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GM Issues Investigated

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The Articles

1. GM Random Audits - Truly Representative?

Published: 16/09/2011

Many WA farmers have welcomed the Government endorsed option to grow genetically modified (GM) canola, claiming coexistence between GM, non-GM (conventional) and organic farming is possible. Monsanto as patent holder of the GM seed espouses values of “ethical, transparent and competitive business conduct”.⁷

But does the fact that GM canola growers are only voluntarily audited support, or contradict these values?

Organic farmers, as part of their certification process, are audited annually. Leesa Caldwell, President of the Organic Farmers Association of WA (OFAWA) told *3rd Degree*: “Every year we’re required to prove we’re using organic seeds, seed raising mix, right through to methods for transporting the seed.”⁴

OFAWA’s website states the concessions Minister Redman used to “swing the vote for GM canola” have been reneged upon.⁵

“The map to show where GM canola was growing did not appear, the list of farmers was rejected for confidentiality reasons, the random audits were anything but random, and the GM-free zoning is now not being supported.”

Professor Wallace Cowling, key researcher for Canola Breeders WA (CBWA) told *3rd Degree* that members of the Australian Seeds Federation like CBWA growing non-GM (conventional) canola follow a decades-long, rigorous set of best practice guidelines and participate in a government seeds certification scheme.

“This includes keeping GM out of seeds, which is a critical component. This purity maintenance ensures the seed released to the public is what it says it is,” he said.

GM canola farmer Michael Baxter of Kojonup, neighbour of contaminated and de-certified organic farmer Steve Marsh, was one of four farmers in the area audited out of a possible 17. Despite Mr Marsh’s predicament, Mr Baxter’s farm was found to comply with the conditions of Monsanto’s licence and stewardship agreement.^{1 2 3 6}

The WA Department of Agriculture and Food’s (DAFWA) report detailing the audit process tabled in Parliament in April showed only 29 local government GM canola growing areas out of a total 49 were audited. The audit process was paid for by DAFWA at an approximate cost of \$200,000.^{8 9}

Esperance had the highest number of GM canola growers (30) yet only two growers were audited. Bruce Rock (11) and Narrogin (10) were in the mid range of growers, yet neither location was audited.

DAFWA auditors audited 55 plantings of GM canola (53 growers) A total area of 24,158 hectares of GM canola was audited or around 33 per cent of the area sown to GM canola in

WA in 2010. The aim of the audit program was to assess the compliance of growers with the conditions of Monsanto's Roundup Ready License and Stewardship Agreement.

The report found no major or minor-conformities in relation to RoundUp Ready License and Stewardship Agreement requirements. Only one grower told the auditor of their intention to save seed from a canola crop planted within 400metres of a GM crop. The grower then decided against saving the seed for planting in 2011 on the recommendation of the DAFWA auditor.

3rd Degree asked DAFWA whether results from this process showed a fair representation of all GM canola growers, and whether there would be any changes to next season's audit program.

In response DAFWA spokesperson said: "Growers volunteered to be audited and in this respect the audit program was similar to other voluntary grains industry audit programs.

"DAFWA's biometrician calculated there was a need for 53 audits to provide reasonable assurance of an adequate level of compliance of the GM canola grower with the conditions of the license and stewardship agreement.

"Growers were encouraged to participate in the audit program to ensure audits were carried out in a wide range of areas, included a diversity of production systems and sufficient growers were audited to provide confidence in the results of the audits.

"DAFWA has recommended the WA grains industry consider continuing the audit program using independent auditors currently available under existing voluntary audit programs."

Hansard reveals Albany was audited despite having no GM canola growers listed in the region on DAFWA's website.¹⁰

Robyn McSweeney, speaking for the Minister of Agriculture said "a difference between the location of the grower's property and the grower's postal address has led to the discrepancies."

Ms McSweeney said DAFWA respected individual GM growers' right to privacy and only growers who volunteered would be audited.

