

# A Discourse Perspective for Critical Public Relations Research: Life Sciences Network and the Battle for Truth

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Critical public relations scholarship is increasingly required to justify the contribution that is made to theory and practice. Within this article, an integrated political economy and discourse analysis is deployed to examine a progenetic engineering advocacy campaign conducted by the Life Sciences Network in New Zealand. The analysis demonstrates the value of examining the sociopolitical contexts in which public relations operates and the discourses that it seeks to produce or influence and thus provides a constructive foundation for further critical research.

James E. Grunig (2001) stated that “in a professional field such as public relations, I believe scholars must go beyond criticizing theories; they also have the obligation to replace theories with something better—an obligation that many critical scholars do not fulfil” (p. 17). Although many critical scholars claim that their work does indeed attempt to offer new ways of thinking about public relations—variously from postmodernist (Holtzhausen, 2000; McKie, 2001), cultural studies (Mickey, 1998), sociological (L’Etang & Pieckza, 1996), political economy (Miller & Dinan, 2000; Weaver & Motion, 2002), and critical discourse (Motion & Leitch, 1996; Weaver, 2001) perspectives—J. E. Grunig’s comments are indicative of a need for critical researchers and theorists to more clearly outline how their approaches contribute to advancing not only public relations theory, but also research and practice.

In this article we demonstrate how critical public relations research can contribute to theorizing public relations practice by developing an understanding of how

discourse is used to establish particular “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1972/1980, p. 131). We build on the work of Motion and Leitch (1996) who argued that, “Public relations practitioners are ... discourse technologists who play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of discourse” (p. 298). In advancing this understanding of public relations practice, we argue that critical discourse analysis provides public relations scholars and practitioners with an ability to conceptualize public relations within the context of culture as a symbolic system where that system “itself is a crucial site in which power may be exercised, contested, negotiated, or resisted” (Switzer, McNamara & Ryan, 1999, p. 26). From this perspective, public relations is theorized as a legitimate tactic in the struggle for and negotiation of *power*. The task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission.

We also argue that discourses deployed for public relations purposes can only be fully understood in relation to the political, economic, and social contexts in which they operate. Moreover, considering the wider cultural context of public relations practice enables researchers to fully theorize how publics are encouraged to conceptualize “the public interest” and support the public relations message in what J. E. Grunig (2001), following Dozier, L. A. Grunig, and J. E. Grunig (1995), described in the new contingency two-way model of public relations as a “win–win” situation for both client and publics.

Despite a number of critical scholars having argued that discourse theory provides valuable insights into public relations practice (Motion & Leitch, 1996, 2001; Weaver, 2001), none have actually demonstrated *how* that practice can be deconstructed through critical discourse research. In demonstrating precisely this, our article presents a discourse analysis of the Life Sciences Network campaign that has sought to promote an acceptance of genetic modification in New Zealand during the 2002 New Zealand national government elections.

Genetic modification (GM) is currently one of the most contentious of scientific applications and is a matter of major international debate and concern. Indeed, the very term *genetic modification* has been a matter of contestation and tends to be used by proponents of the science, whereas the term *genetic engineering* (GE) tends to be the preferred term of those opposed to the science. Many organizations and groups have argued that GM represents a significant advancement of scientific knowledge that can, for example, enhance agricultural output, reduce the need for pesticide use, and increase the shelf-life of foods and extract toxins and allergens from foods (Conner, 2000; Kettle, 2000). It is also claimed that GM research may offer medical breakthroughs in the treatment of, for instance, kidney disorders and diabetes (Kettle, 2000). Those who oppose GM technologies, and especially field trials and their commercial application, argue that there are vast unknown risks involved in this new science and that it could cause significant damage to not only

the environment and bio-diversity but to the health and future of all species (see, e.g., Allen, 2000; Ho, 1999). Not surprisingly given the controversies that surround GM, the role that public relations has played in contributing to public knowledge about this science has also been highly criticized (Bruno, 1998; Weaver & Motion, 2002; see also Durham, 2005/*this issue*). Before examining that role in the context of the Life Sciences Network campaign, we outline the critical, discourse and political economy theories we draw on in our analyses of public relations practice.

