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MEDIA CULTURE &SOCIETY

Sabotage and subterfuge: public relations, democracy and genetic engineering in New Zealand

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Introduction

Public relations has often been criticized for playing a pivotal role in the corporate sector's attempts to undermine public debate and concern about environmental issues (Beder, 1997; Hager and Burton, 1999; Halvarg, 1994; Hawken, 1993; Mitchie, 1998; Stauber and Rampton, 1995). Analyses of corporate environmental public relations work demonstrate how businesses are promoted as 'environmentally responsible' and how this can succeed in pacifying concerned publics when the validity of these evidently persuasive claims is highly questionable. Yet critics of 'environmental' public relations practices have not examined how they are actively encouraged and accepted by the politics of neo-liberal market economies and governments. In this article, we argue that in New Zealand such an economy provided the 'justification' for corporate and government public relations attempts to stifle public debate about the environmental and health implications of genetic engineering research. Indeed, the article demonstrates how, in a neo-liberal political economy, public relations may be used to promote wealth creation as a public interest priority above and beyond the public's right to be informed about the possible negative consequences of wealth creation initiatives.

The article explores the relationship between New Zealand's neo-liberal political economy and public relations practices through an analysis of the

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campaigns developed by the consultancy Communications Trumps for King Salmon, a privately-owned company, which sought issues-management advice on its genetic engineering experiments on salmon, and for the New Zealand Government-funded Crown Research Institutes (CRIs). The CRIs were involved in genetic engineering research and sought to use public relations to create a climate of favourable public opinion for their work through the establishment of an educational trust called the Gene Technology Information Trust. This trust set up an information programme called 'Gene Pool' 'to inform the public on all matters relating to genetic research' (Trotter, 1999) that was managed by Communication Trumps. Through the analysis of these campaigns we examine how both the government and private sectors engaged in a discursive struggle in an attempt to influence the meanings that circulate about genetic engineering, and how these meanings are couched in terms of the public interest.

In line with our argument that public relations work has to be placed within the context of a political economy, an outline of the relationship between the New Zealand political economy and the genetic modification debate is presented. This is followed by a detailed description of the public relations work conducted by Communication Trumps for King Salmon and Gene Pool, as well as an explanation of how this work became public. We then provide a discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 1995) of the texts produced as part of these attempts to manage public information in genetic engineering. Our discussion and analysis of the public relations work also draw on media reports about King Salmon and Gene Pool, an interview conducted by the first author with the Chair of the New Zealand Parliament's Education and Science Select Committee, and a report from that committee on Communication Trumps' work for Gene Pool.

Theoretical perspective

Analyses of environmental public relations practices predominantly fall within two different paradigms. For example, Seitel's (1998) case analysis of the Exxon Valdez disaster is representative of a functionalist prescriptive approach (Trujillo and Toth, 1987). In contrast, Beder (1997), Stauber and Rampton (1995) and Hager and Burton (1999) reflect an investigative journalistic approach where the purpose is to expose 'corporate myths and methods of manipulation' (Beder, 1997: 12). While examples of critical academic analyses of environmental public relations are few, a critical paradigm emphasizes the role of public relations in the establishment and maintenance of hegemonic discourses and relations of power and dominance (L'Etang and Pieczka, 1996; Motion and Leitch, 1996). Trujillo and Toth described the role of critical approaches to public relations as being to:

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> focus attention on the powers of organisations in society and alert us to possible abuses of those powers by organisational members. In this way, critical approaches may provide more self-conscious frameworks for examining public relations research and practice in its broader ethical and societal context. (1987: 220–1)

Our work is positioned within this critical paradigm – it investigates and critiques public relations practice and also offers new ways of thinking about that practice.

However, exactly what constitutes public relations practice is a matter of academic contestation. The transitional, shifting and changing meanings of public relations are highlighted by Cheney and Vibbert (1987) in their brief description and analysis of the history of the field. It is widely held that modern definitions of public relations were originated in North America by two key figures: Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays (see, for example, Cheney and Vibbert, 1987; Ewen, 1996; Olasky, 1989). According to Cheney and Vibbert, for Ivy Lee 'public relations was publicity' (1987: 168), whereas Edward Bernays called what he did 'public relations counsel' (Cheney and Vibbert, 1987: 169). The approach used by Edward Bernays, which he termed 'engineering consent', was one of persuasion, of directing or orchestrating public opinion (Ewen, 1996). Thus the origins of modern public relations were rooted in publicity, persuasion and counselling models of communication.