"The Government has made a commitment not to identify individual GM canola growers," she said.

2. GM Canola - Is Anyone Buying It?

Published: 23/09/2011

Grain traders and the WA Government are refusing to divulge how much of the genetically modified (GM) canola grown in WA last year has been sold, amid reports that sales have been sluggish. While AWB claims the lack of market interest is due to low oil content and the poor finish to the growing season - and not the GM factor - non-GM canola varieties are fetching up to \$50 per tonne more than GM canola.^{9 12 13 15}

While Hansard reveals that WA Minister for Agriculture Terry Redman told Parliament that grain traders advised the Department of Agriculture and Food that a significant proportion of the 49,000 tonnes of GM canola grown last year had sold, exactly how much remains unsold, sitting in silos, has proved difficult to uncover.¹⁰

AWB's current GM canola market price is \$535 per tonne, equating to over \$26 million for the whole crop.⁸ But because of the low demand and the price gap, Elders-Toepfer Grain² and Glencore Grain⁵ have decided not to market GM canola for the time being, preferring to concentrate on the more lucrative non-GM canola market in Europe.

"The grain traders have declined to release any additional information because release of the additional information may affect marketing negotiations," Mr Redman said.⁹

Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH) is WA's main grain handler. Its Media Advisor Claire Armstrong told *3rd Degree*: "The main issue is finding a market for GM canola. 95 per cent of WA's non-GM canola went to Europe last year to cater for the European Union's bio-fuel market – a market with no tolerance for GM canola."

Ms Armstrong said CBH prefers to remain impartial to the GM canola debate and can not provide specific storage figures and marketing information about grains.

"Typically we don't give out specific grain quantities; however the canola crop for the 2010/11 harvest was down on previous years'. The overall canola crop for 2010/11 is reported as being at around 706,000 tonnes and GM Canola only made up about 6.5 per cent of the total canola crop."

Europe's bio-fuel market is paying higher price premiums since the recent introduction of the European Union's Renewal Energy Directive (RED) initiative. This has resulted in a significant price spread between GM and non-GM canola. Europe has a very limited supply of non-GM canola and the RED initiative means canola supplied to the bio-fuel industry must be produced in a sustainable way, and their definition of sustainability includes products and by-products being GM-free.^{16 14}

Anti-GM campaigner and Greens MP Lynne McLaren said WA risks losing this high volume of canola exports if it continues down the GM path. She said non-GM canola must be protected from contamination to ensure the stability of this important export market. She warned that if contamination happened WA would suffer the same fate as Canada, which lost its non-GM canola exports to Europe.¹

Ms McLaren told *3rd Degree* the Government was forced to admit in June that none of the GM canola grown last year had been sold. This information was verified by Hansard on June 23 where Minister for Energy Peter Collier said "none of this canola has been sold at this point."^{4 12}

Ms McLaren said: "It is highly unusual for canola stock to be carried over in this way and this was an extremely embarrassing admission for the Government. It proves what we have been saying all along – our markets simply don't want GM canola.

"It is unacceptable to not reveal how much of the GM canola has been sold and how much it has been sold for. How are farmers supposed to make decisions about what crop to plant next year if they don't know if there is a decent market for their product or not?"

Ms McLaren said it was unfortunate there is no current way that non-GM canola growers can ensure their exports to the European market aren't contaminated and therefore rejected.

"This is why the Greens argued against the lifting of the GM canola moratorium."

Ms McLaren said currently the only way for non-GM farmers to recoup their losses due to GM contamination is to sue their GM growing neighbours – as Kojonup farmer Steve Marsh is currently attempting to do.

"This pits neighbour against neighbour and will destroy the community spirit of our rural communities. We desperately need farmer protection legislation to protect farmers like Steve Marsh from economic losses caused by GM contamination," she said.