### CRITICAL THEORY PERSPECTIVES

Being critical, as Downing, Mohammadi, and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1995) stated,

involves posing questions, including awkward and unpopular ones. It means not merely taking information for granted, at face value, but asking how and why these things come to be, why they have the shape and organisation they do, how they work and for whose benefit. (p. xx)

In public relations scholarship the dominant functional managerial perspective is reluctant to ask (and necessarily avoids) these types of questions that are all essentially about power. This is because, as Berger (2001/*in this issue*), Durham (2001/*in this issue*), and Roper (2001/*in this issue*) all separately and from different theoretical perspectives demonstrate, even though functional theorists assert that public relations has to take into account notions of public interest, ultimately such perspectives privilege the interests of organizations, the elite or dominant coalition and capital.

In contrast, critical approaches to the study of public relations are centrally concerned with issues of power. As Trujillo and Toth (1987) stated, such perspectives “treat organizations as ideological and material arenas for power, influence, and control; and they treat organizational publics as coalitions and constituencies, which have diverse needs, values, and perspectives” (p. 209). The value of critical perspectives is that they investigate how political, sociocultural, and economic conditions shape public relations practice (Holtzhausen, 2000) and determine the “sources of power and influence” (Mickey, 1998, p. 336) that public relations practitioners represent. Equally important are issues concerning how public relations practice itself might promote certain values that fit within particular political, economic, and cultural frameworks and modes of living, but not with others. This in turn leads to a questioning of the role of public relations within, and its responsibilities to, democratic society.

Key to understanding how public relations represents and promotes selected positions of truth and power is the examination of the discourse strategies de-

ployed by practitioners. In public relations, discourse is deployed as a political resource to influence public opinion and achieve political, economic, and sociocultural transformation. Most simply, a discourse may be thought of as a set of statements. That set of statements or discourse, according to Foucault (1996), comprised “the existence of rules of formation for all its objects, for all its operations, for all its concepts, and for all its theoretical options”(p. 35). Thus, discourse is both symbolic and constitutive, structuring how we know, understand, speak about, and conduct ourselves in that world. As Fairclough (1992) explained, discourse is “a practice, not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world in meaning” (p. 64). Although we are in agreement with Philo and Miller (2001) that *not all* experiences are explained through and by discourses, we argue that the core business of public relations is to provide and shape the meanings for social, cultural political, and economic experiences to benefit the client organization.

Public relations practitioners “strategically deploy texts that facilitate certain socio-cultural practices and not others” (Motion & Leitch, 1996, p. 299). In doing so they are attempting to gain a position of power for the client by establishing a “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1972/1980, p. 131). The ultimate strategic aim of being the “voice of truth” is to gain public consent for particular material practices. Thus, the establishment of a regime of truth, is “linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (Foucault, 1972/1980, p. 131). Truth and power, therefore, are inextricably linked and serve to reinforce one another.

Foucault (1972/1980) conceptualized power as both organized and hierarchical within the context of clusters of relationships. The notion of power as relational was clarified by adding the element of strategy. That is, Foucault (1972/1980) saw individuals and organizations as deploying various discourse strategies to conform with, circumvent, or contest existing power relations. However, it is important to note that although the term *power* most usually carries pejorative connotations of domination, Foucault (1969/1972) conceived of power as positive and productive. Foucault (1969/1972) stated, “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it transverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (p. 119). From this perspective then, discourse is the vehicle through which power and truth circulate and the means by which public relations practitioners attempt to strategically maintain and reproduce the status quo or transform society. By employing a critical discourse lens in public relations research we are able to examine the role that public relations plays in attempting to promote organizational and social discursive shifts and transformations.

However, critical discourse analysis can have its weaknesses due to its predominantly textual focus. As Philo and Miller (2001) asserted “without an analysis of changes in social process and material conditions, a textualist has trouble in explaining why a discourse might have to be altered” (p. 44). Consequently dis-

courses, and discourse transformations, have to be theorized in the context of their political and economic circumstances and changes to those circumstances. Indeed, for the critical public relations scholar “the meaning of the words and pictures are ... discerned in relation to the economic and political environment in which they are represented” (Mickey 1998, p. 342). That is, the political landscape, relevant economic agendas, government legislation, and public policy initiatives all form part of the political economy context of public relations discourse practice.

Political economy theory “insists on the power of capital and the process of commodification as a starting point of social analysis” (Mosco, 1996, p. 25). It is an approach that requires posing questions that “focus attention on how the resources for cultural practice, both material and symbolic, are made available in structurally determined ways through the institutions and circuits of commodified cultural production, distribution and consumption” (Garnham, 1997, p. 72). Thus, a critical political economy perspective can highlight how public relations participates in the attempt to manage or control these resources as a hegemonic strategy. By hegemony we mean the nonviolent struggle to maintain “economic, political, cultural and ideological” power (Fairclough, 1992, p. 92; see also Roper, 2005/*this issue*). To establish, maintain, or transform hegemonic power, public relations discourse strategies are deployed to circulate ideas, establish advantageous relationships, and privilege certain truths and interests.