The theoretical approach that best fits the present work is a critical one that examines the engineering of public opinion on the issue of genetic engineering in New Zealand. Drawing upon Foucault's notion of power as productive, public relations can be conceived of as a discourse which may have as its ideal the advocacy of equal and fair power relations. However, regardless of ideals, power relations are an integral, inescapable component of public relationships. Thus, from this perspective, public relations is redefined in the following way: 'Public relations is the production and exchange of meanings through relationships in which power is a regulating, mitigating factor' (Motion, 1997: 19). This definition recognizes the role that public relations may play as a power broker in society and, more broadly, in democratic process.

Cutlip et al. argue that 'Public relations . . . contributes to making the democratic process – as well as the social, economic, and political systems – more effective in meeting social needs' (2000: 25). This is an idealistic and positive view of public relations that fails to acknowledge the power position of public relations counsel. Questions need to be posed about whether it is in fact social needs or corporate needs that public relations aims to meet. Davis, for example, explored the relationship between public relations and democracy, highlighting the way in which the evolution of public relations was 'directly linked to the needs of capitalist democracies'

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(2000: 45). He argued that 'the needs of the state and corporate sectors – to control information flows within the public sphere in the name of the consumer-citizen – necessitate the creation of a professional public relations sector' (2000: 46). This introduces the notion that the profession of public relations and its practices are intrinsically linked to the nature of the political economy. What is questionable is Davis's argument that information flows are controlled in the name of the consumer-citizen; rather, they are controlled in the interests of the clients who employ public relations practitioners. Nevertheless, as is evident from public relations codes of ethics, within the profession there is a perceived tension between the 'dual obligations to a client or employer and to the democratic process' (Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995: 121). This tension, and the fact that public relations is popularly regarded as working in the interests of its clients, and is little more than 'spin', has attracted considerable bad publicity for the profession.

L'Etang highlights the crisis that the public relations profession now faces in regard to its identity and reputation: 'The fact that the term "public relations" itself is falling into disrepute ("just a PR exercise") suggests there is a fundamental problem with the occupation and its standing and reputation in society' (1998: 414). Although, as L'Etang states, 'The themes of democracy, mutuality, reciprocal exchange and the breaking down of barriers remain as core values in public relations discourse, both academic and practitioner' (1998: 425), it is questionable whether these themes are prevalent within public relations practice. This is especially so given that, as L'Etang has herself commented, 'public relations services are only available to elite collectivities' (1996: 97) which predominantly comprise the corporate class. The role of public relations practitioners as advocates for the corporate sector harks back to the 'engineering of consent' approach of shaping, moulding or manipulating public opinion.

An alternative perspective on the corporate shaping of public opinion has developed within public relations issues management theory. According to Heath, issues management can be considered as either 'manipulation of issues to the advantage of large private sector organizations' (1997: 4) *or* the way in which organizations 'make adaptations needed to achieve harmony and foster mutual interests with the communities in which they operate' (1997: 3). Therefore, issues management does not simply comprise engineering public opinion to the advantage of the organization, but can involve the organization adapting its practices to come into line with public expectations. It can also involve trying to cultivate favourable environments in which to operate by taking action 'to create, change or defeat legislation or regulation' (Heath, 1997: 31), and claiming that such legislation or regulation is in the public interest. Hence, as Jesson has explained:

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> Interest groups and politicians have incentives to engage in activities that make it more difficult for the public to discover the special interest group nature of legislation. This often is accomplished by the subterfuge of masking special interest legislation with a public interest façade. (1987: 232)

In a market-driven political economy the public interest and market are constructed as one and the same (Jesson, 1999; Kelsey, 1997; Simpson, 1994).

The political economy in which public relations is practised is fundamentally significant to how it works, and how the public interest is construed. Therefore we will now explain the political and economic context for public relations involvement in the genetic engineering issue in New Zealand.

