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Lecture Berlin 16.1.2013

Humboldt Forum for Food and Agriculture (HFFA)

THE FEAR OF FOOD

How food scandals are created

Exactly one year ago in Germany, newspaper headlines and television and radio news broadcasts were dominated by a scandal which has since been forgotten: a food laboratory found traces of horse meat in a lasagna ready meal.

So that you don't get the impression that I'm just going to gloss over this, I would first like to make it clear that I believe that making false declarations about food constitutes fraud and should be severely punished.

Right, so that's clear.

But was it really such a big scandal? Indeed, in the sense that something outrageous happened which dominated the news and public discussions for weeks. This something seemed more important than mass murders in the Syrian Civil War or the Euro crisis.

The fact is at no point in time was the health of a single person endangered in the slightest by the horse meat additive.

Horse meat is neither poisonous nor of inferior quality. It is a high-quality meat with many valuable constituents.

The real scandal lies in the fact that in Germany most of the 1.2 million horses are not processed into food but rather are converted into fuel for industrial furnaces. Only an affluent society can afford to do such a thing.

Whenever such waves of hysteria sweep through the country, it reminds me of the novel that I used to read to my children "Die dreizehneinhalb Leben des Käpt'n Blaubär" ("The 13 1/2 lives of Captain Bluebear"). In the book, the author, Walter Moers, talks of "shadow ghosts" – nasty, wispy ghosts that feed off people's fear.

However, it's not just in books that you can feed off fear. Feeding off fear is also happening right now in Germany in the 21st century. The Green Party very happily feeds off the fear that it disseminates. The same is true of many other organizations based on similar business models such as Greenpeace, Foodwatch, ARD, ZDF and certain church organizations, just to name but a few.

Before I go into more depth about this "fear industry", I would like to talk a bit more about the idea that most Germans have of agriculture.

In the 1900s, in the German Empire a farmer would have produced enough food to nourish another four people. By the start of the 21st century, this number had grown to 143. Today, less than two percent of the population still works in agriculture. During my childhood, nearly everyone had a relative in farming. Today however, most Germans are no longer personally acquainted with any farmers at all.

For many people, farmers are "exotic creatures" about whom they no longer have any realistic idea.

Unfortunately, the food industry encourages and promotes romantic illusions of agriculture and country living.

During scandal-free times, citizens are fed the following images of agriculture:

A pretty milkmaid lovingly milks her cow and carries her cheese down into the valley on a yoke across her shoulders – that is how cheese is advertised.

Italian cooks stirring steaming pots – that is how gravy granules are advertised.

A picture on an egg box shows hens wandering contentedly around flowering meadows.

Advertising agencies use such images to promote the agricultural and food processing industries. Food is sold through clichés or, to put it another way, through ridiculous false advertising!

So when reality strikes, everyone becomes terrified. You can't really blame them.

Most citizens simply lack basic understanding which is why it is so easy for them to be manipulated by the fear industry.

One fundamental error lies in the assumption that in the past, before agricultural science changed everything, food used to be “natural”.

Many people are unaware of the simple fact that many wild forms of our plants are actually inedible or even toxic.

They have no idea of the extent to which our ancestors have modified the genetic material of plants and animals through breeding. Certain types of cereals, fruit and vegetables bear no similarity whatsoever to their original plants.

Great-grandma's kitchen was in no way healthier than modern-day kitchens. It was often unknown that food harbored pathogens and parasites which caused many deaths. In certain areas, half the population of villages died from consuming ergot or other natural toxins. The curing process had no refrigeration facilities or other protective methods.

Things were not much better for farm animals either. Modern enclosures are far more humane than former dairy cattle tethering methods. You can still see pigsties in historic villages which were not much bigger than the animals themselves.

It is not just ideas about agriculture of the past that are unrealistic but we also have the wrong idea about organic farming.

Hardly any politicians or farmer representatives dare to admit that organic farming is not sustainable as it is breaking down the ecological balance sheet. German organic farmers only harvest half as much per hectare as modern farmers. In fact, we would need a second planet to nourish mankind with just our organic products.