A key strategy in how public relations contributes to hegemonic power is the “articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation of elements in a discourse” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 93). Articulation, as Hall (1996) explained, is the connection or linking of two different elements “which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’” (p. 53). Moffitt (1994) and, subsequently, Motion and Leitch (1996), already identified the importance of articulation to public relations theory and practice. For public relations practitioners the value of articulating otherwise unconnected discourse elements together is that through this strategy they can articulate an image or idea with pre-existing attitudes or experiences that then will predispose an individual to accept that idea or image (Motion & Leitch, 1996, p. 300). It is through the analysis of articulation strategies that we can identify how public relations texts function within the political economy context.

## A CRITICAL METHOD

Having outlined the theoretical perspectives that we bring to our critical analysis of public relations, we can now demonstrate how we apply those perspectives to the investigation of public relations practice.

In the analysis of the Life Sciences Network campaign a three-phase research approach was adopted. First, three research questions were identified: (a) What were the particular political and economic conditions that supported the production of the New Zealand Life Sciences Network campaign and whose interests

were represented by the campaign? (b) What discourse strategies were deployed in the campaign? and (c) How did the campaign attempt to influence public opinion and/or policy agendas and material practice?

The second phase of the research investigated the political and economic structures and conditions of power and ownership that were the historical backdrop to the campaign. The scope of this part of the analysis was kept manageable by examining who or what organizations had a political or economic vested interest in GM in New Zealand—and especially in relation to the Life Sciences Network; where, when, and how GM featured in political and economic debates and events; and what material practices were sought by those with interests in the GM issue.

The third stage of the research comprised the close analysis of the Life Sciences Network campaign texts. Here, in keeping with the concerns of a critical political economy of communications, the aim was to identify how the

discourses are [strategically] handled in the text, whether they are arranged in a clearly marked hierarchy of credibility which urges the audience to prefer one over others, or whether they are treated in a more even-handed and indeterminate way which leaves the audience with a more open choice. (Golding & Murdock, 1991, p. 27)

This discursive investigation entails asking *who* is used to express a particular viewpoint and *why* they are used to perform this discursive role, *which institutions*, if any, do they represent, and *what* are the positions and viewpoints from which they speak? After analyzing the campaign from this microdiscursive perspective, the researcher is in a position to conclude how the campaign discourse seeks to influence public opinion and ultimately hegemonic power and “truth.”

Having outlined how we approached our analysis of the Life Sciences Network campaign, we now turn our attention to the substance of that analysis. First however, it is pertinent to provide some background detail on the Life Science Network and its campaign texts in order to provide an understanding of the aims of both the organization and the campaign.

### THE LIFE SCIENCES NETWORK AND ITS CAMPAIGN TEXTS

The New Zealand Life Sciences Network formed in early 2000 just prior to the hearings of the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry Into Genetic Modification to counter what it claimed to be “uninformed and unbalanced public debate where science was being misinterpreted and ignored by anti-genetic engineering groups and the media” (Hagar, 2002, p. 12). Its membership comprises Crown Research Institutes (AgResearch, Crop and Food Research, HortResearch, Forest Research), universities, commercial corporations, and in-

dustry lobby groups. All of these members have a financial interest in the research and application of GM. By joining together under the Life Sciences Network umbrella they were able to pool financial resources and coordinate a united pro-GM lobby voice. This aim is explicitly outlined in the Life Sciences Network (2002b) constitution that states that one of the organizational objectives is to provide:

An active voice for the creation of a positive environment for responsible use of genetic modification with appropriate caution; accurate and timely information and advocacy to respond to issues related to biotechnology as they arise; assisting and obtaining the cooperation of organisations that will or may benefit from the application of genetic modification procedures. (para. 3.1.f)

The overall strategy of the Life Sciences Network (2002a) is to “undertake three strands of activity; public education, media education and political education about GE and GMOs [genetically modified organisms] and the role of biotechnology” (para. 5). It has done this by making representation to the Royal Commission and providing the media with access to “experts” able to talk on the GM issue, and through an Internet site that, as well as providing information about the Life Sciences Network, provides a press clippings service on news coverage of GM and information kits on GM.