Genetic engineering in New Zealand: the political and economic context

Since the mid-1980s, New Zealand has followed a right-wing, neo-liberal economic agenda which has been:

> . . . dominated by the idea that the marketplace is rational. Left to itself, with no interference from the state, the market will allocate resources in the most efficient manner and will produce the outcome that is most beneficial for everyone. Accordingly, whatever the market touches should be dominated by it. If the market doesn't exist in some area, it should. (Jesson, 1999: 7)

This agenda was introduced by way of an extensive voluntary and cavalier structural adjustment programme (Kelsey, 1997). The corporatization and privatization of central and local government operations comprised part of the '"fundamentals" of the programme – market liberalisation and free trade, limited government, a narrow monetarist policy, a deregulated labour market, and fiscal constraint . . .' (Kelsey, 1997: 2). Consequently, what were previously non-commercial operations, such as housing, health, and – significantly in relation to the case discussed in this article – government research, were all commercialized in the 1980s by a Labour Government that sought to 'decouple political and economic control' of the state (Kelsey, 1997: 115). Foreign investment in New Zealand was also extensively promoted and, under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), commitments made to international free trade.

In line with market rationalization and public choice theory, New Zealand implemented a system of deregulation and restructuring that was 'explicit in [its] political aim of reducing the scope for politicians and

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sectional interest groups to intervene in economic decisions' (Mulgan, 1997: 265). As a result, considerable power was placed in the hands of the business sector, although, as Simpson (1994) argues, evidence of this power is disguised through assertions of consumer sovereignty and market determination in a market economy.

In 1998/99 when the public relations campaigns discussed here were exposed, New Zealand was governed by a National Party-led coalition which was elected in 1996. The other partner in the coalition was New Zealand First, a largely right-wing nationalist Maori party. This coalition government continued to implement neo-liberal political and economic agendas. There was further privatization and state sector organizations were put under increasing pressure to perform whilst being significantly under-funded (see Kelsey, 1997: 372–93).

It was in the political climate of the late 1990s in New Zealand that genetic engineering and genetically modified foods became a subject of public and political concern. Until this point, New Zealand had been relatively uncontroversially involved in developing genetic engineering technology, and both government and private organizations had been conducting and promoting genetic engineering experiments on crops and foods. Prior to 1998, such tests were not rigorously monitored and only government research was subject to full public scrutiny. As far back as 1989, an inter-agency government committee considering environmental legislation 'found something of a vacuum, a system characterised by overlaps on hazardous substances, no legislative control of genetic manipulation and a patchy system for considering introduction of new organisms to New Zealand' (*The National Business Review*, 1994). Consequently, in 1994, the Environment Minister introduced the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Bill in an effort to tidy up legislative control and regulation in these areas. With the passing of the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act, as from 29 July 1998, prior approval for all genetic modification research and field trials had to be gained from the Environmental Risk Management Authority (ERMA).

Throughout the period of the National Party-led coalition government, the government research organizations – the CRIs – were, and indeed still remain, committed proponents of genetic engineering. This interest reflects the fact that the CRIs are 'required to carry out and promote research of excellence which would be of benefit to New Zealand' (Kelsey, 1997: 121). The CRIs interpret 'benefits' as contributing to the nation's economic competitiveness; as promoting New Zealand at the forefront of scientific innovation; and as furthering employment opportunities in science (see, for example, *Waikato Times*, 1999). Yet the CRIs' funding structure also ensures a vested interest in promoting genetic engineering. As Kelsey has explained, CRIs were set up as:

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> . . . funded from user-pays research, and partly by competing with private researchers for funding from the Public Good Science Fund, controlled by the government's . . . Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. The government determined the size of that funding pool and its priorities – and hence the type of research carried out or funded by the state. (1997: 121)

With the coalition government anticipating that genetic engineering would be good for the New Zealand economy and with the CRIs being dependent on private sector user-pays funding, obvious funders for CRI work were corporations interested in genetic engineering technologies.

However, genetic engineering and the genetically modified food issue began to arouse considerable public outcry as the end of the 20th century neared. In New Zealand, this largely appears to have been in reaction to the commercial application of genetic engineering technology (Legat, 1999: 45) when it was discovered in late 1998 that imported genetically modified foods were being, and indeed had been for some time, sold on supermarket shelves. Furthermore, it became evident that the government was not planning to introduce any legislation regarding the labelling of these foods (and had indeed twice blocked a private member's bill that would have required such labelling), had no plans for local testing of such foods, and had already allowed 238 field trials of genetically modified crops and animals in New Zealand (Legat, 1999: 40).

