

# BBC Panorama: Promoting GMO and Cultivating Ignorance

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

*"There is no global or regional shortage of food. There never has been and nor is there ever likely to be. India has a superabundance of food. South America is swamped in food. The US, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe are swamped in food (e.g. Billen et al 2011). In Britain, like in many wealthy countries, nearly half of all row crop food production now goes to biofuels... China isn't quite swamped but it still exports food... No foodpocalypse there either." [Jonathon Latham](#)*

I wasn't expecting much. So I wasn't disappointed when I didn't receive much. I'm talking about the BBC Panorama programme on GMOs that aired in the UK on Monday 8 June. The title of the programme was 'GM Food – Cultivating Fear'. So it was pretty much clear what was to follow.

The programme began with the presenter Tom Heap asking: "Are groups that oppose GM right to be worried or are they feeding the fear?"

There was never any opening discussion about whether GMOs are even necessary. The programme appeared to buy into the calling card of the pro-GMO lobby that there is a crisis in food production and this technology can remedy it. As will be shown, this assumption is erroneous.

After basing the programme on the pro-GMO false narrative that the technology is necessary if we are to feed the world, the onus was then placed on opponents of GMOs to prove that they are unsafe or harmful to the environment. And that set the tone for the next 30 minutes as time and again opponents or critics of GMOs were dismissed for being 'ideological' and 'immoral' and for not having science on their side. It was predictable stuff that has become a pretty much standard response by the pro-GMO lobby when attacking its critics (see [this](#)). It was clear that in the view of Panorama the cultivation of fear by critics of GMOs was the main issue to be addressed.

Early in the broadcast, the presenter stated:

"18 million farmers grow GM crops in 27 countries, Billions of meals have been eaten with GM ingredients."

It mirrors a similar claim made by former UK Environment Minister Owen Paterson that as consumers were already unwittingly eating GM food on a regular basis, concerns about human health are misplaced. [He stated](#):

"There's about 160 million hectares of GM being grown around the world. There isn't a single piece of meat being served [in a typical London restaurant] where a bullock hasn't

eaten some GM feed. So it's a complete nonsense. But, the humbug! You know, large amounts of GM products are used across Europe."

According to Paterson, GM food is safe simply because people do not know they are eating it, have no say in eating it and have not dropped dead from eating it. Perhaps Patterson would like to consult the mounting research that contradicts his assertions pertaining to the health impacts (for example, see [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#)).

Perhaps the Panorama programme makers should have consulted this research too because Heap repeats this later in the broadcast that billions of meals have been eaten with GM ingredients. He adds that no one has ever brought a case saying GM has damaged their health in the US after 20 years of eating GM food.

In the absence of even a single long-term epidemiological study, attempting to pinpoint health issues as being specifically caused by GM food would at this point be highly problematic, especially given the cocktail of chemicals in our food and the environment. One thing is clear, however: as the use of glyphosate (the main active ingredient in Monsanto's Roundup herbicide) has dramatically increased in the last 20 years, a [number of diseases have spiked](#).

While Heap and his pro-GMO interviewees were praising the virtues of GMOs and crops designed to withstand copious amounts of Roundup, not once did the presenter mention that the WHO had recently labelled glyphosate as [probably carcinogenic to humans](#). Given that Monsanto was focussed on at various stages of the programme and that one of the two main commercially available GM traits to date is Roundup ready seeds (the other Bt), any reasonable discussion about GMOs should have at least mentioned this.

Instead, all we heard was that glyphosate kills weeds thereby helping the glyphosate resistant GM crop to flourish. Perhaps Heap should have also focussed on the current situation in Argentina where glyphosate use is [strongly associated with cancer](#) or that a number of countries [have placed bans](#) on the use of this substance .

Panorama would have done better to state that GM food is fundamentally different to conventional food and there has been no long-term independent epidemiological study covering this technology. In fact, it would have been better to use the evidence in Steven Druker's recent book ([Altered Genes, Twisted Truth](#)) as a starting point for the programme. That evidence highlights GM technology was placed on the commercial market due to scientific fraud and that GM technology has a track record of adverse health impacts.

