modified Food* (Virgin Publishing, 1999) and

Joanna Blythman, *How To Avoid GM Food* (Fourth State Limited, 1999). The emphasis on responsible consumption resonates with a long tradition of “green consumerism” among British environmentalists. In the landmark *Consumers’ Guide to the Protection of the Environment*, published in 1971 by Friends of the Earth, Jonathan Holliman argued that “the conversion to a life style more related to the ability of the Earth to supply our needs must start by the consumer regaining the political power of the individual to have real choice in the market place.” Green consumer guides, the predecessors of the best-selling anti-GM guides of the late 1990s, were extremely successful in the late 1980s. Some have argued that green consumerism was a “compromised response” to the *status quo* Thatcherism, a sort of hybrid between environmental activism and the free-market ideology that dominated British policy and politics in the 1980s and 1990s. In this view, the reliance on “consumer power” would be a result of the difficulty of shaping the policy process through the institutions of political representation. The role of the state, as a target and potential ally of environmental activism, became secondary, shifting the emphasis to the ability of individual citizens to affect changes in the marketplace in their capacity as consumers. For an extended interpretation of the British case, see Mike Robinson, *The Greening of British Party Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

- 5) And both retailers changed their position shortly, under increasing competitive pressure from rivals that had already made commitments to “GM-free” foods.
- 6) Sadler’s report provides a summary of the work of the IGD consumer researchers on the acceptability of GM foods throughout the 1990s.

The consumers’ position on labeling was sometimes independent of their concrete attitude towards bioengineered foods. “A few consumers said,” the IGD report quoted above pointed out, “that their decisions on labeling were not necessarily driven by what they wanted, but what they felt was right for other consumers who might be concerned about genetic modification.” (p. 174) Consumers were providing opinions on the right to know whether a food product had been genetically modified, rather than on the issue of genetic modification *per se*, and their demand for labeling could be interpreted as a declaration of the rights of consumers, rather than a show of mistrust in the technology.

- 7) As had been the case with the commercialization of the FlavrSavr tomato in the United States, biotechnology and food industry execu-

tives thought at the time (1996) that a high-public profile could only help the prospects of the new products. According to the industry's own data, about 22 million viewers received information about the new product through television commercials and news reports. Martineau provides a first-hand account of the regulatory and public relations disputes involved in the FlavrSavr case (cf. Martineau).

- 8) Dr Nigel J. Poole, Testimony before the House of Lords, Select Committee on the European Communities, 3 June 1998.
- 9) Ross Buckland, Chief Executive of Unigate PLC, Chairman of the Policy Issues Council and IGD President, Foreword to the Institute of Grocery Distribution, *Labelling and Communication Guidelines* (Wartford: Institute of Grocery Distribution, March 1997).
- 10) Institute of Grocery Distribution, *Labelling and Communication Guidelines*, p. 7. In this, as in other cases, the IGD justified their conclusions by reference to the insights generated by the consumer research program. On the issue of labeling active versus inactive modified genetic material, the IGD argued that "our discussions with consumers on this subject demonstrated that they were unable to distinguish between active and inactive (as a result of processing) genetic material" (p. 5).
- 11) *The Independent on Sunday*, 21 March 1999.
- 12) This is, of course, not a particularly innovative idea. It was already present in the early reports of IGD researchers, although there it was expressed as a concern over the *timing* of technological innovation (i.e. the speed with which GM foods would be introduced). The importance of control was also strongly argued in a report commissioned by Unilever and published simultaneously with the IGD labeling guidelines. In *Uncertain World*, Robin Grove-White, Phil Macnaghten, Sue Mayer and Brian Wynne cautioned that "reliance on labels as a political response to concerns about the wider cumulative implications of biotechnology for society, reduces inherently general issues to matters of atomised consumer 'decision' at the point of sale." See *Uncertain World: Genetically Modified Organisms, Food and Public Attitudes in Britain* (Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster University, March 1997). Similar arguments are being made at the moment about the introduction of nanotechnology in the UK, and the need to incorporate the concerns of citizens and consumers earlier in the research and development process. See for instance James Wilsdon and Rebecca Willis, *See-*

through Science: Why Public Engagement Needs to Move Upstream (Demos, 2004).

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