

## **MODIFYING PERCEPTIONS: THE UK PUBLIC DEBATE ON GENETIC MODIFICATION (GM)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although Genetically Modified (GM) Organisms have been widely grown and used for food production in North America since the early 1990s, introduction of the technology into the EU countries has been very controversial. In recognition of the depth of public concerns, in 2002 the UK Government announced a public debate on GM technology, consisting of public meetings, a website to contain information and expert opinions on the scientific and economic aspects of GM, and an online debate to which members of the public could contribute through the submission of emails.

The concerns, claims and counter-claims expressed in the public contributions to the debate display an enormous range of views, beliefs, knowledge and understanding about this issue. The aim of the present paper is to investigate some of these differences in perspective. The paper draws on concepts of discourse theory and appreciation theory to investigate the ways in which complex issues involving science, technology, the environment and public health are constructed and understood. Through detailed analysis of a sample of the public contributions to the debate, it defines a number of positions concerning a specific issue identified as important by contributors to the debate, (the use of GM to end world hunger), and investigates the ways in which perceptions about this issue may differ. From this analysis, it offers a number of dimensions for the classification of multiple perceptions of a single issue.

The paper contributes to a wider debate about how such issues are constructed and contested in modern democratic societies, and has wider implications for issues of public trust and the public understanding of science.

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