The Fight over (non)GMO Labeling
A Sociological Perspective
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(Non)GMO labeling
1. What’s happening?
   - Political and market movement for non-GMO labeling
2. Who is driving it?
   - Social movement organizations
   - Conscientious consumers
   - Food retailers and processors
3. Settling the debate?
   - Social, ethical, political, economic interests and values driving debate
     - No homogenous ‘consumer’ or ‘agrifood sector’
   - Science cannot ‘solve’ GMO debate
FDA Labeling Requirements for GMO Foods

- No federal, mandatory labeling required
  - Only for functional differences – label the difference

- 1992 FDA determined:
  - GM foods substantially equivalent
  - GM foods pose no additional risks

- FDA allows voluntary process-based labeling so long as not false or misleading
  - “Non-GMO Project Verified”
Social Movement Labeling Campaign

Consumer, Food, Environmental Organizations

GMO Assumptions

- GMOs proxy for broader social, ethical, environmental concerns
  - governance, values, democratic participation, industrial agriculture, corporate control and consolidation, patents, environment...

Mandatory labeling

- “right to know”
- “choice”
- “transparency”
Social Movement Labeling Campaign

- National efforts to ban/label GM foods fail
- Shift focus to states
  - 2012: CA Prop 37 failed 53-47
  - 2013: WA Initiative 522 failed 51-49
  - 2014: OR Measure 92 failed 809 votes
  - 2014: CO Prop 105 failed 66-34

- Connecticut (2013) and Maine (2014) pass contingent law requiring GMO labeling
- 2014: Vermont passes GMO labeling law, effective July 1, 2016
GMO Labeling Countermovement

Major Food, Agriculture, Biotech Companies

GMO Assumptions
- Technical debate about human/ environmental risks
  - Safe
  - Good for environment
  - Feed the world

Mandatory labeling
- No scientific justification
- Costly
- Confusing and misleading

“Stand up for Science. Join us in demanding ….science-based standards for GMO food labeling.”

(Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food, 2015)
“Compromise” Federal GMO Label

Biotech Labeling Solutions Act (S. 764)

- Passed July 14, 2016
- Nullify Vermont’s law and bar other state initiatives
- Disclose GMO ingredients through “text, symbol, or electronic or digital link” such as QR codes
- Narrow GMO definition GMO, excludes gene editing
  - Artic apple; Innate potato
- Meat and diary fed GMO feed excluded
- No federal penalties for violations
  - USDA no recall authority
Conscientious Consumers

- **Food Movement**
  - Purchases of conscientious consumers reflect social, environmental, ethical concerns and values not price

- **Food trends**
  - Local, fair trade, animal welfare, minimally processed...

- **Neoliberalism**
  - Market vs government based solutions
  - Concerns about transparency, risk, trust
    - Individuals empowered through role as consumers
“In the world of GMO issues, labeling seems achievable and it taps into a uniquely American thing…everyone is down on the government, the government can’t do anything [but people think] “if you put labels on it, I’ll decide for myself.”

(Food and Environmental Advocacy Organization I)
Food Choice Preferences Survey
(Bain and Dandachi, 2016)

National survey, 2016: 1000 respondents

Desire for GMO Labels

- Should GMOs be mandatorily labeled?
  - 74% agreed

- Is there any additional information you would like to see on food labels?
  - 6.7% whether products contain GMOs
Food Choice Preferences Survey

Overall attitude toward GMOs by Gender

- Men more likely than women to have an overall positive attitude toward GMOs, and women more likely than men to have an overall negative attitude toward GMOs
  - 29% men and 51% women have overall negative attitude
  - 29.5% men and 14% women have overall positive attitude
Food Choice Preferences Survey

Avoiding purchasing foods containing GM ingredients

- 31% actively avoided in past 12 months

- Women more likely than men to avoid
  - 25% men and 36% women avoided

- No association between annual household income
  OR education level and avoidance of GMOs
Food Choice Preferences Survey

Top 5 reasons for avoiding (agreed/strongly agreed)

1. Personal/family health and wellbeing (92%)
2. Want to know what is in food they purchase (90%)
3. Do not want to support companies that use GM ingredients (75%)
4. Concerned about impact of GMOs on environment (73%)
5. Do not trust the people providing information about GMOs (68%)
Food Companies

- Food retailers/processors adopting GMO and non-GMO labels
  - Non-GMO one of fastest growing labels

- Social, environmental, ethical food standards, certification, labels = good business
  - Vulnerable to activist campaigns
    - Protect valuable brand names, reputation
  - Demonstrate “corporate social responsibility”
    - Convey transparency, trust, credibility, reduce risk
  - Non-price competition based on ‘quality’ attributes
    - Niche markets with price premium
Thank you for labeling GMOs!
Non-GMO Market

Non-GMO Project Verified

- North America’s main third party verification and labeling for non-GMO food and products
  - > 34,000 products verified since 2008
  - $348.8 million (2010) to $13.5 billion (2015)
- Threat to organic?
Voluntary GMO Labels

Whole Foods

- 100% labeling by 2018

“Whole Foods Market commits to full GMO transparency …”

“We are putting a stake in the ground on GMO labeling to support the consumer’s right to know”  
(Walter Robb, co-CEO, 2013)
You are our main ingredient.
What's important to you drives what we do. So we're launching a multi-year plan to change how we make our yogurt to give you more choices about your food.

We're now offering products with non-GMO ingredients*—with more to come.

From the fruit on the bottom to the granola on top, we're committing to getting rid of GMOs in our flagship brands. We're also working with our farmer partners to remove GMOs from their cows' feed. It'll all happen over time, but the work has already begun. The first Dannon products with non-GMO ingredients* are available as of July 2016. By the end of 2017, all products from the Dannon brand family will contain non-GMO ingredients* and will be made with milk from cows fed non-GMO feed. Products from the Oikos and Danimals brand families will follow by the end of 2018.

We're using fewer and more-natural ingredients.
For our flagship products, we're starting to use ingredients, such as sugars and starches, that are more natural, non-synthetic and non-GMO. Our plan is to have the new ingredients in the cup by the end of 2017 for Dannon branded products, and the end of 2018 for Oikos and Danimals branded products. We wanted to start big. Together, these three brands represent about half of our US sales volume.

We're getting our milk directly from farms we know.
When we get our milk straight from our farmer partners, we can know exactly how they operate. We know that as certified responsible producers they treat their cows well and we know what they're feeding them. And we can work together with them on environmental issues like soil health, water usage, biodiversity and carbon.

If it still has GMO ingredients, we will soon let you know.
Whatever your stance on GMOs, we think you have the right to know if they're included. And then you can make your own choices. We're going to label if there are GMO ingredients in our products nationally by the end of 2016.
Conclusion

- Contemporary momentum for (non)GMO labeling
  - Food movements, conscientious consumption
  - Neoliberalism, market-based governance and competition
- Efforts to dismiss anti-GMO movement as “anti-scientific” failed
  - Food quality and labels inherently political, social, and ethical
  - Market opportunities
    - Food companies and consumers not homogenous
- Is there room for GMO and non-GMO foods and labels?