As long as these and many other misconceptions about agriculture continue to dominate public thinking, the fear industry will continue to have an easy job.

Another important factor which explains agriculture's rapid loss of image is our lack of respect for food. Most of the German population lives in prosperity, in fact, compared to other parts of the world, you might even say that Germans live in complete luxury. In any case, German citizens believe that there will always be enough to eat.

In terms of food, humankind has evolved by satisfying its hunger. Apart from a tiny percentage of privileged persons in the higher echelons of society, humans ate whatever they could get their hands on. For most, there was not enough to eat, for some there was no food at all.

Today however, our main concern focuses on eating the RIGHT THING. Food should be healthy and “natural” of course – whatever that is supposed to mean.

When buying and cooking food, we subscribe to a certain life style, some of us even subscribe to a certain philosophy. We take for granted the fact that we have plenty of food and that it tastes good.

For about half a century, the vast majority of the European population has been able to choose what it would like to eat according to its appetite or how it feels at any time. Historically speaking, half a century is not a long time. But we soon grow accustomed to pleasant conditions.

It is precisely due to the fact that there is plenty of healthy and nutritious food available for everyone that nutrition is such a target for the fear industry.

The fact that one food scandal follows on from the next is not related to an increasing risk. Quite the contrary. Since the 19th century, thanks to modern hygiene and refrigeration methods, the danger of disease or of food poisoning in Western industrialized countries has fallen dramatically.

The risk of being harmed by pesticide residues is tiny in comparison with the many consequences of malnutrition of past times.

Thanks to improved hygiene, nutrition and modern medicine, the life expectancy of humans in Europe has doubled in the last 200 years.

“From a scientific point of view, compared to earlier times, today's food has become significantly safer and far better quality,” states a recent analysis of the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment.

When it comes to buying food, you are unlikely to find any other person in the world who is as comprehensively protected as a German citizen. Never before has food been subject to such intense monitoring as it is today.

Yet, instead of decreasing, the fear of unhealthy eating has actually increased.

Fear industry representatives prescribe ever newer and ever more absurd requirements; indeed, you can make a good living by making the population feel insecure.

The fear industry's aim is to sell headlines, collect donations and gain publicity. Where food is concerned, all types of scaremongers have an easy job of it. Hardly anybody inquires about the facts. Speculation about the potential dangers suffices.

Why am I using this controversial expression: “fear industry”? Because, in fact, today it is possible to earn significant amounts of money by making people feel insecure and by over-exaggerating tiny risks. I will talk later about who is involved in the fear industry and how the fear industry works.

In public talk shows, there is a general consensus that our lives are constantly under threat. The worst case scenario is always taken very seriously. Scaremongering is seen as being critically aware. The more badly the situation is presented the greater it is applauded.

At the start of the 21st century, an unwavering assumption among Germans is that the food industry is poisoning us.

Many people in our country believe that the “food mafia” (made up of Frankenstein-like scientists, packaging fraudsters, wine adulterators, deceivers, cheats and animal torturers) is dominating the food production market.

Ever-recurring headlines about hazardous substances found in food have created a deep mistrust.

I for one, no longer allow my appetite to be spoiled, as, at my age, I have become crisis-proof. From the population explosion to the extinction of the German population, from dying forests to mad cow disease, we've already been through quite a lot!

Note that despite being the first generation of Germans who have lived their entire life in peace, prosperity and – for those who grew up in West Germany – freedom, we are the generation that constantly expects the world to end. We are a generation that will become older than any former generation and yet we incessantly choose to believe that we are in peril of death.

We live at a time when the dangers of nature are hidden from us or scarcely noticed by most, and therefore fear focuses on technology.

This became very clear in 2011 with reports on the situation in Japan. Earthquakes and Tsunamis which claimed almost 16,000 lives were far less relevant from a German perspective than the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster. This was true despite the fact that not one single Person was exposed to a life-threatening dose of high radiation.

Along with atomic power, the chemical industry is also viewed with contempt. A friend of mine, David Harnasch (a journalist from Freiburg) once put this theory to the test. He asked people to sign a petition to prohibit the use of Dihydrogen Monoxide.