It was during the New Zealand 2002 national government elections that the Life Sciences Network developed the public campaign that is the focus of our critical analysis. The campaign comprised a television commercial, two newspaper advertorials, and an Internet based GM information kit. In addition, paid for pro-GM kits and a toll free hotline both were made exclusively available to election candidates with the exception of the “anti-GM” Green and Alliance parties. Of these materials our analysis focuses on those specifically targeting the New Zealand general public: the two newspaper advertorials and the Internet GM information kit. Although the television commercial also formed part of the public education strategy of the campaign, we have not included it in the analysis as it was only 5-sec long and simply encouraged viewers to read the newspaper advertorials.

The two newspaper advertorials that we analyze were published during the period of the election campaign—one at its outset and the other 3 days prior to polling. Both featured statements from expert opinion leaders to make a case for GM. The first advertorial (Life Sciences Network, 2002e) appeared in the *Waikato Times*, one of New Zealand’s highest circulation regional papers. It was entirely text based and featured a quotation from the founder of Greenpeace, Patrick Moore, which took up one side of a double page, while information about the safety of GM was presented on the other side.

The second advertorial (Life Sciences Network, 2002d)—a single page spread—appeared in 21 national and regional newspapers and focused on GE re-

search. Although this advertorial also was text intensive, the top right quarter featured a medium close-up photograph of a young woman in a white laboratory coat with the caption “Dr Margy Gilpin, Plant Biotechnologist and victim of sabotage.” A second long-shot image of a smiling Gilpin in a dark jacket and skirt also featured at the bottom of the advertorial just left of center adjacent to the highlighted statement “Approved use of GE is safe.” This advertorial reveals the story of Gilpin’s laboratory based GE research that was “destroyed by saboteurs: anti GE fanatics.” As we discuss next in our analysis of the text, the advertorial contains further statements from Gilpin about the safety of GE products and unattributed assertions that GE technology is of critical importance to New Zealand’s future economic prosperity.

The third text included in our critical analysis of the Life Sciences Network public relations campaign is the Internet based information kit on genetic engineering (Life Sciences Network, 2002c). It is in this kit entitled “GM—The public’s right to choose” that the most extensive explanation of GM and what are presented as the issues surrounding the science are given. One of the key aims of the entirely text-based kit is to provide communities that are considering going GM-free with information on the implications of doing so. The kit highlights the difficulties for local body authorities considering enforcing a GM-free zone.

Clearly, the Life Sciences Network undertakes many other public relations efforts such as lobbying. However, the publication of the advertorials during the election offered an opportunity to specifically reflect on the public education aspect of the campaign.

### POLITICAL ECONOMY CONTEXT OF THE LIFE SCIENCES NETWORK CAMPAIGN

The Life Sciences Network campaign and the range of discourses used in that campaign can be fully understood only in relation to a wider set of political and economic practices that have shaped New Zealand’s sociocultural and political landscape since the mid 1980s. Since 1984, New Zealand has pursued a right wing, neo-liberal economic agenda of privatization of central and local government services, market liberalization, and deregulation. This also has involved the promotion of foreign investment in New Zealand and, through the General Agreement on Tarriffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization, commitments have been made to free trade (Jesson, 1999; Kelsey, 1997, 2002; Weaver & Motion, 2002). This neo-liberal economic agenda was begun under a Labour Party government and then furthered under three consecutive National government terms. Under one of these National Party governments the Crown Research Institutes (CRIs), which, as we have stated, are members of the Life Sciences Network, were created “to carry out and promote research of excellence which

would benefit New Zealand” (Kelsey, 1997, p, 121). More recently the CRIs have developed significant involvement and interest in GM research.

At the 1999 general election the Labour Party did not gain sufficient seats to secure a majority government and so formed a coalition government with the Alliance Party and depended on the seven Green Party Members of Parliament to support it on issues of confidence and supply (Kelsey, 2002). This gave the Green Party considerable leverage to pursue their environmental policies that, broadly, seek to maintain “New Zealand’s clean, green image” (Fitzsimons, 2000, p. 196). In particular they have placed a priority on ensuring that New Zealand remain GM-free by not permitting commercial application of GM and GMOs. They also successfully campaigned for the establishment of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into GM in New Zealand. During the Royal Commission a moratorium on the release of GMOs was put in place until August 31, 2001.

Reporting on its findings in July 2001, the Royal Commission rejected the idea that New Zealand should remain GM-free. It concluded that “it would be unwise to turn our back on the potential advantages on offer, but we should proceed carefully, minimising and managing risks” (Royal Commission on Genetic Modification, 2001). The Royal Commission recommended that New Zealand keep its options open in relation to GM and loosen barriers to low-risk GM applications while calling for an increased regulatory framework for high-risk applications. With the reporting of the Royal Commission came an extension of the moratorium until October 2003 to enable the establishment of appropriate regulatory monitoring bodies for GM and GMO applications.

