

Not in my interests: trust and controversy in perceptions of genetic modification

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Abstract

The genetic modification of crops and foodstuffs (GM) is one of the most contentious issues of public science policy. In 2002, the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) organised a public debate on GM, including the creation of a website to which members of the public could post comments.

The research described in this paper entails analysis of the responses to this consultation, using qualitative social science techniques. Building on an earlier stage of the research, the paper considers contributions to the debate in terms of a number of dimensions, concerning assumptions about degrees of belief, time and the types of criteria on which truth claims may be made. Using these dimensions to classify and interrogate the contributions further reveals underlying implicit assumptions concerning the validity and trustworthiness of various sources of knowledge about the issue.

The research has implications for other issues characterised by controversy and polarisation of views; for the effectiveness of public policy on such issues; and for the relationship between science, the public and government.