Food Technology Narratives

DAVID M. KAPLAN
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
How do we defend/criticize novel foods?
Natural seems better than artificial
Even safe artificial seems iffy

- Ammonium compounds
- Ascorbyl palmitate
- Calcium stearoyl lactylate
- Erythritol
- Ferrous gluconate
- Fumaric acid
- Polysorbate 60
- Sodium erythorbate
- Sorbitan monostearate
Public Opinion

- **US (Harris Poll, 2012)**
  - 43% oppose GM foods
  - 63% seek out natural foods
  - 35% willing to pay more

- **Europe (Eurobarometer 354, 2010)**
  - 71% oppose GM foods
  - 51% “fairly worried” food no longer natural
  - 25% “very worried” about food additives
Food industry responds

- **Frito-Lay** to discontinue MSG, FD&C Red 40, and 30 other additives from its chips.

- **Nestlé** to remove all artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives – 80 additives – from all of its candies.

- **Kraft** to replace Yellow 5 & 6 in its macaroni and cheese powders; remove preservatives from American cheese.

- **General Mills** to replace artificial colors in its baking products.
Food technologies have supporters

- Food manufacturers
- Government officials and regulatory agencies
- Scientists
- Advocacy organizations
- The public
  - Most people have no opinion
  - Trust communications messengers: farmers, FDA, friends and family, scientists and academics
Moral-political justifications

- **Consequentialist**
  - Good actions bring about the best consequences for the most people
  - Governments should promote the general welfare

- **Rights**
  - Individuals have inviolable rights (life, freedom, property)
  - Governments have the duty to protect our rights
Consequentialist justifications

- Useful
- Beneficial
- Harmless
- Traditional
- Functionally equivalent
Rights justifications

- Freedom
- Justice
- Responsibility
Moral-political arguments against

- Consequentialist
- Rights
- Harmony with nature
- Quality of life
Consequentialist arguments

- Bad for your health
- Bad for children
- Bad for animals
- Bad for the environment
- Bad for public policy
- Bad for international policy
Rights arguments

- Disrespectful
- Irresponsible
- Deceptive
Harmony with nature arguments

- Impure
- Alienating
- Disgusting
Quality of life arguments against

- Undesirable
- Inappropriate
- Unrefined
- Profane
- Taste worse
- Cheating
All arguments presuppose narratives

- Stories focus on the central actors,
- select the key events,
- create meaningful accounts of what happened,
- put events into context,
- portray characters,
- represent things with historical dimensions.
Narratives make arguments

- Raise claims of truth, moral right, and appropriateness: present looking
- Rest on prejudices, presuppositions, and interests: backward looking
- Depict scenarios: forward looking
Narrative theory is philosophy

- Philosophy
  - World
  - Concept
  - Knower

- Narrative theory
  - World
  - Narrative
  - Reader
# Common food technology narratives

- Modernization
- Anti-modernization
- Romantic
- Religious
- Biographical
- Historical
- Economic

**Graph:**

- Arrows indicating the direction of change:
  - Arrows pointing upwards: worse
  - Arrows pointing downwards: better
Modernization

- Science, technology and reason will lead us from ignorance and suffering to bring us freedom, security, and happiness.
- Our current problems stem from a lack of knowledge and technical know-how.
- Experimentation and empirical evidence establish acceptable risks and consequences.
- Better living through science and technology.
What’s wrong with this story?

- Bad theory of value-free technology and technological determinism
- Science and technology do not necessarily improve our lives
- Supports private and pro-development interests
- Overly optimistic; quick techno-fix
Anti-modernization

- Science and technology are out of control.
- Industrialization has gone too far.
- Our powers have outstripped our wisdom.
- We have to adapt to new technologies.
What’s wrong with this story?

- Bad theory of autonomous technology and technological determinism
- Overly grim and pessimistic
- Artifacts have both technical functions and social meanings
- Makes for good science fiction.
Science and technology are alienating forces.

Detached, objectifying, reductivism is the problem.

We need to reconnect with nature and each other.

Less abstract science, more concrete relationships.
What’s wrong with this story?

- Too strong a distinction between humanity and technology.
- Connection is not always good; disconnection not always bad.
- Tends toward provincialism, traditionalism, animism.
- Contradicts progressive, urban, cosmopolitanism.
Religious

- Relies on concepts of sacred, profane, redemption, deliverance, righteousness, salvation, eschatology, sin, evil, heaven and hell (on Earth)

- Other-worldly dimension to existence

- Each religion has unique core concepts.
What’s wrong with this story?

- People have different religions.
- Not binding on non-believers.
- Too many metaphysical commitments needed.
- We don’t all have to agree to act in common.
Biographical

- Story that follows the fate of persons.
- Memoirs, character studies, portraits, testimonials
- Journeys, quests, conflicts, transformations, revenge, sacrifice, underdog justice, etc.
What’s wrong with these stories?

- Sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes relatable.
Historical

- Connects agents and events in plausible ways.
- Locates the origins of things, traces development, puts into context, relate consequences.
- Identify key actors, patients, events, objects, circumstances.
- Attribute responsibility to decision makers.
What’s wrong with this story?

- Can be either conventional or critical.
- Vital for questioning authority, challenging attitudes, explaining states of affairs.
- Exposing failures, omissions, overlooked victims.
- Identifying vested interests, placing things in relation to power and authority.
Economic

- Food as commodity within a global economic system.
- Explained by profit motives, business models, expanding markets.
- Analyze production, distribution, and consumption.
- In relation to regulations, desires, environments, moral norms.
What’s wrong with this story?

- Conventional and critical versions.

- Potent narrative, common in journalism and advocacy literature.

- Food films (*Food Inc.*, *King Corn*, *Fargmaggedon*)

- Not the whole story but a crucial part of it.
Disadvantages of narratives

- Not methodological
- No certainty
- Decidedly interpretative
- Necessary but not sufficient: rely on facts and norms.
Modest conclusions

• We rely on stories to make claims about things with a historical dimension whether we realize it or not.

• Learn to recognize better and worse narratives.

• Avoid techno-optimism and techno-pessimism.

• Remember: food is for eating – that changes things!