

Part II: The Messages

A core function of these front groups is to promote messages that benefit the bottom line and advance the policy agenda of industrial agriculture. These frames are designed to become part of the dominant narrative of our food system. In this section, we share five of these messages developed by industry to respond to real-world concerns raised by scientists, public health advocates and elected officials about the risks and impacts of industrial agriculture. This is not meant to be an exhaustive compendium of these framing messages, nor a thorough refutation of them, but an opportunity to showcase five being pushed by front groups using the tactics we describe below.



Source: USFRA Antibiotics Messaging and Working Group

(1) “Organic is no better than conventional and not worth the money.”

The Spin: The past several years have seen a strong push from industry to convince the public there are no clear benefits to eating organic food, claiming in particular that organic methods use pesticides, too. Many media outlets have picked on up this message, running with headlines such as “Save your cash? Organic food is not healthier” (*NY Daily News*); “Organic food no better than conventional for kids” (*NBC News*); “Is It Worth Buying Organic? Maybe Not” (*Time*).⁷⁴



How to sell a toxic pesticide the smart way—call it organic

Hank Campbell | October 24, 2014 | Genetic Literacy Project

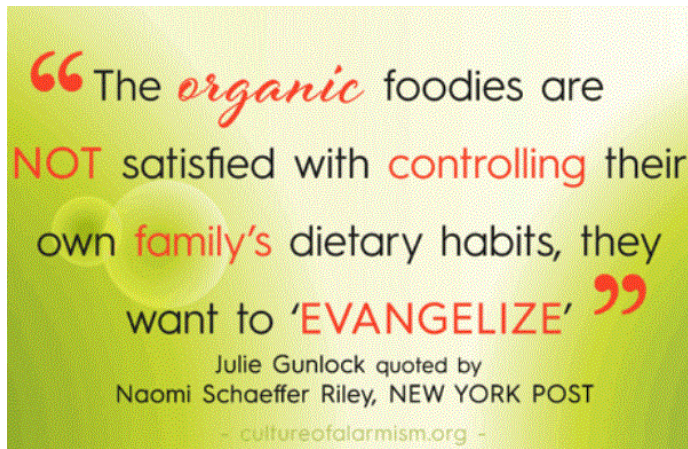
From the Genetic Literacy Project
www.geneticliteracyproject.org

The Reality: There is a rich literature describing the risks of chemical pesticide residue on food and the nutritional, public health and ecological benefits of choosing organic.⁷⁵ A large and growing body of peer-reviewed science demonstrates how agrochemicals degrade water and air quality, damage critical ecosystems and beneficial organisms, and pose serious risks to farmers, pesticide applicators and farmworkers and their families as well as nearby communities.⁷⁶ UC Berkeley’s CHAMACOS study has been tracking farmworker children, from the womb on, and finding neurodevelopmental implications of *in vitro* pesticide exposure.⁷⁷ The Agricultural Health Study has been following tens of thousands of U.S. agricultural workers since 1993, finding that agrochemical exposure leads to higher rates of certain cancers — including leukemia, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and cancers of the lip, stomach, skin, brain and prostate — and other health effects, from asthma to neurologic disorders to reproductive problems.⁷⁸ Recognizing that the public is concerned about pesticides, industry groups have been pushing a corollary talking point that organic agriculture uses pesticides, too; however, this ignores the evidence that organic pesticides tend to be far less toxic, degrade faster, and are used as a last resort, compared with the massive quantities and toxic-level levels of chemicals on industrial farms.⁷⁹

(2) “Organic food advocates are elitist food nannies.”

The Spin: The assertion that advocates for healthy, sustainable food choices are elitists and finger-wagging scolds out to undermine personal freedoms dates back to at least 1981. That year, a *Washington Post* op-ed described public health advocates’ attempts to rein in junk food marketing to children as the efforts of the “nanny state.”⁸⁰ This language is being used with increasing fre-

quency, both to disparage the efforts of communities to promote healthy food and as a way to shift attention from the veracity of the messages by demonizing the messengers. A few examples:



Source: Independent Women's Forum www.iwf.org/blog/2793752/Meet-the-Organic-Mom-Mafia