The Federal Government's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's (DAFF) website says: "Abnormal weather conditions in both the eastern and western states of Australia may have impacted on the final amount of GM canola that was harvested from the 2010 season."³

Weather conditions aside, consumer attitudes continue to be a significant factor influencing the market for GM canola.^{6,7}

A 2010 report from the Australian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society (AARES) found world grains markets where GM varieties are available are "dominated by GM grains" though there are "niches for certified non-GM and organically produced grains, for which price premiums are paid."¹⁰

3. Adding Up Monsanto's InterGrain Investment

Published: 14/10/2011

It's no secret Monsanto wants to increase the 19.9 per cent share it bought in WA's crop breeding company InterGrain last August. After the announcement, InterGrain's CEO Brian Whan gleefully said InterGrain was 'in bed' with Monsanto and proud of it.^{2,5}

Monsanto's Peter O'Keefe said it was part of the company's business model to look towards increasing its share in InterGrain, citing global competition from other big biotech players as well as "strong competition for InterGrain on the varietal front in Australia" as reasons to do so.

Mr Whan said the partnership meant InterGrain would have access to very sophisticated technology, and there would be significant improvements to Australian grain growers who could expect to see crop yields increase, with an estimated yield improvement of 2 per cent per year.¹⁴ InterGrain wasted no time in sending wheat breeders over to Monsanto's headquarters in St Louis in the US last October to learn about implementing new strategies.

Mr Whan said InterGrain had to partner with an international organisation in order to grow and expand the grains industry.¹ However this expansion did not include non-GM varieties,

from which the best would be taken and crossed with GM biotechnology to make them viable for WA.²

Mr Whan said farmers who don't want to embrace the GM technology can stay with the old varieties, though he found this idea hard to contemplate. "I don't for one minute think a farmer's going to reject a 10 per cent yield improvement because it has a biotech trait," he said.²

Not everyone agrees that Monsanto's investment in InterGrain is good for WA agriculture. The issues of choice and the negative impact on non-GM farming are at the forefront of concerns as InterGrain and Monsanto's intention means taking the best (non GM) germplasm, and inserting a GM gene – restricting a non-GM choice.³⁶

Greens MLC Lynn McLaren said: "The sale of 19.9 per cent of InterGrain to Monsanto can only limit the types of plant breeding carried out by InterGrain and I consider this decision to be anti-competitive in nature."

The lack of market for GM canola, and contamination issues and subsequent market loss, as experienced by Kojonup organic farmer Steve Marsh were reasons to call for new legislation, she said.

"The Greens are calling for Farmer Protection Legislation to protect non-GM farmers from economic losses caused by the introduction of GM crops."

Ms McLaren said if Monsanto wants to increase its share of InterGrain, which it has indicated it would like to, there is no requirement for this to be a parliamentary decision – "since InterGrain acts like a private company with the State Government as a primary shareholder."

"I believe this is wrong – InterGrain should be acting in the best interests of WA farmers, not those of multinational GM crop companies."

Ms McLaren told *3rd Degree* she would ask in Parliament how much money the WA Government makes from the sale of agricultural products.

InterGrain is one of a number of grain breeding businesses that collect royalties through an end-point royalty system. Tresslyn Walmsley, Commercial Manager at InterGrain told *3rd Degree* she could only speak in terms of wheat and barley, not for canola, and said there is a "fair indication that the royalties don't exceed the operating costs of the business."

"There are no royalties going back to the State Government at the moment, though as a shareholder in InterGrain the State Government receives its rights at the end of the day," Ms Walmsley said.

"We're in a transition to being fully commercial, where wheat and barley's sole revenue source is end-point royalties."

Ms Walmsley said InterGrain does not receive levies from the Grains and Research Development Corporation (GRDC). She praised GRDC's End Point Royalties system, saying it was a "fundamental reason as to why we're attracting international investment."