With New Zealand approaching an election in 1999, genetic engineering became an issue that, particularly the Green Party, but also to some extent the Labour and Alliance parties, used as an electioneering platform. This was a particularly useful issue for these parties' voter appeal as even in early 1999 the coalition government continued to refuse 'the need for labelling of anything other than substantially modified foods, despite the majority of the 3000 public submissions received by ANZFA [Australian and New Zealand Food Authority] requesting labelling of any foods containing GM ingredients' (Legat, 1999: 48). Such a refusal is perhaps hardly surprising given the predisposition of public choice theory against regulation (Simpson, 1994). However, in the face of continued public and political outcry, Prime Minister Jenny Shipley committed her government to a highly unusual U-turn and promised to introduce a labelling scheme.

However, it then became apparent that concern about genetically modified foods in New Zealand was not only a matter of domestic politics, but also a matter involving international free trade agreements. When it was suggested that New Zealand might consider imposing labelling requirements on genetically modified foods, and that some crops might be banned, the American Ambassador, Josiah Beeman, warned that the United States would take a 'dim view' of this (Legat, 1999: 40) as it would represent a challenge to free trade agreements.

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The King Salmon/Gene Pool case

Whilst the particulars of the public relations work at the centre of this article hit the media headlines in April 1999, its history began in 1994 when King Salmon, owned by a company registered in the West African State of Liberia, but operating near Blenheim on the South Island of New Zealand, gained approval from the then Advisory Committee on Novel Genetic Techniques to conduct genetic experiments on salmon. As a private company, King Salmon had not been compelled to seek this approval, but nevertheless had done so – possibly because the research was also supported by $200,000 in public funds from the Technology New Zealand Scheme – an arm of the Government's Foundation for Research, Science and Technology (Samson, 1999). The experiments involved 'taking a Chinook salmon gene, rearranging it and introducing it into a Chinook salmon so that the fish had two of the genes, which promoted growth' (*Nelson Mail*, 1999). This work continued uncontroversially for a period of four years.

However, on 6 April 1999 the leader of the New Zealand Green Party, Jeanette Fitzsimons, leaked a document to the media revealing that King Salmon had employed the Wellington public relations company, Communication Trumps, to advise how it should publicly handle the fact that some of its genetically modified salmon had developed unusually large lumpy heads. The leaked document contained some brief background on King Salmon and two pages of issues management advice on how to minimize public concern about the experiments. The Green Party claimed to have obtained the leaked document from an employee of Communication Trumps. However, Communication Trumps asserted that the contents of the leaked document were only a draft version of advice and had not been implemented.

Radio New Zealand's *Kim Hill* programme of 6 April 1999 was the first of the national media to explore this case, and exposed the many intricacies that it involved through interviews with the Green Party leader, Jeanette Fitzsimons; the head of ERMA, Bas Walker; and a representative of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand's (PRINZ) ethics committee, Tony Cronin. On the programme Fitzsimons revealed that Communication Trumps was also working for AgResearch, Federated Farmers and PPL Therapeutics, and identified Norrie Simmons, the Managing Director of Communication Trumps, as the President of PRINZ. Fitzsimons also drew attention to the fact that the public relations company was also working for the CRIs' Gene Technology Information Trust.

The Gene Technology Information Trust had been established on 1 May 1998 by four CRIs with interests in genetic engineering (NZ Institute for Crop and Food Research; Horticulture and Food Research Institute of NZ; NZ Forest Research Institute; and NZ Pastoral Agricultural Research

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Institute). The Trust had a stated purpose to 'provide authoritative gene technology information to enable New Zealanders to make informed choices about the use of the technology' (Steel, 1999: 1). This information was also to be 'impartial' (Steel, 1999: 3). To perform this role, the Gene Technology Information Trust established an information programme entitled Gene Pool. Communication Trumps was employed to run this programme which comprised an interactive web site, information packs, an information brochure, a public help line, and a series of nine 'road show' seminars held in various locations around New Zealand. Communication Trumps played an extensive role in managing Gene Pool: '[I]t took charge of all administration; handling all enquiries on one dedicated phone line, monitoring the quality of information sent out and co-ordinating discussion meetings' (Steel, 1999: 3). Indeed, the income and expenditure accounts of the Gene Technology Information Trust for the period ending 31 December 1998 reveal the extent to which the public relations company took on the functions of the Trust. Of a total Trust expenditure of $196,314.98, $189,140.42 was paid to Communication Trumps (Steel, 1999: 3).

