

## Media Imagery of GM and Stem Cells

Research on how the media treat issues such as GM crops or the stem cell controversy highlights the way in which different framings of problems and solutions in this field are evoked and emphasized through various competing linguistic, metaphorical and visual cues. The way the risks and benefits are framed in the reports may be more important in shaping how people respond to risks than the balance of 'factual' information. Key 'discursive cues' in framing of risks are:

- Contrasting labels: e.g. In the GM debate terms such as 'cross-pollination' compete with 'contamination' and concepts such as 'weeds' compete with 'biodiversity'. In debates about stem cell research concepts such as 'human embryo' compete with terms such 'blastocyst', and phrases such as 'medical experiments' compete with alternatives such as 'therapeutic cloning'.
- Competing analogies or historical reference points: e.g. GM crops may be related to an uncontroversial technology such as cross-breeding, or be linked to controversial historical landmarks such as the BSE crisis. Stem cell research may be presented with reference to 'medical breakthroughs' such as the discovery of penicillin, or related to the more sinister historical association of eugenics.
- Visual imagery: The field is a central image in the GM debates: expanses of waving golden GM corn compete with images of white-coated protesters uprooting crops. The embryo/blastocyst is the central visual icon in the stem cell debate - magnified images of the cluster of cells used by stem cell researchers compete with representations of more developed embryos, with tiny fingers and toes.

The success of such labels, images or visuals in penetrating popular discourse varies. The analysis of media and focus groups shows that the notion of contamination, for example, dominates media discourse about GM crops and the term 'embryo' has been more successful than terms such as 'blastocyst' in the stem cell debate. However, even an evocative term such as 'embryo' may be associated with acceptable risk-taking if the benefits (e.g. medical advances through stem cell research) are sufficiently highlighted.

It is also important to differentiate between people simply using a cultural resource as a 'reference point' in debate and actually being 'influenced' by it. For example, references to science fiction are common in discussion of the risks of new technologies. However, close attention to how such references are actually mobilised in discussion challenges the idea that science fiction causes fear in any simplistic way. Audiences are not passive dupes. Meanings and representation are subject to negotiations in the context of people's day-to-day lives and wider social and political perspective on the world.

Professor Jenny Kitzinger and Dr Emma Hughes analysed 1,500 newspaper and magazine articles and television programmes in 2005, carried out 45 interviews with people who contributed to major media stories and carried out 20 focus groups to examine how the media frame risk in relation to GM food, stem cell research and nanotechnology as part of the *Social Contexts and Responses to Risk* Priority Network.