4. Steve Marsh - The GM Threat Firsthand

Published: 21/10/2011

It's been a while coming, but Steve Marsh - the Kojonup farmer who lost his organic certification last year because of GM contamination - is now in the final stages of preparing a writ for a "common law" battle with his neighbour and childhood friend Michael Baxter.

GM canola from Mr Baxter's farm blew onto Mr Marsh's property and started sprouting, despite assurances given at a Katanning meeting hosted by the WA Department of Agriculture (DAFWA) in August last year.

In a landmark case, Mr Marsh and his lawyers from Slater and Gordon are now taking legal action to try to recoup some of his financial losses since the National Association of Sustainable Agriculture (NASAA) decertified his farm in December 2010.

Mr Marsh told *3rd Degree* he hoped legislation would be introduced to "protect the traditional rights of non-GM farmers". He hoped a fund would be set up, levied against the GM industry with money contributed either by "the biotech companies themselves or the GM farmers", and made available to help non-GM farmers deal with the loss of income and the clean-up costs when contamination occurred.¹

Mr Marsh described the effect the case has had on his small community as "very sad." Mr Baxter declined to comment to *3rd Degree*.

DAFWA's approach to the problems such as the Marsh/Baxter case to-date has centred on encouraging conversation. This has taken the form of the establishment of a register of 'Sensitive Sites' that it says "may include certified organic, certified biodynamic, aquaculture, and viticulture" properties.

The purpose of the registering as a Sensitive Site seems to be mainly about granting the Department permission to share information about privately-owned farms to let other farmers know which side of the GM fence their neighbours are on.

While the Department has actively encouraged farmers to join the register it is yet to be seen whether registration affords any actual, practical or financial protection to non-GM farmers.

Documents obtained through an FOI request lodged by *3rd Degree* reveal that after the Katanning meeting DAFWA Director General Rob Delane told colleagues inside the department they "needed to be proactive in encouraging all producers to register 'Sensitive Land Sites' in DAFWA's Client Resource Information System (CRIS)" and for this information to be easily accessible via the Internet.²

While prioritising the free flow of communication sounds good, the documents obtained via FOI showed just how hard Mr Marsh's battle to extract information from DAFWA has been.

As his concerns (and the young GM plants on his property) were growing late last year, he wrote to DAFWA and asked why legal issues about contamination of neighbours' land hadn't been resolved before the release of GM canola.

In a letter dated November 10, 2011, he asked DAFWA for information about: ²

- 1) A toxicology report on GM, Monsanto's Safety Data Report and any independent reports on GM
- 2) DAFWA trial results including failed trials
- 3) The percentage level Monsanto will pursue for royalties in grains
- 4) How DAFWA will maintain 0.5 per cent of contamination or less in foundation seed?
- 5) Why didn't Minister Redman and DAFWA consult with our organic grains industry?
- 6) Why isn't it mandatory for GM growers to notify all their neighbours?
- 7) How is DAFWA going to keep our integrity of organic seed when GM cereals and legumes are released?
- 8) Maintaining zero tolerance for certified organic products as many products supplied to the health industry are for people with serious health conditions.

But he didn't get a satisfactory answer. Instead he was simply forwarded a copy of a research report on the survival of canola seeds in a range of habitats by a Victorian academic dated April 2002. ²

In September 2011, Mr Marsh again asked DAFWA a number of questions about procedures to deal with accidental presence of GM material on non-GM properties. DAFWA's response reiterated the merits of its Sensitive Sites WA service, and recommended discussion between neighbours as the "best way to manage coexistence."