In August 2001 GM and biotechnology science research was discursively repositioned from that of an environmental issue to an economic one following a major 3-day “Catching the Knowledge Wave” Conference staged in Auckland and cochaired by the Prime Minister and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Auckland. The conference marked a significant attempt to promote public, political, and business discussion about transforming New Zealand into a knowledge society (Kelsey, 2002). As part of the Knowledge Wave initiative that followed the conference the government developed a Growth and Innovation Framework comprising three task forces: the biotechnology taskforce, the creative industries taskforce, and the information communication technologies taskforce. Each of these taskforces represented industries that the government considered of primary importance to New Zealand’s economic growth. Of specific relevance here is the biotechnology task force that investigates ways of enhancing scientific research, development, and production in the biotechnology sector. It is in relation to this political and economic agenda that the Life Sciences Network campaign was able to promote biotechnology as central to New Zealand’s economic prospects. Indeed, the campaign itself actually encourages audiences to understand a pro-GM stance as vital to the future development and well being of the country’s economy in stating:

If we do not allow safe research to continue in New Zealand, we all pay the price. To cease the hard work would have an unprecedented negative impact on our economy and on our critical position in the knowledge economy. (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8)

In using the term *knowledge economy* the Life Sciences Network articulated a pro-GM position with the Government's agenda to develop New Zealand as a knowledge economy.

In May 2002 GM once again became a prominent environmental and political issue following the Green Party's refusal to support the Labour Government's passing of the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms (Amendment) Bill (Ministry for the Environment, 2004), which established an automatic expiry of the October 2003 moratorium on GM. This created considerable tensions between the Government and the Green Party that led to the coalition government becoming unstable. Consequently, on June 11, Prime Minister Helen Clark called a snap election for July 27 anticipating that, given that the Labour Party was proving very popular in the polls, Labour would be returned into office with a majority Government.

During the election campaign, GM was a key policy issue for debate and one that political commentators believed could significantly influence voting. It was in this context that the Life Sciences Network put out their media advertorial campaign. On June 22 it placed the Patrick Moore advertorial in the *Waikato Times* (Life Sciences Network, 2002e) and on July 24 placed the Margy Gilpin advertorial in both the national and regional press (Life Sciences Network, 2002d). However, the advertorials became a focus of some political and media controversy when *The New Zealand Herald* featured reports detailing that they had been paid for through a \$180,000 fund set up by Life Sciences Network members, which included the Government funded CRIs, AgResearch and Crop and Food Research, (Collins, 2002a), and the University of Auckland's commercial arm "Uniservices" (Collins, 2002b). It was suggested that what could be regarded as a Government supported pro-GM campaign was intended to dissuade voters from giving their support to the Green Party in the election (Collins, 2002b).

In terms of its contribution to public understanding and knowledge of the GM issue during the election campaign, it can be argued that, from a public relations perspective, the Life Sciences Network campaign performed a perfectly legitimate role in informing the public of alternative views on GM that contrasted to the anti-GM position advocated by the Green Party. On the other hand the Life Sciences Network message can be viewed as a political campaign supporting government policy agendas, and one that is funded by the taxpayer. Furthermore, the timing of the campaign's second advertorial, appearing as it did 3 days before the national election, could be interpreted as an attempt to boost votes for pro-GM political parties and an attempt to intervene in the democratic process. This was cer-

tainly a criticism directed at the campaign by the coleader of the Green Party, Jeanette Fitzsimons, who argued, “I don’t think it is appropriate for government research institutes to get into funding political campaigns” (as cited in Collins, 2002a). From the Government perspective, Peter Hodgson, the Minister of Science (in a radio interview), argued that the Life Science Network campaign had “nothing to do with politics” (as cited in Clark, 2002). However, as our discourse analysis now will demonstrate, the content of the Life Sciences Network campaign was inherently political.