In May 1999, Parliament's Education and Science Select Committee asked the Gene Technology Information Trust for details of the sources of its funding. At this point, on the grounds that 'grants from private individuals and private companies were made on a commercially confidential basis' (Bezar quoted in Steel, 1999: 1) only details of its public funding were made available. In September 1999, the activities of the Gene Technology Information Trust and Gene Pool ceased. Also in September 1999 the Chairperson of the now defunct Trust, Howard Bezar, finally appeared before the parliamentary select committee, to reveal the exact details of the public and private funding. These details then became public on 7 October 1999 when the Education and Science Select Committee released its report on its inquiry into the Gene Technology Information Trust.

The funding of the Gene Technology Information Trust and Gene Pool does raise questions as to the impartiality of these initiatives given that their private sector sponsorship came from Monsanto ($27,500), the NZ Beef and Lamb Marketing Bureau ($5625), NZ Kiwifruit ($5625), NZ Plant Breeding Research Association ($3749), and Agriseeds ($1000). This involvement of corporate sector organizations with interests in genetic engineering in the funding of the Trust and its activities needs to be understood in the context of the requirement that the CRIs be partially funded by user-pays research, as detailed above.

Following the broadcast of the *Kim Hill* programme which identified the links between King Salmon, Gene Pool, Communication Trumps and PRINZ, Communication Trumps issued a press statement declaring an intention to pursue legal proceedings against Radio New Zealand. '"Comments made selectively and out of context" claim[ed] Trumps' director

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Alan Emerson, "were promulgated on Kim Hill's show"' (Braunias, 1999: 18). It was later announced that Communication Trumps was also pursuing legal action against the Green Party's Jeanette Fitzsimons. The cases against Radio New Zealand and Fitzsimons are, at the time of writing, still waiting to be heard in Wellington High Court. However, in the Auckland District Court in December 2000 Communication Trumps won a defamation case against the Auckland-based newspaper *Rural News* on the grounds that its reporting of Communication Trumps activities in the satirical column 'The Hound' damaged the professional credibility of the consultancy.[1] In January 2001, *Rural News* lodged an application to appeal against this ruling. However, this appeal was later rejected by the Auckland High Court.

Issues management strategies: King Salmon

The issues management advice developed by Communication Trumps for King Salmon may be considered in the context of how the consultancy views the role of public relations. This company held a number of public relations contracts associated with the 1996–99 Coalition Government. Its directors have also worked with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the New Zealand Employers' Federation. Communication Trumps' promotional materials state:

> Our clients expect audiences to change their attitudes and behaviours, understand key messages or have fears or concerns minimised. To achieve these objectives existing perceptions have to be understood and often 're-engineered'. (Communication Trumps, *http://www.comtrumps.co.nz/services.html*, 31 January 2001)

This statement implies a one-way, asymmetrical model of public relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Rather than responding to stakeholder concerns, this type of public relations practice aims to change the opinions of the stakeholders instead of the client's activities.

The document leaked from Communication Trumps (1999) reveals strategies typical of those deployed by corporations seeking to influence public opinion and avoid public scrutiny, regulation and public accountability. Moreover, these types of public relations strategies are designed to avoid questions being asked about a corporation's activities – in this case genetic engineering experiments, and, in terms of the management of symbolic meaning, are designed to encourage the construction of positive public understandings of corporate activities. In the leaked document, Communication Trumps advised King Salmon that because its experiments were on 'a live animal' and not simply plants, in terms of the 'fears and hype' surrounding genetic engineering they were 'likely to be engaging in a higher emotional level' (1999: 6). This appreciation of the developing

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climate of public concern about genetic engineering may well explain the nature of Communication Trumps' advice, as discussed below. The advice implicitly identifies what Sethi (1977) has termed the 'legitimacy gap' between 'what specific companies are thought to be doing and the expectations publics hold regarding those activities' (Heath, 1997: 4). That is, as Communication Trumps recognized, the New Zealand public might have been surprised to discover that a privately owned company was conducting genetic experiments on animal species in a natural environment such as the Marlborough Sounds, a renowned tourist destination for fishers, divers and other water sports enthusiasts, part of which comprises a protected marine reserve.