Mr Marsh wrote that he thought DAFWA would have procedures to deal with GM contamination of organic and biodynamic farms. And DAFWA parried with a "lack of transparency and clarity in the procedures laid out by NASAA and the other organic/biodynamic certifiers in the decertification and recertification process" made this impossible, and urged Mr Marsh to discuss the standards with NASAA. ²

DAFWA said Australia's organic standard for accidental presence of GM material in organic products was more stringent than organic standards in Australia's main organic export markets. It added that "it is hard to understand why an industry would choose to have ambiguous and excessively constraining standards, nor why an industry would choose to have standards that make products less competitive." ²

Mr Marsh asked DAFWA if any other GM canola contamination among non-GM farms in WA in the 2010-2011 season had occurred. DAFWA said one other case of movement of GM plant material between properties in the 2010 season occurred, and the department provided advice to the growers involved and the case was resolved satisfactorily for both growers. ²

Mr Marsh asked if DAFWA knew of any GM canola contamination within the supply chain in the 2010-11 season. DAFWA replied that Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH) had advised it that: "Such was the extent of the testing regime that of the 25,000 deliveries of non-GM canola to be received this harvest, the accidental presence in a single load of non-GM canola was detected allowing the load to be isolated and managed. Further testing is being conducted on this load to ascertain the actual level of GM canola." ²

Last October NASAA's Chairman and DAFWA representatives discussed the merits of the Australian organic industry adopting a threshold of 0.1 per cent of accidental presence of GM, which DAFWA said could provide marketing advantage to Australian organic growers.

NASAA advised there were “not great impediments to adoption of common approach but the common approach was yet to be developed.”²

5. WA Govt Weighing GM Wheat Options

Published: 28/10/2011

The WA Department of Agriculture and Food's new Merredin Research Centre is part of the State Government's \$9 million *New Genes for New Environments* project and its developing genetically modified (GM) wheat and barley.^{4 5 7 8}

Despite Minister Redman's claims in a media release that the centre will put WA at the forefront of agricultural research, in Parliament he echoed the concerns of two fellow Liberal party members and admitted that not all countries currently importing Australian wheat would accept GM wheat.⁵

The Grain Growers Ltd Stakeholders' Report 2011, called *What the World Wants from Australian Wheat*, summarised survey interviews with flour and stockfeed manufacturers in Australia and flour millers in South East Asia, North Asia, the Middle East and Europe. All countries that import Australian wheat were involved in the survey.³

The report concluded:⁵

- (1) GM wheat would not be acceptable for the Australian, North Asian and European markets in the foreseeable future;
- (2) Food security concerns may assist acceptance of GM wheat in South East Asia; and
- (3) It would be at least five years before GM wheat would be acceptable in the Middle East.

Two GM traits are being trialled on the Merredin property. One is co-funded by the CSIRO and the Grains Research and Development Corporation. The other trait is part of a research collaboration between CSIRO, the Australian Centre for Plant Functional Genomics and Arcadia Biosciences, a US biotechnology company.^{4 5}

The Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA) said a Katanning facility will be completed for the 2012 growing season, providing two contrasting environments with varying rainfall, length of season and soil types from which to evaluate breeding material, in accordance with the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator's strict standards.¹

A DAFWA spokesperson said: “The *New Genes for New Environments* facilities aim to ensure that GM technologies will be among the tools available to plant breeders to deliver climate resilient crop varieties, improved quality and improved consumer health benefits.

“The consequences of not investing in these new GM technologies at this time includes a reduction in future productivity gains, a decline in international competitiveness, less profitable farming systems, less viable regional farming communities, and fewer varieties.”

DAFWA said if the trials are approved and commercial varieties of these GM wheat and barley plants become available by 2017, each GM crop will require approval for sale in the market destinations before sales can be made.

“Grain growers will make decisions on which varieties to grow, whether they are GM or non-GM, based upon how well they match their farming needs and the ability to generate additional profit,” DAFWA said.¹²

CSIRO would not confirm how much money has been invested by the Federal Government to date in the development of the GM crops.^{4 9 10}

MLA Peter Abetz, Liberal Member for Southern River, said continuing refinement of gene technology decreased the chance of new GM crops producing rogue proteins or genes producing other harmful compounds.¹⁶

He said: “If DAFWA could produce a drought, salt or frost tolerant cultivar of wheat, which after evaluation was found to be safe, I think there would be much less resistance to it being accepted in the market place, because the multi-national agrichemical companies would not be seen to be benefiting from these cultivars. It would only be the farmers who benefit.”