Dihydrogen Monoxide is simply a rather long-winded chemical term for water.

He gave the following information to the people he talked to: Dihydrogen Monoxide is contained in almost all foodstuffs including baby food. Farmers spray it on their fields. If you inhale it in its pure form, you will die.

Not one of the people approached asked what kind of substance it was or whether it could also be used for a good purpose. The sound of the unfamiliar chemical term was enough in itself to encourage everyone approached to sign the petition.

In telling this true anecdote, it is not my aim to mock the population's level of education. I myself would not have immediately known the true identity of Dihydrogen Monoxide either.

I simply wish to demonstrate that an unknown chemical term is enough in itself to generate fear.

The fear of the chemical industry, which is widespread among the population, is one of the causes behind pseudo-scandals and media hype in the food industry.

Artificial flavorings, additives and preservatives are enough to arouse suspicion. Anyone who adds something to an allegedly natural foodstuff to make it last longer or improve its taste, is automatically labeled as a "poisoner". The fact that traditional food such as cheese or beer is the result of biochemical processes is consequently ignored.

Distrust of the residual traces of pesticides is also particularly strong.

Greenpeace and other representatives of the fear industry regularly organize campaigns to highlight the presence of residual pesticides on fruit and vegetables. They repeatedly present sample showing traces above the permitted maximum values.

Certainly, this mustn't happen.

However, these reports hardly ever mention the fact that these maximum legal values (about which a lot of fuss is made if they are exceeded) are generally 100 times lower (and sometimes even lower) than the values established as causing health implications in animal experiments.

Of course, there is a core of truth to the fear of pesticides. After all, pesticides are poisons designed to kill fungi, weeds or insects, and farmers must use them with care. Anyone who distributes cans of the stuff onto their fields, without taking plenty of precaution, will indeed endanger themselves and others.

However, it is no coincidence that the alleged pesticide scandals make no mention of dosages despite the fact that the question of dosage is a prerequisite to any toxicological assessment.

Paracelsus' rule from the 16th century applies here: "All things are poisons, for there is nothing without poisonous qualities. It is only the dose which makes a thing poisonous."

There is no risk *per se*. A risk can only be assessed if it can be compared to something.

When I hear about something being dangerous, I like to be able to compare it to a danger that I am familiar with.

Whoever claims that something is poisonous *per se* regardless of the dosage should know that about half of all substances, whether synthetic or natural, can cause cancer in laboratory animals if administered in appropriately high doses.

Even pesticide-free vegetables are not free of toxins. Plants themselves produce toxins to spoil the appetite of caterpillars and other pests that want to eat them.

99 percent of all toxins that we consume are natural ingredients.

The regular scandals about pesticide residues are also the result of progress made in measuring technology. Thanks to ever improving measuring devices used in analysis labs, the quantities of undesirable substances detected in food and drink are becoming ever smaller.

Where once, a thousandth of a gram of a potentially carcinogenic substance was enough to tip the balance of an analysis device, today a millionth or even a billionth of a gram is enough to do the same.

The standard trick of the fear industry consists of turning relative risks into absolute risks.

Take an example from the field of pharmacology: in 1995, the news that third generation contraceptive pills increased the risk of thrombosis by one hundred percent terrified women in Great Britain.

In absolute terms, the risk was still very low: Out of 20,000 women taking the pill, six suffered from thrombosis whereas three out of 20,000 had suffered with the previous generation of pills.

However, this important element in understanding the risk was not actually communicated. Many women immediately stopped taking the new pill. In the following year in the UK, there were 26,000 additional unwanted pregnancies and 14,000 more abortions.

You could object that such excessive prudence with regard to potentially hazardous substances or potentially harmful radiation is really not such a bad thing.

It is better to have a maximum permissible value which is too strict than one that is too relaxed. It is better to have one too many bans than one too few – then you're on the safe side.

However such thinking is a fallacy because avoiding a slight risk is often associated with a far greater risk – as the English pill scandal demonstrated.

