Growing food in the post-truth era

By Alana Mann

6 Jul 2017

*This article is part of an ongoing series from the Post-Truth Initiative, a Strategic Research Excellence Initiative at the University of Sydney. The series examines today's post-truth problem in public discourse: the thriving economy of lies, b*llsh!t and propaganda that threatens rational discourse and policy.*

The project brings together scholars of media and communications, government and international relations, physics, philosophy, linguistics, and medicine, and is affiliated with the Sydney Social Sciences and Humanities Advanced Research Centre (SSSHARC), the Sydney Environment Institute and the Sydney Democracy Network.



hpgruesen via pixabay

The global food system has been operating in post-truth mode for decades. Having constructed food scarcity as a justification for a second Green Revolution, Big Agriculture now employs its unethical marketing tactics to selling farmers "climate-smart" agriculture in the form of soils, seeds, and chemicals.

The cover of Monsanto's 2016 annual report, A Limitless Perspective, presents a vista of galaxies worthy of a George Lucas production. The brightest star is an A$88 billion merger with German chemical company Bayer, to be finalised this year.

Critics have described this as a "marriage made in hell". They fear the new mega-corporation will impose even more pesticides and genetically modified seeds on the world's farmers.

Monsanto's oft-stated aim is to "consolidate the entire food chain". That means a corporatised food regime that concentrates knowledge and power in the hands of a few.

This cedes control of food security to profit-making companies. The democratic governance of food and agriculture policy is under threat.

The myth of scarcity

Framing market opportunities as moral imperatives, the agribusiness narrative is to "feed the world". That's while making

exorbitant profits at the expense of small-scale farmers and consumer health.

The rhetoric of scarcity is hollow; excess production is the problem. The food industry is a major contributor to overproduction, food insecurity and environmental degradation.

This includes the production of up to one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions, when fertiliser production, food storage, and packaging are included.

Yet “Big Ag” is committed to raising output, intensification of farming, mass processing, mass marketing, homogeneity of product, monocultures, and chemical and pharmaceutical solutions.

The post-truth claim that the powerful US agribusiness lobby uses to justify these practices is that America’s farmers must double grain and meat production to meet the needs of a global population of nine billion by 2050.

In reality, the surplus, heavily subsidised production of the US grain-livestock complex makes little contribution to ending global hunger and malnutrition. Some 90% of US exports go to countries where people can afford to buy food.

The corporate capture of climate change

Ironically, a new enemy within threatens Big Ag’s market opportunities.

When US President Donald Trump met his election commitments by stepping out of the Paris Agreement on June 2, 2017, he stepped on some big toes. Following Trump’s election, Monsanto and Du Pont had joined more than 360 US-based multinationals in signing a letter to Trump demanding action on climate change:

> *“Implementing the Paris Agreement will enable and encourage businesses and investors to turn the billions of dollars in existing low-carbon investments into the trillions of dollars the world needs to bring clean energy and prosperity to all.”*

The altruism of these motives is questionable, given the profits to be made in the corporate capture of climate change. The low-carbon economy is big business.

Archer Daniels Midland, which bills itself as “supermarket to the world”, is investing in carbon capture and sequestration projects with the aim of reducing emissions and storing them underground.

Bayer is developing stress-tolerant oilseeds, maize and wheat varieties that will cope with extreme weather.

Global Swiss agro corp Syngenta’s Good Growth Plan assures us the private sector can deliver on “the promise of sustainable and inclusive development” while mitigating the effects of climate change.

If you tell the same story five times, it's true…

Rising global temperatures will bring new varieties of pests and disease, and a new twist on the time-worn post-truth spin that pesticides are the solution to feeding a fast-growing population.



The pesticide business is huge, despite the increasingly well-documented evidence of the harm it does. jetsandzeppelins/flickr, CC BY

In a report in March this year, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation publicly dismissed this claim. The report cites evidence that pesticides cause 200,000 deaths a year.

In the report, the UN special rapporteur for the right to food, Hilal Elvar, says global corporations manufacturing pesticides are guilty of "systematic denial of harms" and "aggressive, unethical marketing tactics".

She condemns lobbying practices that have "obstructed reforms and paralysed pesticide restrictions". Companies infiltrate federal regulatory agencies via "revolving doors" and "cultivate strategic public-private partnerships that call into question their culpability or help bolster the companies' credibility".

This credibility is propped up by networks of academics and regulators recruited as consultants. In accepting corporate funding and signing confidentiality agreements, scientists sacrifice autonomy and are co-opted into disinformation campaigns that support Big Ag agendas, at the cost of their ethics.

For example, when bee scientist James Cresswell presented findings that linked Syngenta pesticides to colony collapse, he was pressured "to consider new data and a different approach" in his industry-sponsored research. The "Faustian bargain" he had made cost him dearly.

Some are brave enough to call out post-truth claims. Angelika Hilbeck found toxins in genetically modified corn killed lacewing bugs as well as pests. Scientists like her are labelled "ideological researchers" and part of the "extremist organic movement".

World views collide

This frank dismissal of alternative production systems represents a collision between competing frames, stakes and forms of expertise in food and agriculture policy.

Big Ag relies on the myth that large-scale, conventional agriculture generates higher yields and is more efficient than small-

scale, family farms. Yet the latter produce more than three-quarters of the world's food.

Concerns about the lack of sustainability and resilience of industrial farming practices has led to critical questions about the way we produce food. Notably, in 2008 the Internal Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) recognised the need for changes in "paradigms and values" to include alternative, agro-ecological production systems.

A multi-year study involving 44 scientists from more than 60 countries, the IAASTD considers the political conditions that contribute to food insecurity. This includes damaging structural adjustment policies and unfair international trade agreements.

The findings highlight how poverty rates, levels of education, knowledge of nutrition, war and conflict marginalise those most vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. Importantly, the report emphasises that critical communities, by raising questions of ownership and control of technologies, play a vital role in food systems governance.

These include the global peasant farmers' movement La Via Campesina, which openly rejects climate-smart rhetoric as promotion of an agribusiness agenda.

Promoting the concept of food sovereignty, La Via Campesina denies simplistic linkages between population growth, climate change, conflict, and resource scarcity. We are reminded that technological solutions are not neutral. The 2007 Nyeleni Declaration of the Forum for Food Sovereignty asserts:

> *"the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems."*

These farmers are the vanguard of resistance to Big Ag's efforts to further intensify agricultural production at the expense of people and environments.
We have a responsibility to join them in challenging the logic of an industrial food system that is about growth at all costs.

You can read other pieces in the post-truth series here.

The Democracy Futures series is a joint global initiative between The Conversation and the Sydney Democracy Network. The project aims to stimulate fresh thinking about the many challenges facing democracies in the 21st century.

This article was originally published on The Conversation. Read the original article.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alana Mann, Chair of Department, Media and Communications, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, *University of Sydney*

For more, visit: https://www.bizcommunity.com