MLA John McGrath, Liberal Member for South Perth, said: “While I am not opposed to well-controlled research in grain plant breeding, I think we have to tread very warily on the subject of GM wheat, which is such a staple food crop and one of our biggest exports.”^{2 6 11}

“I do not think there is any appetite in overseas markets for GM wheat. In fact, when Japanese leaders raised concerns about GM wheat earlier this year, Premier Colin Barnett, assured them that WA would not be going down that path.

“I still have concerns about the results of the first year of planting GM canola on a commercial basis, especially after Kojonup organic farmer Steve Marsh lost his organic certification due to contamination from a neighbour’s GM crop.

“I think grain producers need to be aware of what consumers want. I think they are becoming more particular about what they buy.”

Shadow Minister for Agriculture Mick Murray asked: “Why are we spending huge amounts of money on GM when there’s no appetite for it?”

Mr Murray said the money would be better spent on crossbreeding and developing better qualities of conventional wheat.

“This is a push by the Minister to further his own bouquet. The connection with the companies concerned, like InterGrain, is a real worry as they’re in bed with the Government. This compromises the independence of InterGrain.

“If people come in and use it for their own benefits, what tests will be done to ensure cross-contamination doesn’t occur?”

Exegesis – Investigative Journalism

These articles are the best from a ten-part series written for the student publication *3rd Degree*, they were also co-published by online news service *Crikey*. Exploring the GM topic as an investigative journalist required plenty of pre-reading and research to understand the complexities of the issues. Credible information was sourced from various websites, including: the Department of Agriculture and Food (DAFWA); The Department of Fisheries and Food (DAFF); The Organic Association of WA (OGAWA); Monsanto; InterGrain; The WA Farmers Federation; The Pastors and Graziers Association of WA (PGA); The Greens; Greenpeace; and The Steve Marsh Benefit Fund Facebook page.

Hansard transcripts from the WA Parliament proved to be a valuable, reliable source of information. Local and national news websites such as the ABC, ABC Rural, thewest.com.au, CountryMan, Farm Weekly and PerthNow were scrutinised, as well as general Internet searches for news items on the topic.

Following standard journalism protocol as described by Lamble (2010), during the research and interviewing processes I tried to be as impartial as possible so I could comprehend the various issues clearly as they unfolded, and gain maximum information during the interviewing process. I felt I added a new layer of knowledge each week about the topic as I progressed. By this I mean I used an epistemically objective approach – I tried to use best practices and “satisfy a range of standards derived from logic, perception and the canons of inquiry” (Wilkins & Christians, 2008, p.72).

For me, the main issue about the GM debate is around choice – I believe that farmers and consumers should have the right to choose between GM and non-GM products and not be adversely affected by one side or the other. I discovered the introduction of GM farming in WA has already shown it has the ability to adversely affect non-GM farmers, as in the case of Steve Marsh (a farmer who lost his organic certification because of contamination from his neighbour’s GM crop). In addition, the potential for contamination and loss of income for important non-GM export markets is very real. I felt it was important to balance this information with details about the Government’s aims and research on the development of GM varieties so the readers could form their own opinion on the issue.

My position on choice comes from my wider belief that people, wherever they are worldwide should respect, take it upon themselves to become educated about, and try to understand one another’s point of view. It is a simple approach but one I think is basic to getting on in this world. This position is also in accord with what Ward (2005) describes as an appropriate basis for practice in the new era of global journalism ethics. This doesn’t mean agreeing with everyone, merely taking the time to try understand different viewpoints. I acknowledge that everyone puts a ‘spin’ on everything they do, as they represent a certain viewpoint, whether it’s Monsanto, the Government, Greenpeace or ordinary citizens; it’s inevitable that everyone puts their “game face” on when required to get their point across.