Another example:

At the start of the 90s, the Peruvian government refused to disinfect its drinking water with chlorine. It justified its decision with studies showing that chlorine was a carcinogenic substance. However, chlorine is also one of the most effective weapons in the fight against infectious diseases such as Cholera. As a result, a Cholera epidemic cost the lives of about 7,000 Peruvians.

The fear of pesticide residues has recently gained a new rival: the fear of genetic engineering. In this area too, the fear industry managed to spread fear about a key 21st century technology.

Anti-genetic engineering campaigns survive on the myth that Germany does not practice genetic engineering. However, patients are treated with genetically engineered medicines in German hospitals, and healthy people are immunized with genetically engineered vaccines. Diabetics inject themselves with genetically engineered insulin.

Groceries in supermarkets contain over sixty percent of genetically-engineered components such as amino acids, vitamins or yeast.

Millions of German tourists – including Green Party politicians – have visited the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil and other countries where farmers grow genetically improved maize and soybean varieties, and have eaten the groceries produced there.

And then there's cotton. German T-shirts and underwear are all made from cotton, along with tampons, coffee filters, bandages and cotton wool. Euro notes are also made from cotton.

Cotton products can hardly be GM-free as 82 percent of the world's cotton comes from genetically modified varieties.

A while ago, I asked the then Minister of Agriculture Ilse Aigner: "You banned the production of GM corn in Germany. How does that work when you're abroad, say in the USA or Canada where most groceries are genetically engineered? Do you have a problem with that?"

She replied: "When I'm abroad, I eat what everyone else eats. I'm not afraid of food produced from genetically modified plants but I take the concerns of our consumers seriously."

Are we really taking citizens seriously if our policies are guided by fears which we ourselves consider completely nonsensical? Or does this show that we take voters for idiots in need of therapeutic care because they cannot cope with the facts?

Genetically modified plants have been grown commercially since the mid-90s. In 2012, there were 170 million hectares, more than Europe's entire agricultural area. 17.3 million farmers utilize the advantages of these plants. And not one single person or nature itself has ever suffered as a result.

However, a coalition made up of environmentalists, priests, politicians and journalists has succeeded in making Germans believe that this technology is a terrible threat.

This rumor is paying off for the fear industry, particularly for certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

When it comes to the subject of NGOs, many of us still remember little David in his small rubber dinghy as he courageously set out to attack the supertanker Goliath. But those times are long gone.

In the 21st century, many thousands of international NGOs are active throughout the world. If you also include organizations restricted to their own country, there are in fact millions of them.

Some of them have even developed into governmental Goliaths. They sit on United Nations councils or in EU institutions and are invited to parliamentary committees where their voice is heard. And for good measure, they are also actively funded by tax payers.

The large green NGOs enjoy a reputation of being "an advocate for good". Virtually all the media portray their evaluations and targets as being the absolute truth. These parties organize their environment, climate and health policies to suit themselves.

Any scientists who come to different conclusions than Greenpeace and "Friends of the Earth", etc. are rarely interviewed by journalists.

The older ones among you will still remember the time when the forests were dying out. In the 80s, this theory represented Germany's number one fear in a similar way to global warming today. Media researcher Rudolf Holzberger carried out an inquiry into the coverage and number of scientists who had actually supported this theory. There were two of them: a soil scientist from Göttingen and a forestry botanist from Munich. Apart from these two scientists, hardly anyone else has ever been quoted. But these two scientists are quoted time and again.

This method has proven reliable to this very day. Pick a couple of scientists who best suit the ideology you are trying to spread. Then use them to barnstorm the media.

Green NGOs are seen as altruistic and uninterested, obligated simply by their high morals. However, a medium-sized company such as Greenpeace Germany with over 47 million Euros' worth of donations has at least one interest: to preserve its 200 jobs.

And these jobs can only be secured by continuing to sell horror stories to the public.

The EU finances some of the most powerful green NGOs with sums in the high tens of millions. According to estimations, NGOs have become the world's eighth largest economic sector.

Let there be no misunderstanding on this point: most NGOs carry out valuable work for respectable social, ecological or cultural concerns.

