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Empowerment and anti-GM Rhetoric: Lessons from an online discourse analysis

This paper aims to discuss issues stemming out from my M.Res dissertation on the discourse and rhetoric of the Greek anti-GM social movement, and its argumentation online. In the actual research I have used the method of online or virtual ethnography, mostly collecting documents and discussions from web-sites concerned with the Greek struggle against G.M.Os. What is compelling in the Greek case is the outright governmental ban on all G.M.O. releases after a massive media outcry, in a country where, according to recent Eurobarometers, the knowledge about the effects of biotechnology and genetic engineering is very low and there is little or no debate prior to the introduction of new technologies. In the discussion, I plan to address issues of online rhetoric in parallel with counter-expert knowledge construction. In specific, by presenting the rhetoric of some significant tangents of the Greek anti-GM movement, like the anti-capitalists, the environmental NGOs, the Green Parties and the local public coalitions of rural areas, I will focus on the issue of the construction of contesting knowledge in counter-experts' discourse which aimed at the empowerment of the consuming public and the activists. As Anthony Giddens (1992) proposed, people craft their own expertise for themselves, in the face of contesting scientific claims, in times of risk and uncertainty (Beck, 1992). In a country like Greece, where the anti-GM struggle didn't meet in public with critical scientific voices, local non-scientific knowledge(s) emerged, the 'cultural rationality' as Fischer (2000) suggested, sometimes using an ignorant rhetoric of fear, unverified personal claims or rumors. In this context I aim to discuss the idea of citizens' empowerment through local knowledge, debating whether it lead to the success of the governmental ban or rather to learned helplessness and indifference.