Sometimes there were barriers to obtaining the sort of information I was seeking, especially from some Government departments and CSIRO. Though this is frustrating at times, part of being a journalist is to try and counteract these barriers creatively. On the rare occasion someone declined to comment, I included this fact in the article to show their comment was sought.

When speaking to Keryn McLean from Monsanto my diplomacy skills were tested. I initially asked her about Monsanto's reputation and ill-deeds of the past, and I quickly had to establish a working rapport with her in order for her to respond to my questioning as she naturally went on the defensive. However this did not mean apologising for my questions; I explained to her I was trying to establish Monsanto's view on their reputation 'then and now'. Once this rapport was established she was reasonably obliging. It was not always easy to make contact with McLean due to time-zone differences and other workload pressures on her part. When I did manage to make contact with her (usually after several missed calls) I had to try to get as much information as possible from her via that phone call. I do not believe she set the agenda for the questions, in fact I tried to ask her as many varied questions as possible. I would not hesitate to ask her 'tricky' questions again in the future.

This investigation included a Freedom of Information (FOI) request that had to follow the bureaucratic process prescribed, in order to be legally effective. Sometimes my communication with the FOI officers was a bit clumsy. Inexperienced at the process, I was trying to establish what information I was asking for, while the officers helped to guide my inquiries around their parameters. Submitting the FOI application early was very important in gaining the information I was seeking within the timeframe I had to write the articles. The ability to write a well thought out FOI request is a valuable skill to be sharpened over time and with experience.

The FOI request gave me good insight into the scope and depth of the communication measures Steve Marsh took to draw his GM concerns to the attention of the WA Department of Agriculture, and the department's responses prior to his farm being declared contaminated, which did not occur until after Marsh's contamination status was confirmed and legal action had commenced.

I learnt to look for information in creative ways, like via the Steve Marsh Benefit Fund FaceBook page, which was a valuable, up-to-date source of news links from around the world on the anti-GM movement (though some information had to be taken with a 'grain of salt'). I found being assertive and well informed before interviews, clarifying quotes with the interviewee and admitting when I didn't understand something about the conversation or content helped me become more confident during the interview process.

Not surprisingly, people with vested interests in the topic, who often have limited media exposure (i.e. the GM-Free campaigners) began contacting me with information such as media releases on new developments, and that being in the position as journalist was quite privileged, as opposed to being on the PR side and trying to attract media attention.

Writing these articles helped me understand the importance of 'watchdog journalism' and a Fourth Estate perspective. Inspired by text book statements such as: "Part of the

social function of the media – as the Fourth Estate – is to ensure via thorough reportage that any breach of the separation of powers is brought to the attention of the public” (Pearson & Polden, 2011, p.11); and “It’s important to remember political parties have an important impact on the relationship between the executive and the legislature”(Spindler, 2000, p.1), I paid particular attention to the relationship between the different powers.

Scrutinizing the conduct between the Government (DAFWA), the WA Parliament (via Hansard) and the courts (e.g. Steve Marsh “common law” suit) was important to the democratic process. It was important to try and unravel the true motivation behind the Monsanto/InterGrain partnership from the perspective of the WA Government, as decisions made about expanding GM in WA continue to affect the choices of all farmers and consumers. The public have a right to know about the decision-making processes of those in power that may affect them. InterGrain’s conduct as a “private company with the State Government as a primary shareholder” was important to highlight (L. McLaren, personal communication, September 22, 2011).