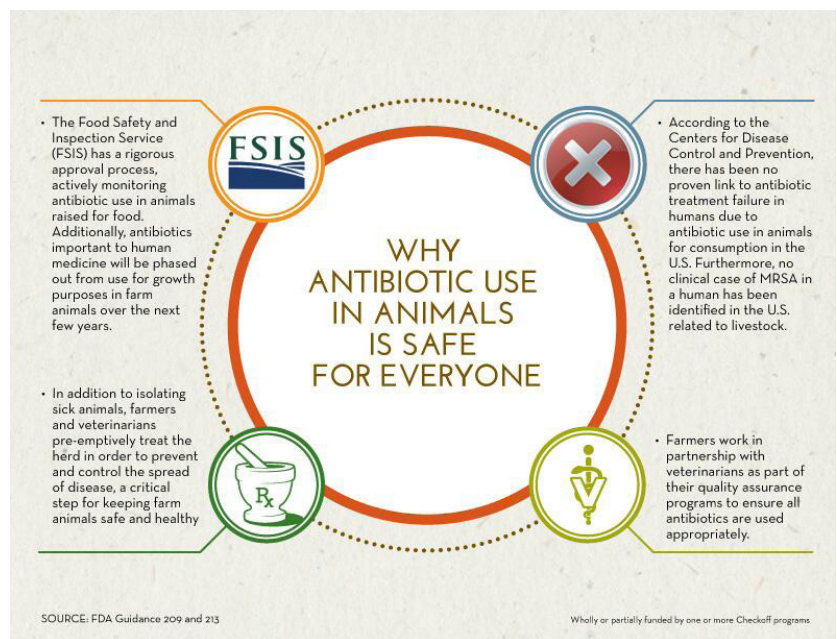
“We live in a food nanny state” (*Globe and Mail* 2011);⁸¹ “Food nanny Mike declares war on salt in NYers diet” (*New York Post* 2010);⁸² “Food nanny activists’ ‘studies’ support non-solutions to childhood obesity” (*Forbes* 2012);⁸³ “Snobby first lady made dough from ‘cheese dust’” (*Boston Herald* 2015);⁸⁴ “The tyranny of the organic mommy mafia” (*New York Post* 2014).⁸⁵

The Reality: Some of the most vocal advocates for getting toxics out of the food supply and for building a just and sustainable food system are among the most vulnerable — and decidedly un-elite — among us: farmworkers on the frontlines of toxic pesticide exposure like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers; food justice advocates fighting for healthy food access and better working conditions like the Food Chain Workers Alliance; working-class communities and their children living in toxic pesticide drift zones like those organizing with Pesticide Action Network; and labor advocates exposing unsafe workplace conditions in food production facilities like the unions representing meat packing workers. There is a growing body of science that is guiding vulnerable communities and parents to make healthier, organic choices

for themselves and their children. These include studies linking low-level exposure to pesticides during pregnancy and early childhood to learning disabilities and lower IQ, as well as recent designations of some of our most common pesticides as hormone disruptors and carcinogens.⁸⁶ In fact, the most recent data available shows that growing numbers of African American and Hispanic families are choosing organic; a 2014 survey of 1,200 households conducted by the Organic Trade Association found that the demographics of organic buyers closely follows the demographics of the American population.⁸⁷

(3) “U.S. meat production is safe, efficient and does not overuse antibiotics.”

The Spin: U.S. industrial meat production, including the widespread use of hormones, growth promoters and routine antibiotics, is completely safe.⁸⁸ In addition, the industry, including the Animal Agriculture Alliance and the American Meat Institute, often tout how it is committed to the “judicious” and responsible use of antibiotics to maintain the health of livestock⁸⁹ and that antibiotic resistance is primarily a result of overuse of antibiotics in human medicine.⁹⁰



Source: Graphic funded wholly or partially by one or more checkoff programs and posted at TheFarmer'sDaughterUSA.com⁹¹, [The Statler Family Farms](http://TheStatlerFamilyFarms.com) blog and more.

The Reality: According to experts, including those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Academies of Science, the routine overuse of antibiotics in U.S. meat production is contributing to the rise of antibiotic resistance, one of the country's most serious public health problems.⁹² Pharmaceutical industry data provided to the Food and Drug Administration indicate that 70 percent of the antibiotic types used in human medicine are sold for use in food-producing animals.⁹³ According to the FDA, sale of these drugs for use by the livestock sector surged 16 percent between 2009 and 2012.⁹⁴ And according to many public health advocates, solving the growing problem of antibiotic resistance will only be possible with a dramatic reduction in the routine use of antibiotics in animal production.⁹⁵ There are also serious health and animal welfare concerns about the extensive use of growth hormones⁹⁶ and growth promoters⁹⁷ in beef, pork and turkey.

(4) “We need GMOs to feed the world.”



Screenshot from Monsanto.com (March 2015)

The Spin: From Monsanto's website to the op-ed pages of the biggest media outlets, the biotech industry promotes the message that GMOs are essential to feeding the world's growing population, largely based on the claim that biotech crops increase yields and use fewer resources.