One strategy that was recommended to deal with this legitimacy gap was to build particular types of relationships with key influential groups and individuals. For example, it was stated that:

> Consideration could be given to inviting Bas Walker from ERMA and the MfE [Ministry for the Environment] team down at some stage to look at the programme, and also identifying allies from institutions, such as universities and CRIs with whom you can share your work, without prejudicing any commercial or operational confidentiality. If you have allies, those allies can support you, and Bas can say he's been there and all looks fine. (Communication Trumps, 1999: 24)

Such advice can be viewed as using 'specialist help to ensure "third party" endorsements' and seeking 'to restrict the issue to a dialogue between specialists' (Hager and Burton, 1999: 155). At the same time this issues management approach functions to build allies in exactly those individuals who scrutinize and regulate industry and develop and administer legislation. In the present case it was a particular concern, for although the King Salmon experiments had passed a policy approval process, the establishment of ERMA meant that any person could request that the research be referred back for reassessment. Reassessment would mean that for the first time the experiment would be 'subject to full public scrutiny, under the same criteria as any other new organism application' (*Evening Post*, 29 April 1999: 15).

Of equal concern to the public relations firm was managing relationships with negative influencers. In creating some very tenuous links between a number of groups Communication Trumps presented an argument that stated:

> The influence of the Nelson Recycling Centre people should not be underestimated, they have strong links with Greenpeace and the Natural Law Party, both of whom are well-funded for their fights against GMOs [genetically modified organisms] by such wealthy notables as Paul McCartney and Billy Connolly. (Communication Trumps, 1999: 6)

Communication Trumps was following standard issues management techniques by identifying potential activists who might pose a threat to an

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organization. What the public relations advice did not do was suggest how King Salmon might 'harmonize their goals and policies with activist positions', a tactic Heath (1997: 157) considers astute. Instead, the advice escalates the issue from concern by a small local group of people, to both national and international political campaign groups, to wealthy high-profile internationally recognized celebrities. In making such links the advice appears to be legitimizing the public relations role as essential in managing the legitimacy gap between business activities and what are constructed as internationally situated public expectations. When there is no gap between business performance, activities and policies and public expectations there is only a minimal role for public relations to play in issues management. An alternative approach that Communication Trumps could have recommended would have been to create shared 'zones of meaning' (Heath, 1997: 192) between King Salmon and environmentalist activists. That is, King Salmon could have been advised to recognize that the primary 'zone of meaning' for environmental activists in relation to the salmon experiments would have been that of environmental protection. King Salmon needed to demonstrate to the activists that the company was equally concerned about the environment, and that it was taking action to protect the environment from any negative impacts that might result from its genetic research.

In addition to the management of relationships, the other recommendations on how to deal with the legitimacy gap can be considered in the context of a discursive struggle for symbolic meaning of the outcomes of the salmon experiments. For example, in order to calm public fears should the results of the trials become public, the Communication Trumps document advised that King Salmon could put a positive 'spin' on communications:

> Issues such as deformities, lumps on heads etc. should not be mentioned at any point to anyone outside – comments about these would create ghastly 'Frankenstein' images and would be whipped up into a frenzy by Greenpeace. . . . Our message must be that the only difference is good, as can be seen from the fish in the ponds, is that they are larger. (Communication Trumps, 1999: 24)

Clearly there was no consideration of the public's democratic right to know about the failure of the salmon experiments, or the risks that these might pose to the environment, despite the trials being partially funded by the tax-payer. The attempt to shut down public access to information was further demonstrated in the statement that: 'Also important is how we can continue to keep wraps on the project, when it is probably discoverable under the official information act' (Communication Trumps, 1999: 24). This advice was coupled with the suggestion that Communication Trumps prepare a backgrounder 'with that data that is OK to release publicly. This would not be used unless the issue became public, it is simply a resource

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that might be needed in the future' (Communication Trumps, 1999: 24). These tactics indicate that, in this case, public relations is about providing fragments of knowledge to the public, and only those fragments which function in the corporate interest. The notion of public interest is not taken into account, rather there is 'a type of discursive closure' (Deetz, 1992: 56) on the issue of genetic engineering. Furthermore these tactics represent an attempt to circumvent the Official Information Act that legislates on freedom of information in New Zealand.

Ironically, because the Green Party leaked the draft document being developed for King Salmon by Communication Trumps to the media, the issue of the 'lumpy head salmon' received considerable national publicity. Consequently the activities of King Salmon, Communication Trumps and more generally public relations practitioners in New Zealand, became the subject of public discussion and debate in the media. As Beder (1997) stated, 'public relations . . . influence only works while it is hidden. The exposure of public relations strategies, their messages and sources undermines their strength and persuasive power' (1997: 139). However, the exposure of this case not only impacted on the public relations profession, but also laid bare the extent to which the corporate sector in New Zealand was trying to contain public information and emotion on the issue of genetic engineering. Whilst it had already been publicized how multinational corporations such as Monsanto were attempting to steer the global debate on genetic engineering (Bruno, 1998), the King Salmon case exposed how New Zealand-based corporates were also employing public relations companies to assist in this struggle for power over the meaning of genetic technologies.