### DECONSTRUCTING THE ADVERTORIAL DISCOURSE

As we have indicated, a constitutional objective of the Life Sciences Network was to “influence the development of a positive public policy environment” (Life Sciences Network, 2002b, para. 3.1.d). Creating this positive public policy environment required a public opinion base that supported GM research for medicine and agriculture. To achieve this opinion base, the campaign adopted particular discourse strategies designed to counter what it termed “misinformation surrounding the debate” (Life Sciences Network, 2002e, p. 22). “Experts” were used to express an “informed” position supporting GM. The first advertorial quoted Patrick Moore as stating, “I believe the campaign of fear against genetically modified foods is based mostly on fantasy” (Life Sciences Network, 2002e, p. 22). Thus, a highly credible opinion leader on environmental issues is presented as supporting the need for a factually based debate on GM.

The advertisement then provides “facts” about public perceptions of safety. It states that

Last year 5594 New Zealand kids were injured at school. 30 New Zealanders died after driving into power poles. And 83 New Zealanders came home with Dengue Fever. By comparison, in some 20 years, not one health issue involving GM products has ever been substantiated. Not one. (Life Sciences Network, 2002e, p. 22)

These figures encourage the reader to consider socially accepted mundane everyday activities as involving elements of health risk that cannot be controlled and have a low probability of occurrence. In contrast GM is presented as having no known health risks. In effect the advertorial attempts to make a nonsense of objections to GM given that New Zealanders continue to participate in activities that do carry risk, but will not entertain the idea of GM technology that according to the text has only positively “contributed to many significant advances in medicine including much-improved human insulin for diabetics” (Life Sciences Network, 2002e, p. 22). In using this risk discourse the Life Sciences Network attempted to expose “a gulf between knowledge and decision, between the chain

of rational arguments and the course of action which attempts to resolve the dilemma" (Beck, 2000, p. xii). The advertorial seeks to close the knowledge gap that people have regarding the health and safety risks of GM.

The advertorial also contains a highlighted text box that shifts the rational argument on GM to an emotive level in stating that "the only thing about the approved use of GM technology that will make you sick is the misinformation surrounding the debate" (Life Sciences Network, 2002e, p. 22). Thus the dangers of GM are discursively constructed as having no basis in reality and anti-GM arguments are positioned as "the real danger" to health. The advertorial then concludes in large bold type "Approved use of GM is safe." In these terms the advertorial attempts to establish a regime of truth about the safety of GM with the Life Sciences Network as the arbiter of that truth.

The second advertorial repeats this safety message about GM. However, in this second text the campaign used the term *GE* instead of *GM*. It could be argued that this was done because this second advertorial focused largely on the GE debate and anti-GE activism. In the text, GE is primarily (although not always) articulated with distortions of truth. Indeed this point is emphasized through the advertorial's headline banner that states "In the GE debate, the facts have been modified beyond recognition" (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8). Although intended as a humorous play on words to entice the reader to engage with the full text of the advertorial, this headline discursively constructs the anti-GE position as hindering open and honest debate. The anti-GE position is also presented as a highly emotional and politicized discourse that creates unwarranted fear of GE technology.

In this text, Margy Gilpin brings scientific credibility to the advertorial message that "there is no sane basis for the horror stories being promoted by certain, anti-GE factions" (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8). The advertorial explains that Gilpin was involved in GE research on potatoes for the CRI, Crop and Food Research, and she is constructed as an intellectual whose research had "earned her the right to present her results at the prestigious International Association of Plant Tissue Culture Biotechnology. A career dream" (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8). However, although Gilpin is clearly set up as a scientific expert on GE, she is also presented as a "mother of two young children" and a victim whose "entire [GE research] crop was targeted and destroyed" (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8). Thus, the reader is invited to trust Gilpin's message about GE from several *credible* positions. First she is an internationally recognized scientist whose work could make an important contribution to the economic future of New Zealand. Second she is positioned as a mother of children who, the reader is encouraged to assume, would not put her children's health at risk by promoting GE if it were not safe. In positioning Gilpin as a mother the text also encourages the reader to see her as an "ordinary citizen" thereby reducing the gap between scientists and citizens enabling the reader to identify and empathize with her. Thirdly she is positioned as a *rational* and knowledgeable person who was investigating "facts" about GE and

its potential health and agricultural applications, but whose work was destroyed by *emotional and irrational fanatics*.

Foucault (1972/1980) explained that the political economy of truth is centered on scientific discourse and that “it is necessary to think of the political problems of intellectuals not in terms of ‘science’ and ‘ideology,’ but in terms of ‘truth’ and ‘power’” (p. 132). From this perspective, Gilpin’s role is that of conveyer of truth and the advertorial can itself be considered as part of a “battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays” (Foucault, 1972/1980, p. 132). That is, the text seeks to normalize GM and establish the Life Sciences Network perspective as the requisite truth about GM that has to achieve hegemonic ascendancy if New Zealand is to take political and economic advantage of this scientific technology.