The business ethics of the Government and Monsanto were also important to highlight. The grey areas of business practices are where the law ends and commercial in-confidence clauses kick in. This was highlighted in the Marsh case where Common Law is to be contested. Marsh hopes farmer protection legislation will be introduced after his case is heard in court. That law and business ethics are contentious, and sometimes at odds, is also well supported in the literature, as expressed by Crane and Matten, who wrote:

Discussion about the ethics of particular business practices may eventually lead to legislation once some kind of consensus is reached, but for most of the issues of interest to business ethics, the law typically doesn’t currently provide us with guidance. (2007, p.7)

In terms of transnational capital, Monsanto’s domination of agribusiness in Australia and globally had to be explored, albeit briefly, to set the context for the concerns that arise, particularly if the company does gain a greater share of InterGrain in the future.

While I didn’t openly question ethics as such, it was hoped the readers would glean from my writing insight to the ethical positions of the Government and Monsanto. I aimed to throw a spotlight on the Government’s business practices with the introduction of GM, audit processes, research, investment and expenditure, and handling of communication issues, such as in the Marsh case.

The GM issues proved to be a diverse topic, and many aspects were not covered. I felt it was important to stay focused on Western Australia’s experience with GM, drawing comparisons with countries like Canada which has ‘gone before us’ for a broader perspective where necessary. Word-count restraints also limited my reporting of deeper issues. I did not delve deeply into areas like criticisms of Monsanto’s business operating practices and ethics because of the level of investigation required to do this justice, word count, legal considerations and time constraints on gathering credible sources.

The subbing process has taught me to be careful of using jargon and to work on the style aspects in my copy. The challenge was to try to make my writing accurate yet edgy, fair and active not dull or sensationalist.

The assignment brief required an audio and video piece in addition to the 10 articles and FOI. The audio and video recording processes provided another layer to my stories. I worked with an experienced producer during the filming and editing process of the video and with both I initiated the communication required to make the recordings happen. Audio recording an interview with Steve Marsh meant phoning him the day before and faxing through my list of questions. He needed to obtain permission from his lawyers to speak to me and to determine what questions he was able to answer from a legal standpoint. After agreeing to the interview, we negotiated a date and time to do the recording.

The experience highlighted to me the sense of satisfaction of following a story in depth over time and not just briefly at surface level. With multiple layers of inquiry it is possible to explore a number of issues extensively. Obtaining and maintaining key contacts and building up a working rapport with those people would be advantageous and a time-saver if a similar investigative opportunity arose in the future that had to be written more quickly. Being on a media email list for media releases would save some time as new developments break.

Doing as much research as possible on the topic before starting to write, and talking to lay people about their views can help to clarify the thought process when starting to write on a new topic. Understanding your readership and asking the questions readers want answered are key starting points. Researching previously written articles could provide possible follow-up angles and stories to write; this could be a time saver.

This experience has made me think about the level of bias and level of depth that go into the news stories I read in the daily press. It has made me cast a more critical eye over news reports, and I am particularly interested when a FOI request has revealed information that has been included in a story.

It has emphasized to me the importance of the role of the Fourth Estate perspective the media has and I look more closely at how the media handles this role. Journalists should be checking facts about what was said and done (from Hansard etc) and comparing it with the 'spin' (Davies, 2011).

I was mindful of the ethical and legal implications of my reporting style, from the broad concept of freedom of the press, to using and attributing a photo correctly. My position involved walking the line between being bold while "exercising a discretion that may need to be defended in court" (Pearson & Polden, 2011, p.3).

I believe Hirst and Patching (2007, p.58) sum up the challenge of being a journalist today, with the words: "Most journalists are indeed, at their core, idealists: they believe in the role of journalism as watchdog, but they also feel the constraints of news production that prevent them from reaching this goal."

Schulz (cited in Hirst & Patching, 2007, p, 59) also suggests that "commercial considerations and the interests of media owners are the biggest obstacles to

disclosure of unpleasant facts about the rich and powerful” and that most journalists would like the idea of the Fourth Estate perspective – “a type of journalism that maintains a weather eye on possible misdeeds, questionable practices, inconsistencies and dishonesty by the powerful.” This is important to help readers to make an informed decision based on the material presented to them.

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