The Reality: Since their first commercialization in 1994, genetically engineered traits have largely been introduced into commodities like corn, soy and cotton that are mostly grown for animal feed, biofuels or fiber. These crops are not being grown to feed people directly, or at all. Of the genetic engineering traits developed to date, the most common ones create herbicide tolerance or insecticidal properties. According to the USDA,

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more than 90 percent of these genetically engineered crops planted in the U.S. are designed to resist the spraying of herbicides.⁹⁸

In addition, more than 20 years of research shows that genetic engineering has not produced the yield boom industry promised.⁹⁹ GMO companies point out that yields for U.S. corn jumped by 28 percent from 1996 to 2008, the period when GMO corn was first widely planted.¹⁰⁰ But this confuses correlation with causation. According to an analysis of USDA data by the Union of Concerned Scientists, any increases in yields during this time were largely the result of conventional breeding and other improvements in farming methods and had little to do with genetic engineering.¹⁰¹

Moreover, many have observed that genetically engineered seeds for herbicide tolerance or insecticidal purposes do not address the root causes of hunger that afflicts nearly a billion people globally. As the head of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, Graziano de Silva has said: "...food production is not a sufficient condition for food security."¹⁰² Indeed, feeding a growing population is not primarily a productivity issue. High rates of poverty, low wages, and lack of access to land, water and other basic infrastructure for small-scale farmers — who already produce 70 percent of the world's food — are the main barriers to feeding

the world.¹⁰³ Furthermore, contrary to the repeated myth that industrial farming is the only way to feed a growing population, a growing body of research — including a recent 2014 UC Berkeley meta-analysis — shows that organic, diversified agriculture is highly productive, and can deliver high yields at or just below the level of industrial agriculture.¹⁰⁴ Most importantly, it can do so while producing important ecological and health benefits and freeing farmers from dependency on purchased seeds, toxic pesticides and synthetic fertilizer.

(5) “The science is settled — GMOs are safe.”



The Spin: Over the past few years, the biotech industry has pushed a narrative that there is a consensus about the safety and positive benefits of GMO production, including in the reduction in the use of pesticides. More recently, industry and the media have spuriously compared GMO critics to anti-science climate deniers.

The Reality: Among the global scientific community, there is great debate about the safety and benefits of GMOs.¹⁰⁵ In December 2015, the journal *Environmental Sciences Europe* published a paper signed by 300 scientists from around the world that clarified the ongoing scientific debate over the risks and benefits of genetic engineering. The authors write that the claim of consensus about GMO safety “is misleading and misrepresents or outright ignores the currently available scientific evidence and the broad diversity of scientific opinions among scientists on this issue.”¹⁰⁶

A report co-authored by hundreds of scientists from around the world and commissioned by the



World Bank and other global institutions, meanwhile, found consensus about the need to deploy agroecological solutions to address the roots of hunger and shift agricultural systems away from the reliance on agrochemicals in farming that genetic engineering perpetuates.¹⁰⁷

Contrary to the often published industry myth that GMO crops reduce the use of pesticides, A University of Washington study found that the widespread planting of GMOs has resulted in a net increase of 400 million pounds of pesticides applied on the soil from 1996-2011.¹⁰⁸ Agrochemical companies have long promoted glyphosate, the primary herbicide applied on GMOs as “safe and benign,” but the World Health Organization

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Industry has often claimed that chemicals are perfectly safe when overwhelming scientific evidence has eventually proven otherwise. Source: www.thesocietypages.org (2015)

has recently listed the chemical as a probable human carcinogen.¹⁰⁹ And the U.S. Geological Survey, which recently concluded that glyphosate is widespread in our nation's air and water, has noted that "many studies indicate that commercial glyphosate formulations can be more toxic than pure glyphosate due to the toxicity of additives, such as surfactants (detergents)."¹¹⁰ Many experts,

including the USDA, predict that the next generation of 2,4-D-resistant GMO crops will lead to significant increases in the use of even more toxic pesticides.¹¹¹

The next section outlines the communications tactics used by industry groups to move these messages into the media and into the public conversation about food and farming.

words to lose -	words to use +
Pesticides	Preventing bugs and other pests from eating crops
Fertilizer and Nitrogen	Nurturing crops with nutrients at exactly the right time, at the right rate, and in the right amounts to make them thrive
GMOs	Seeds that grow stronger, more resilient and better tasting crops
Antibiotics	Keeping animals healthy
Hormones	MAINTAINING growth

U.S. Farmers & Ranchers Alliance

Source: USFRA Ag Forward Communications Strategy (September, 2011) webadmin.pork.org/filelibrary/Retail/092711USFRAPresentation.pdf