In performing a discursive role within the advertorial, Gilpin presents the pro-GE position as one that emerges out of a rational considered analysis of factual scientific research findings, although no scientific facts about GE are presented. In contrast, anti-GE campaigners are depicted as little more than Luddite criminals whose destruction of Gilpin’s crop not only destroyed her career chances, but possibly also New Zealand’s future position in the global knowledge economy. The advertorial stated:

New Zealand is in a very good position to be the world leader in GE technology. Scientists have been studying the safety and potential of crops since the first field trials at Lincoln in 1988 but we risk losing our place in the knowledge wave by not allowing continued research. People need to be able to make choices about the food they eat, by being informed with accurate information. (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8)

This statement clearly positions anti-GE campaigners as putting New Zealand’s future prosperity at risk as well as attacking cherished liberal ideologies of an individual’s right to choose and freedom from censorship—in this case the censorship of research activity. It also serves, as we have argued previously, to articulate the pro-GE discourse of the Life Sciences Network with that of current government policy. Yet underlying the statement are also appeals to notions of truth and objectivity. By inviting New Zealanders to return to a “rational” and “objective” consideration of GE technologies, rather than what is presented as the emotional and political anti-GE position, the Life Sciences Network reduced the complexity of debate around GE to the simple point that “in the last 20 years, no health issue involving consumption of GE products has ever been substantiated, even though an incredible amount of effort has gone into looking for potential problems” (Life Sciences Network, 2002d, p. 8). Thus, the advertorial repeated the safety assurance in the first advertorial and invited readers to consider that, in fact, the potential health and economic benefits of GE technologies outweigh any risks that they might pose.

Like the Life Sciences Network advertorials, the organization's Web pages also promoted GM technologies through very specific discursive lenses. The information kit lays out the issues around GM according to the Life Sciences Network's own agenda. These issues are detailed on the first page of the kit as (a) the relationship between organic farming and GM, (b) liability and safeguards, (c) health issues, (d) GM in the food chain, and (e) environment and sustainability.

In outlining the relationship between organic farming and GM the information kit explains that currently farmers have a freedom to choose which type of crop to farm according to what best suits their land and their individual expertise. This is contrasted with a possible future scenario where in a GM-free zone, "the ideological perceptions of other members of the community or the local body authority" (Life Sciences Network, 2002c, p. 3) determine the nature of their farming. The kit thus implies that in a GM-free zone, individual freedom of choice will be eliminated and farmers will find themselves powerless because they are "locked into a particular type of crop" (Life Sciences Network, 2002c, p. 3). Similarly, it is said:

Residents in a GM-free zone would no longer have access to medicines that were genetically modified or produced by genetically modified organisms. At present this includes the cholera vaccine and the insulin used by diabetics in New Zealand. Would these residents be forced to move house to another local body or would the authorities turn a blind eye to doctors who smuggled supplies in to the zone and administered them to residents after hours? (Life Sciences Network, 2002c, p. 9)

We would argue that these assertions comprise a campaign of fear that is being waged against GM-free communities and that they are using the very same emotive and scare mongering tactics that their advertorials critique. This is evident in the images evoked by the information kit's suggestion that the establishment of GM-free communities would require the isolation and surveillance of physical communities. It is stated:

Border posts would need to be set up to stop residents and visitors deliberately or inadvertently entering with GM organisms. For example, neighbouring farmers may enter the area with seeds on their boots or clothing and residents may be tempted to smuggle GM medicines in. Border checks would be a huge hassle for residents and visitors and a big expense for the local body authorities. (Life Sciences Network, 2002c, p. 9)

In this statement the Life Sciences Network encouraged the New Zealand public to perceive a GM-free position as threatening the New Zealand way of life—creating divisions among communities and instituting a regime of surveillance. In constructing such a scenario the campaign predicts a disutopian future that is clearly designed to counter the discursive construction of the organic and authentically clean green and safe New Zealand environment used by anti-GM

lobby groups. In effect, we would argue that the kit is designed to ensure that local body authorities do not undermine national pro-GM policy and legislation by succumbing to anti-GM discourses.

The GM-free scenario is also constructed as problematic under the liability considerations explored in the information kit. It is argued that current New Zealand common law can adequately deal with the introduction of GMOs into the country, but that the real liability issues lie with becoming a GM-free community or local body. For example, it is argued that GM-free communities would be liable if “an easily controlled bug that is breeding out of control in a GM-free area” ravaged GM farmers’ crops (Life Sciences Network, 2002c, p. 6). Thus, environmental risk is *rearticulated* with GM-free zones and *disarticulated* from GM itself.