However, some of them have now become powerful lobbying institutions similar to trade unions, churches or industrial associations.

NGOs have a significant civil society controlling function. But who is controlling the controllers?

Some of them lack any legitimization through a membership base. Some of the largest among them are not even democratic but are controlled by a small circle of activist friends.

Ever since environmental protection became successful in industrial countries, since Germany's rivers were cleaned up and the air was made purer, green NGOs started to act in the same way as any other institution. They began the search for new activities to avoid becoming obsolete.

Unfortunately, less and less scientists get to decide which new issues should be exposed, instead, this is decided by NGO economy managers: campaigners, donation collectors and PR experts.

When deciding on campaigns, the question of "What is the most important environmental and health problem?" hardly plays a role anymore.

Commercial considerations have become increasingly important: Will people make donations for it? Does it have emotional appeal? Will the campaign make a good impact?

Let's have a look at the core activity of green NGOs: What happens when they reach their targets? Is the outcome better for people and nature? The results are rather mixed.

As I explained earlier with the example of the contraceptive pill and the addition of chlorine to water, complete avoidance of a risk can become the greatest risk of all, especially if the risks which should be avoided are determined by ideological criteria. A few examples:

- Green NGOs encouraged the ban on the use of DDT pesticides which had a lethal impact on birds in agriculture. However, DDT was also one of the strongest weapons in the fight against malaria. In Sri Lanka, for example, thanks to the use of small amounts of DDT, the number of malaria deaths per year decreased from 7,300 to 17. After green NGOs enforced a ban on DDT, the number of victims dramatically rose again. Today, according to the WHO, the mosquito-transmitted disease causes the loss of millions of lives.
- Green NGOs are working to prevent genetic engineering of plants. In 2002, under pressure from European genetic engineering opponents, the Zambian government refused to distribute US food aid to its starving people because it contained maize which, as is customary in the US, came from genetically engineered varieties.
- In the 80s and 90s, green NGOs fought against "red genetic engineering". For this reason, the Hessian Ministry of the Environment, led by Joschka Fischer, prevented the production of a better-tolerated insulin preparation for diabetics because it was genetically engineered. The urgently required insulin was manufactured in France and imported into Germany.

None of the above examples affected the impeccable reputation of these organizations. In the public eye, they continued to be seen as the good guys.

Opinion polls repeatedly show that NGOs are significantly more trusted than most other institutions. They are perceived to be the uncompromising advocates of general

public interest who do not go boss-eyed over election dates or balance sheets and persistently strive for the good of all.

Many see in them the best representative of the people and trust them more than they do elected parliamentarians. Even the financial scandals of several major NGOs barely dented their flawless reputations.

Strengthened by this foundation of trust, when it comes to debates about healthy eating, NGOs play the role of the public educator who determines what we should and should not eat.

Completely overwhelmed by shopping, food and drink, the citizen is declared to be in need of care and constant guidance. He is no longer able to make his own purchasing decisions or to read information on the ingredients.

He must be incessantly protected from the wheelings and dealings of a dark industry.

The consumer has become the ward of the NGOs.

It is about time that we ask these alleged "advocates of good" the same critical questions that we would ask when carrying out research into companies.

However it is precisely my branch of trade – the media – that remains remarkably uncritical in this area. We prefer to target the usual suspects and concentrate on their mistakes and failures.

Whenever the media creates a real or alleged scandal about an issue, public reactions always follow the same pattern: Short prelude, rapid build-up leading to a hysterical climax where every insignificant little detail is rolled out at length and repeated on all frequencies.

The ending is always the same too: the subject fades away into the mists of the news machine and simply disappears.

Whether we're talking about horse meat, pesticides or acrylamide, dioxin or BSE, after the wave of hysteria, news reports always peter out into nothing. We virtually never take stock of the situation and we are never given the "all-clear".

The fact that forecasts never materialize or that the predicted sick and dead are often alive and kicking never becomes a subject for public debate.

When there actually was a disaster in 2011, and people died or became seriously ill due to E coli bacteria, the public did not get as upset as usual. The reaction was surprisingly mild.