Constructing and containing the genetic engineering debate: Gene Pool

The work that Communication Trumps performed for the Gene Technology Information Trust calls for a critique of the way in which, in this example, corporate *and* government interests can come together in an effort to construct a dominant hegemonic discourse about genetic engineering and gene modification.

In the case of the Trust's Gene Pool public information campaign, the issues management strategy was to shape public opinion at the formative stage (Heath, 1997) so as to pacify public concerns about genetic engineering and the need for its regulation. According to the Chairperson of Parliament's Education and Science Select Committee, Tony Steel, 'The public need[ed] to be reassured and . . . brought up to speed and reminded of the different degrees of genetic modification' (Steel, 2000). Although the stated aim of the Gene Pool was educational, according to Steel a

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commercial imperative underpinned the campaign: 'There is also a commercial reality. . . . If people have got confidence then you don't get this extreme reaction based on fear and ignorance . . . which will impede our making progress and maintaining a commercial edge internationally and enhancing production' (Steel, 2000).

Communication Trumps used similar tactics in the Gene Pool public information campaign to those drafted for King Salmon. Particularly significant was the attempted construction of a 'rational' scientific and dispassionate – though at the same time positive – discursive understanding of genetic engineering and modification. The choice of the name 'Gene Pool' illustrates the use of unemotional terms. This nomenclature neutralizes notions of the uniqueness of species, and implies an impersonal mass of genes for scientists to draw on in the development of their scientific technologies and knowledge.

A key component of the Gene Pool public information campaign was a brochure prepared by Communications Trumps for public distribution. This represented a particular effort to present the meanings about genetic engineering proffered in the information campaign as those of an authoritative voice. For example, the cover of the brochure presents Gene Pool as:

> Providing *authoritative* gene technology *information* so that New Zealanders can make *informed* choices on the use of these *technologies*. (Gene Pool brochure, emphasis in original)

The author of this 'authoritative' voice is not identified. Indeed, no indication of what Gene Pool is (other than an 'authority'), who it represents, and how it is funded are provided in the brochure. Further, the words printed in bold in this sentence clearly encourage a reader to make links and consider the brochure as providing 'authoritative information' on 'informed technologies' and perceive it as the product of qualified knowledge.

The Gene Pool campaign brochure also articulates age-old food production methods with more modern genetic engineering methods. This implies that genetic engineering is nothing new and that past generations have already recognized the vast benefits that it offers. The brochure deploys a rhetorical question technique in order to link past and present food production techniques:

> What is gene technology? Biotechnology has been used for thousands of years – the Egyptians learned how to ferment wine and make bread rise, and the Greeks grafted plants to enhance fruit production. Selective breeding of plants and animals over centuries has produced the food sources we use today. (Gene Pool brochure)

The brochure did not explain the difference between selective breeding and transgenic experiments. Rather, gene technology is posited as 'a modern,

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fast and precise way to improve the way we eat' (Gene Pool brochure), and therefore as a simple scientific solution to the further improvement of food production.

Indeed, it is by presenting genetic engineering in highly simplified explanatory terms that the Gene Pool material encourages the allaying of fears about this science. Such discursive strategies are illustrated in the description of genes in the brochure text. These are defined in the following way: 'A gene is simply a segment of DNA with a specific message encoded in its chemical structure' (Gene Pool brochure). Yet this can be contrasted with the more precise definition that 'Genes are the coded instruction contained in the DNA molecules found in the cells of all living organisms which determine what each organism is like' (*Consumer*, 2000: 9). As Deetz states: 'Dominant-group definitions of reality, norms, and standards appear as normal rather than as political and contestable' (1992: 62). In the Gene Pool example, we can see how the pro-genetic engineering voice is attempting to construct a dominant definition of a gene simply as 'a message'. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that genes carry the inherited characteristics of species, and indeed of individuals. Thus, the information campaign disassociates species information and species identity from the understanding of genetic engineering. Consequently genetic engineering is represented as apolitical and unproblematic – and not a site of necessary contestation.