Having established the difficulties and disadvantages of becoming GM-free, the information kit then reassures readers of the safety of GM foods. It does this using a very simple explanation of the fact that all foods contain genes. In inviting readers to consider the issues of eating GM foods that *combine* plant and animal genes, the information kit stated that “it is not dangerous to eat the genes from plants and animals together . . . . If you eat a meal of meat and vegetables you are eating the genes of plants and animals together” (Life Sciences Network, 2002c, p. 12). Thus, risk is neutralized by articulating transgenic engineering with the meals that we already eat and by extracting the complex scientific processes of GM from the discursive explanation of the effects of eating GM foods.

As our discourse analysis of the Life Sciences Network campaign has demonstrated, the strategic use of discourse is central to public relations practice and solicitation of public consent to pursue an organizational mission. The first Life Sciences Network advertorial drew on a risk discourse strategy to accentuate the safety of GM and thereby minimize and counter the opposing anti-GM discursive strategy emphasizing environmental and health risks. Within the second advertorial, risk again featured, this time as a strategy to emphasize the economic risks of rejecting GM science. Thus, the GM debate was articulated to the dominant political economy discourse. Within the Internet-based information kit, the discursive strategy highlighted the economic and social risks of establishing a GM-free zone. The use of experts, an environmental activist and a woman scientist, served to create doubts about the uncertainties and criticisms of GM. The audience was not offered an open choice of what discourse to prefer—the struggle to achieve hegemony was underpinned by a strategy of positioning the pro-GM discourse as *the truth*: The Life Sciences Network had the “facts,” therefore, anti-GM discourses could not maintain their “regime of truth.”

From a critical discourse perspective the Life Sciences Network campaign is interpreted as positioning a pro-GM stance as a win-win position for the Life Sciences Network clients and in the interest of the New Zealand public. Consequently, the notion of “the public interest” can be understood as a contestable discursive construction that may be deployed to influence public opinion and

policy. To articulate the public relations campaign as representing the public interest, the message communicated was framed in terms of the political economy agenda. The campaign did not function as a public education campaign that developed New Zealanders' understanding of GM science or advanced the GM debate, but instead used public funding during an election to overtly promote a particular political and economic ideological agenda in relation to GM. Interestingly, although we are not entirely attributing the election outcome to the Life Sciences Network campaign, in the 2002 national government election the Green and Alliance parties, and the anti-GM lobby, experienced a significant decline in public support, and they lost several of their key constituency Members of Parliament.

## CONCLUSIONS

In applying political economy and discourse analysis to the critical study of public relations we have demonstrated the value of researching and theorizing the social and political implications of communication practice. Our analysis of the Life Sciences Network campaign illustrated how public relations deploys discourse strategies to promote, maintain, and resist dominant political and economic ideologies. The issue of GM was disarticulated from the scientific and environmental discourse domains and rearticulated as an economic discourse in order to align GM with the "superordinate" agenda of mainstream New Zealand politics. In this way, the campaign took an undeclared political stance to support particular political agendas. From this perspective, it can be seen how a political economy analysis informs critical discourse analysis by way of explicitly identifying the sociopolitical contexts in which public relations operates and which it seeks to influence.

Analysis of the campaign discourse demonstrated the way that the Life Sciences Network sought to disqualify anti-GM discourses and knowledge and sanction pro-GM knowledge. The example of the Life Sciences Network advertorial campaign demonstrates how public relations participates in a discursive struggle to establish the status of truth because, from a critical theory perspective, truth is understood as contingent and relative. Our critical analysis of the campaign also illustrates the strategies through which groups can attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission. It identified how win-win scenarios can articulate organizational interest with public interest in a specific historical sociopolitical context, and how that context itself determines the way "the public interest" is defined.

Discourse analysis offers critical scholars a mode for researching and theorizing the public relations practices that structure societal systems of knowledge and beliefs, the rules that are being established to shape or challenge the way we construct our thinking, and the role of public relations in influencing social change in

democratic societies. A limitation of using discourse analysis alone is that it may neglect reference to real practice (Mills, 1997; Philo & Miller, 2001), a weakness that an integrated political economy and discourse analysis seek to overcome. The challenge for critical public relations researchers is to place the issues of power and truth at the center of their inquiry in order to more fully understand the role of public relations in democratic decision making processes.

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