A survey carried out in the autumn of 2011 shows the extent to which public perception can be distorted. Most consumers considered that the threat of eggs contaminated with dioxin (this was the subject of the January 2011 scandal) was worse than the E coli outbreak in the summer of 2011.

Yet, at no point in time was the health of anyone endangered by the eggs contaminated by dioxin.

On the other hand, the E coli epidemic was the worst food disaster in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. Over 4,000 people were affected and 53 people died. 855 developed a life-threatening kidney malfunction. Some of them since depend on dialysis.

The root causes were organic sprouts imported from Egypt which had been processed by an organic farm in Lower Saxony.

The situation remained amazingly calm as the deadly microbes came from the "wrong" industry. In Germany, hardly any other occupation enjoys as much sympathy as that of the organic farmer. And yet the organic content of food consumption amounts to a miserable 3.7 percent. Nevertheless, almost everyone believes that organic groceries are healthy and are helping to save the world. The majority of journalists also have great sympathy for organic farming.

If the contaminated sprouts had been discovered at Nestlé or in McDonald's salads, I can guarantee that there would have been a completely different reaction.

But back to the usual food scandals which create much ado but are without fatalities. In retrospect we never really know how they end. After the panic, there is always a news vacuum. The topic simply peters out.

As the years go by, one scandal turns into another and fear piles upon fear in the consciousness of many television viewers. Only very few concretely remember what actually became of each topic. We are left with a vague feeling of being constantly threatened and there remains a deep sense of mistrust of the food industry and government authorities.

The media play this game again and again. Their key principle is: only bad news is news.

Depending on the way in which it is presented, good news can be turned into bad news.

In October 2012, a particularly good example of how to turn good news into bad news attracted my attention on the daily news broadcast "Tagesschau".

The fact underlying the report was actually a happy one: life expectancy was not only increasing in wealthy industrial countries but also in developing countries.

But what did the Tagesschau make of it?

"The world's population is ageing at an ever faster pace."

My favorite headline is one heading up an article reporting that the forest area was increasing in the Alps. It stated:

"Tree invasion threatens alpine meadows!"

If you wish to terrify readers and viewers but don't have any facts to hand, I recommend diligent use of the word "could". A certain type of substance "could" be danger-

ous. It “could” have serious consequences even if nobody has ever suffered any harm.

In this way you can lose all sense of life's actual risks.

People who get on a motor bike without hesitation are terrified of a bag of chips.

Through fear of being criticized, industrial companies submit themselves to the rules of the game defined by the NGOs and their media power. This is how the genetic engineering ban came about in the retail industry in 2004.

Anti-genetic engineering activists bullied the major retail chains until they declared that their ranges no longer included products from genetically modified plants.

As trade companies capitulated, this decision was taken as evidence to demonstrate how dangerous green genetic engineering was. Motto: even the food trade industry is afraid!

This had a pleasant side effect for the professional scaremongers. The consumer will not fall into temptation to taste a genetically engineered product or consider it good.

The formula for success.

Step one: Unsettle producers and traders.

Step two: Once they are unnerved and have abandoned the product, publicly embrace them, declare them to be an ally, and announce that nobody wants this innovation anyway.

This cunning game can only be stopped if traders and processors display enough courage to use better arguments and put Greenpeace and Co. in their place once and for all.

However, companies generally choose the easier road of hurried submission.

This policy of bowing and scraping, practiced today by many companies in the food processing industry and trade, is an invitation to continued moral blackmail.

Anyone wishing to restore confidence must make it crystal clear what its company and its products stand for.

To do so, companies must first critically examine their own production methods and the origin of the raw materials they use. If anything rotten is detected, it should be highlighted and rectified.

Once that has been done, we should stand by what we do – even if we are attacked for it.

Today, many managers prefer to duck away from their responsibilities and avoid harsh confrontation. In doing so, they forget that companies must own up to their social responsibility and clearly fight against scaremongering and public hysteria.

Acting responsibly also means defending oneself against the demagogues whoever they may be.