Another way in which Gene Pool normalizes genetic engineering technology is through the minimization of the health risks associated with genetically modified foods. The brochure explains that 'genetically modified crops pose no known health risk' and 'changing the genetic makeup of a plant by engineering is a slow and careful process which is followed by lengthy and strict testing procedures'. The brochure also contains responses to rhetorical questions about genetically modified food safety which assert that the genetically modified foods are in fact safer than traditional foods: 'Safety testing means that the likelihood of identifying potentially allergenic plants is far higher than in traditional plant breeding. . . . It is also possible to use this technology to remove common allergens from food'. As a further reassurance, details about the legislative safeguards required in the sale of genetically modified foods in New Zealand are also given.

As in the King Salmon case discussed above, the Gene Pool campaign emphasizes the positive aspects of genetic engineering technology. There is a complete absence of any discussion of problems associated with this science. Additionally, Gene Pool omits to acknowledge the environmental risks of genetically modified foods when 'many others agree: the bigger dangers with GM food come from growing rather than eating it. The environment is probably at greater risk than our health' (*Consumer*, 2000: 10).

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Indeed, the report of the Education and Science Committee's inquiry (Steel, 1999) into the Gene Technology Information Trust commented that the campaign was one-sided in its presentation. The committee stated of the Gene Pool brochure: 'It sets out the perceived merits of gene technology, it states that modified foods "pose no known health risks", and reassures about the safeguards in place, but it offers little explanation of the potential risks of modified foods' (Steel, 1999: 3). However, because the committee comprised an equal balance of government and opposition MPs, two views on the Trust's impartiality were offered. Some believed that the Trust had genuinely tried to educate the public but that a series of 'unfortunate associations and errors of judgement were the result of good intentions and naivety'. Others believed the 'associations are evidence that the Trust was running a partisan campaign to alter the balance of the gene technology debate in favour of genetically modified foods' (Steel, 1999: 5). Despite the parliamentary select committee inquiry into the Gene Technology Information Trust also identifying a 'conflict of interest in Communication Trumps' different activities' (Steel, 1999: 4), to date no complaint about this has been lodged with PRINZ.

Not surprisingly, given Gene Pool's one-sided point of view and its corporate funding from, among others, Monsanto, it has been described as a 'classic industry front group' (Hager and Burton, 1999: 230). However, this was not in fact a simple *industry* front group. Rather Gene Pool was a front group for the corporate sector, government research and, therefore, a New Zealand government that viewed genetic engineering in terms of potential wealth creation as highly beneficial to the New Zealand economy.

Concluding remarks: public relations and values and New Zealand democracy

It can be argued that public relations is primarily concerned with two communication tasks: creating and managing meaning, and creating and managing relationships. In order to understand the role that public relations plays in society a number of questions need to be asked. What relationships does public relations help to construct and why? Whose meaning is being created? How is that meaning being created, and why? To answer these questions, the links between political economy and public relations have to be examined. In New Zealand, public relations practices have been inextricably linked to the neo-liberal political economy where the 'public interest' has been subsumed by corporate and market interests. Consequently, commercial agendas, relationships and meanings about genetic engineering were prioritized over the public's democratic right to make informed decisions about this science and its products. Indeed, public

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relations strategies attempted to deploy propaganda and secrecy as key tactics in the engineering of public consent for genetic technology. Ironically, the attempts at propaganda and secrecy were exposed through the media, which in turn resulted in public knowledge of, and concern about public relations' role in managing the issue of genetic engineering.

In the 1999 New Zealand parliamentary election, the National Party failed to gain re-election to office, and a Labour and Alliance party coalition government was formed. Interestingly, the Green Party's exposure of the public relations work undertaken by Communication Trumps brought the party considerable publicity prior to the election and can thus be considered part of its own public relations campaign. Seven Green Party MPs were elected to Parliament. Because the coalition government is a minority one, the Green MPs are key to its survival and, consequently, the Green Party has been better able to pursue its own environmental agenda. This, as well as public expressions of concern about genetic engineering, led in April 2000 to the establishment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry into genetic engineering in New Zealand. Paradoxically, the exposure of public relations attempts to subvert democratic decision-making processes and engineer public opinion, forced onto the agenda public debate on the issue of genetic engineering and the implementation of more democratic decision-making processes.

Notes

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1. The statements made in *The Hound* on which the defamation case was based cannot be detailed here for legal reasons. To do so would be to repeat the defamation.

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