Preferring not to mention any of these issues, the programme soon took us to a field in Bangladesh to try to convince the viewer of the benefits of Bt brinjal - eggplant/aubergine genetically modified with an insect toxin which means in principle (not necessarily [in reality](#)) no/less pesticides need to be sprayed on the plant. Heap interviewed a doctor of medicine for his opinion on Bt brinjal who speculated it is a good idea if workers are not coming in with pesticide-related ailments. Of course a medical doctor would say if a plant needs less pesticides then it could only be positive in terms of health impacts on farm workers. Who wouldn't? But that is not an endorsement of Bt brinjal itself. It was a loaded interview. Nothing was mentioned about the toxin inserted into the plant (effectively making the plant itself a pesticide) and the potential effects on consumers or soil, for instance.

The programme said the GM seeds were given to farmers in Bangladesh who are free to

plant the seeds the following year. A combination of public service and US government aid/altruism seems to be the driving force behind GM brinjal in Bangladesh; at least that was the impression given by Tom Heap.

Then we met an organic farmer. Heap says to her that GM advocates do not mind having organic farms in Bangladesh, so why should she mind having GM in the country, which she clearly does (presumably due to the possibility of cross contamination). Again, an anti-GMO person – this time a farmer – was portrayed as being somewhat dogmatic or irrational. Although the programme tries to convince the viewer that cross gene contamination is highly unlikely, [contamination of non-GMO food is an increasing concern](#) (see [this](#) as well) and can occur by various means – and [deliberate contamination](#) is a legitimate issue. It is indeed [unlikely that GMO and non-GMO crops can co-exist](#). Again, this was never discussed.

We are merely assured by scientist Jonathan Jones from the Sainsbury Laboratory in Norwich that contamination is not an issue and that moreover an overwhelming majority of scientists now agree that GM poses no more danger to our health and the environment than non-GMO. The issue of a consensus on this matter was brushed aside as done and dusted.

The reality is very different. Scientific institutions do not support the so-called consensus. The scientific literature also does not support it. And independent scientists do not support it either. Perhaps the programme makers at Panorama should have consulted [this](#) informative, fully-referenced short report from Food & Water Watch prior to implying to millions of viewers that the debate on GMOs is more or less over. Perhaps we would have seen one or two people with alternative views being interviewed (see [this](#) to see how scientists/prestigious scientific bodies even propagandise on behalf of the GMO biotech industry).

The presenter then interviews a Greenpeace scientist who claims there is a health risk with GMOs, but he is immediately pulled up by Heap on the basis of his mistaken assertion that there is a lack of evidence for this. It seems such a wasted opportunity that Heap was never as keen to probe the many pro-GMO supporters (who were given a lot of air time) about their claims or the motives of the companies pushing GM technology. The actual need for GMOs was never questioned. It was never argued by anyone that [non-GMO agriculture uses less pesticides and that GM farming does not necessarily result in better yields](#), as Jack Heineman and his team have discovered. It was never acknowledged or mentioned that many (most) innovations in recent years have occurred through [conventional breeding techniques](#).

And it was never argued that GMOs actually [drive the sales of glyphosate](#). Instead Heap claimed GMOs are taking chemicals out of agriculture.

“In order to deal with rapidly resistant weeds, farmers are being forced to expand use of older, high-risk herbicides. To stop corn and cotton insects from developing resistance to Bt, farmers planting Bt crops are being asked to spray insecticides that Bt corn and cotton were designed to replace” [Professor Charles Benbrook](#)

As the discussion shifted to feeding poorer countries with large populations, GM was forwarded as being the solution to global hunger. There was no mention that GMOs are arguably driving poverty and even [ecocide/genocide in South America](#). Neither was there any discussion about alternatives to GMOs despite numerous official reports having argued that to feed the hungry in poorer regions we need to support diverse, sustainable agro-

ecological methods of farming and strengthen local food economies: see [this](#) UN report, [this](#) official report, [this](#) report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food and [this](#) report by 400 experts which was twice peer reviewed.

There was no discussion about how we currently produce enough food to potentially feed 10 billion people or how the globalised system of food production contributes to food insecurity or poverty (see [this](#)). Again, the underlying premise was that GMOs are needed to feed the world.

