

We are glad to see UC Berkeley showing films related to agriculture and food!

However, this particular film — [Food Evolution](#) — deserves to be called out for what it is: a piece of propaganda. We write as scholars and researchers who have long been working with issues of plant biotechnology, sustainable agriculture, the media, and food justice. Some of us were also interviewed for the film. We thus have some insight into the history, funding, and politics of expertise surrounding the film's topics.

Featuring Bill Nye ('the Science Guy') and Neil de Grasse Tyson, the documentary tagline asks: "Do alternative facts and fake news enrage you as much when the topic is...food?" Unfortunately, it appears to repeat a pattern we've seen time and again. The film purports to offer an 'objective analysis.' It manufactures scientific consensus where [no such agreement](#) exists. And it naturalizes the knowledge it conveys as common sense: 'Evolution.'

To do so, it set out to bring in people "from all sides" of the GMO debate. Champions of sustainable agriculture and food justice like George Naylor, Timothy Wise, Vandana Shiva, and Michael Pollan. Biotech proponents like journalist Mark Lynas. As mediators we get the beloved public scientists Tyson and Nye. But the film proceeds to undercut the critics in multiple ways. Some folks, like Wise and Naylor — known for [incisive critiques](#) of GM crops, price-fixing, and corporate consolidation of agriculture — were not included in the film after they learned that the filmmaker had misrepresented its editorial focus and funding, and Wise withdrew his consent to be in the film. The remaining voices are now framed as impassioned but ultimately kooky and unscientific, the equivalent of climate-change deniers.

This tactic is nothing new, but it's particularly vexing in a film that especially purports to go deeper. It's also particularly ironic given the conflicts of interest in play. The project was funded by the Institute of Food Technologists, a professional association for food scientists and technologists which has long had interests in food biotechnology.

Mark Lynas works with the Cornell Alliance for Science, formed in 2014 with a [US\\$5.6 million grant](#) from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to "depolarize" the debate over GM foods. Alison Van Eenennaam, a prominent UC Davis animal scientist interviewed in the film, has worked in the past for Monsanto. Even the ostensibly neutral arbiters — Tyson and Nye — have already become well-known [as boosters](#) for biotech solutions to food insecurity.

The upshot is a portrayal that marginalizes the lived experiences of farmers and eaters, that downplays the concerns of a public that's increasingly savvy to corporate-driven science (see: the "[Monsanto Papers](#)"), and that overlooks the eager [enrollment of journalists](#) and front groups to do PR for agribusiness. It also ignores the validity of mounting scientific research: by natural and social scientists who have documented the connections between genetic engineering (GE), fossil fuel and chemical dependency, and monoculture cropping. We know that Africans aren't starving for lack of technology (as this film portrays) but because of centuries of colonial land and seed dispossession. We know that control of intellectual property is central to interests in

genetic engineering, as evidenced by the triplet rise of patents, GE seeds, and [corporate seed industry consolidation](#) in the past twenty years.

GE can't be understood in isolation, we now know, as it co-produces a complex industrialized agri-food system that damages landscapes, water systems, biodiversity, worker health, traditional seed systems, and rural livelihoods globally. Good science has produced plenty of reservations that biotech will be equitably benefit people and nature, but here that science is ignored.

The general public who will watch this film is, by extension, also discredited. People were right to be skeptical about cigarettes when Philip Morris insisted they were safe. They were right to be wary of Exxon Mobil which, we now know, suppressed its knowledge about climate change for more than 50 years. They're now perfectly legitimate in wondering if agrichemical giant DuPont has the public's best interests at heart (see this [11-part series](#) in the Intercept), or why Syngenta loves some scientists and [loathes others](#). To treat the public as ignorant about biotechnology is to misunderstand (or misconstrue) their warranted concerns over how science has been abused to mislead corrupted regulators and citizens about the systemic safety of their products.

Our education teaches us to value scientific research. But it also teaches us that we can value scientific inquiry without viewing the sciences [as free of politics](#). Films like these make pretenses to the latter, while being riddled with their own conflicts of interest, only confounding a conversation that continues to shed less light than heat.

Stay tuned for more in-depth investigations by journalists who've been following this film's development closely. We'll circulate those articles in hopes of fostering more critical discussion about the intersection of technology, agriculture, and social change.

Signed by:

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