Heap interviewed Bangladesh's agriculture minister to let the viewer note that politics plays no part in forcing GMOs into that country. The minister assures him that she or her government are not in the pocket of Monsanto. We are left in no doubt that any 'conspiracy theory' about 'evil' corporations forcing the hands of politicians has no place in this discussion.

A proper investigative approach to the GMO issue would have attempted to unveil what any informed observer already knows: the corporate capture of regulatory and policy making bodies is a major problem. It is much of a problem as it is in India, the US, Britain or Europe as a whole (see [this](#) discussion) . A more revealing approach would have looked at the role of the [US State Department in promoting GMOs](#) abroad and its use of unsavoury tactics.

Heap notes that in Britain there is growing scientific and political support for GM. He presents no analysis as to why this might be (ie the issues referred to in the preceding paragraph). The programme merely gives the impression that this support is because the debate of safety and efficacy is virtually won. The presenter says a single study (Seralini) – as if there is only one study highlighting problems – showing major safety concerns was discredited by the European Food Safety Authority. He thus dismisses health risks pertaining to GMOs. Again, this is as naïve as it is misleading because as Druker shows – as many scientists and studies show (see previous embedded links) – there is abundant evidence indicating serious health issues and conflicts of interests within such bodies.

During the programme, Greenpeace comes in for special attention. Steven Tindale (former Greenpeace UK director) says Greenpeace is a top-down organisation and that everything is decided centrally. Note there was no analysis of the main global player in the GMO agritech business – Monsanto. Its actions in Bangladesh are merely presented as benign. It's record elsewhere has been [as bad as it can get](#). Moreover, it is not some altruistic company setting out to feed the planet. It has a vested interest to capture markets and buys up competitors while seeking control of food via applying patents. No discussion about this.

There was no attempt to deal with the argument that the GMO issue isn't about nutrition or 'feeding the world' but about modifying organisms to create patents that will allow increasing [monopolistic-like control over seeds, markets and the food supply](#). No talk of seed freedom or food democracy. There was no analysis of the massive conflicts of interests within agencies set up to protect the public interest. Any critique was aimed at Greenpeace (and a specific incidence involving Action Aid). The critique was not for Monsanto and its attitude to [controlling the 'science' around GMOs and the smearing of scientists](#) whose research it finds unpalatable.

None of the above is based on speculation. It has all been documented. Is sound political analysis conveniently to be brushed aside as conspiracy theory, as not worthy of comment or analysis?

Time and again throughout the programme, interviewees are selected to argue that critics of GMOs are ideologically driven. Former Chief Scientific Advisor for the EU Anne Glover is interviewed and claims certain groups are driven by ideology and are making thing up. The irony (or hypocrisy) of her claim would not have been missed by those who have regarded her as little more than a pro-GMO lobbyist than a scientist (see [this](#)). She claims these groups are scare mongering and have a privileged position.

Yet not at any stage of the programme was someone interviewed to explain how certain pushers of GMOs or the companies behind them have made [false claims](#), have spent over [\\$100 million](#) in the US to prevent the labelling of GM food, have made [claims that are not supported by studies](#), have corrupted the machinery of government or policy/regulatory bodies or are driven by financial and political motives (see [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#), for example).

Instead we have Heap letting Mark Lynas or Heap himself glibly explaining away certain issues.

At the end, Heap says the whole GM issue rests on questions of trust and safety. However, the issue also rests on a wider discussion of GMOs that gives time to critics to express their points of view in full. This includes safety issues, environmental impacts, the politics of (GM) agriculture, whether GM is necessary in the first instance and alternative approaches.

The food crisis lies in a system that is squeezing the bedrock of global food production ([smallholders](#)) onto [less and less land](#), financial [speculation](#) in foodstuff commodities and land, the [colonisation of indigenous agriculture](#) by Western corporations and food insecurity which the [introduction of GM has often exacerbated](#). Panorama failed to inform the viewers about any of this and merely presented GM as the solution to hunger and food insecurity. Any honest and balanced discussion would have tackled or at least mentioned these issues and the many others outlined in this piece.

What are we left to conclude?

Many will have watched the Panorama programme and will be forgiven for asking: as a 'public service' broadcaster, who does the BBC really serve?

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