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Understanding and (dis)trusting food assurance schemes: consumer confidence and the ‘knowledge fix’.

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Introduction

Campaigners are increasingly concerned about food consumption and production practices in industrialised countries, because such practices can cause environmental damage, poverty and social inequity for people across the world. Their solution has been to promote quality, authenticity, localness, sustainability, fairtrade,¹ animal welfare and other attributes of food production and sale, in order to change these practices. This has provided much material for academic researchers, who can be both sympathetic to and critical of such solutions. In particular, food assurance schemes have been developed to reconnect consumers with production by, first, raising consumer awareness about the consequences of the products that they buy and, second, harnessing consumer purchasing power to push production towards ‘better’ and more sustainable practices. Examples include assurance about organic methods of production, animal welfare standards and prices paid to producers through fairtrade schemes. The consumer is thus conceived as part of the problem but also potentially part of the solution.

However, much of this campaigning and academic literature has focused upon how food is produced, distributed and sold and very little upon how it is perceived, viewed and consumed. The presumptions about localness, authenticity and quality have therefore been little verified. This paper takes a more consumer-oriented approach to the question of food quality and, using evidence from focus groups with consumers in England, considers how consumers understand and evaluate a range of proxies that offer assurance about food and consumer products, particularly voluntary certification schemes. Our focus is therefore how people understand food production and assurance information, rather than how food production itself is organised and marketed. In this way, we aim to fill the gap currently growing between the production-oriented arguments from the agro-food literature and the consumers on whom many of their arguments depend, in seeking to harness consumer power to change food production systems.

Fixing the problem of consumer knowledge about food production

We begin by outlining the agro-food and consumption literature mentioned above. This has both environmental and sociopolitical interests in changing how food is produced and traded across the world, in favour of better diets, less environmental damage and support for small-scale farming. A key argument here is that consumers in developed economies are increasingly disconnected or distanced from producers in both developed and developing economies (e.g. Princen, 1997), and that this has allowed producers and retailers (by which writers usually mean big corporations) to sell food which is increasingly damaging for human health, the environment and development, especially in the global South. A solution commonly proposed is to reverse this distancing, to reconnect consumers with producers through education and information provision about systems of food production, so that consumers will avoid food coming from such damaging systems and instead favour food from more beneficial systems (for examples, see Jackson et al. 2006).

Such arguments tend to emphasise (1) shorter supply chains that bring consumers face-to-face with producers through farmers' markets, farmgate sales and organic box schemes (e.g. Ilbery et al., 2005; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Hinrichs, 2000; Seyfang, 2006) and (2) assurance schemes that reconnect producers to consumers through information on packaging even where producers and consumers do not come into direct contact (e.g. Morris and Young, 2004).² Both seek to build consumer trust and confidence in food and thus to change consumer behaviour in favour of smaller scale, less damaging production systems, and also to foster a wider 'ethics of care' (Barnett et al., 2005; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Cook et al., 1998). Campaigning groups share this academic agenda and have used reconnection arguments to market produce, for example, through the Countryside Commission's 'Eat the View' and Sustain's 'Sustainable Food Chains' (analysed by Jackson et al., 2006). The Curry Report (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002) to the UK government likewise claimed to take reconnection as its central theme, although (like the academic literature) it primarily looked at the problem from the point of view of producers rather than consumers. Retailers and manufacturers in the UK have put photographs and biographical details of 'real' farmers on packaging to sell produce through both national and regional connections, e.g. Marks and Spencer's 'named farmer' scheme or the Yorkshire Soup Company's 'local heroes'. This agenda also links to arguments about 'slow food' (Honoré 2004) in Europe and the benefits of retaining traditional knowledge about foods and cooking practices.

The problem is that changing consumer behaviour in this way relies on knowledge: that more information will re-connect consumers and producers. This is often linked with political economy and the intent to 'unveil' and defetishise the commodities produced by modern capitalism (Hudson and Hudson 2003), although debate is rife about whether this can and should be done (e.g. Jackson 2002; Goss 2004). Our purpose in this paper is to contribute to this debate by evaluating food assurance schemes that seek to provide this knowledge fix and to show the difficulties of implementing this worthy but somewhat simplistic principle. Our interest is not in knowledges provided by consumers' own senses or experiences, which have been studied elsewhere, but in what we term 'knowledge intermediaries' that provide information to assure consumers and to change their purchasing behaviour. Many of these subscribe to the agenda outlined above and have developed schemes to reconnect consumers and producers through certifying the conditions of production and their consequences for the environment, human health and animal welfare. They do this not through face-to-face contact but through on- and off-product identification (and thus differentiation) using qualities which consumers themselves cannot detect. These have been termed 'credence', 'proxy' or 'secondary' qualities in the consumer literature (e.g. Frewer et al., 2003; Grunert, 2002) as they rely not on direct consumer perception but on belief and confidence in these knowledge intermediaries. For example, the UK's National Consumer Council (2003, p. 10) reported that consumers in its survey believed 'that to have clear, honest, transparent food labelling was the foundation for consumer choice.' Such schemes are thus a good contrast to the emphasis in the literature on face-to-face solutions to the reconnection issue, especially farmgate sales, farmers' markets and delivery schemes (e.g. Ilbery et al., 2005; D Watts et al., 2005; Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002; Seyfang, 2006; for a critique, see Hinrichs, 2000).

Assurance schemes are varied: they range from information that can be objectively verifiable by a third party, such as salt content of food or toughness of a car windscreen, to judgements that cannot, such as rating a favourite restaurant. They use a variety of intermediaries, from famous names to charities, to assure consumers that the information they provide is valid and actionable. The geographical literature has (understandably) focused upon geographical assurances about the region of origin and, hence, authenticity of the product (e.g. Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Parrott et al., 2002), despite Tregear et al. (1998, p. 392) finding that consumer awareness of such schemes was low and that these designations were 'unlikely to have any influence on consumer perceptions or purchases of regional foods'. However, producing and consuming assurance information is a complex process, because such qualities are not givens but are produced through 'the complex sociomaterial relations of commodity production, trade, and consumption' (Mansfield, 2003, p. 6). To put it another way, quality both links the network of production-consumption but also is a (continually changing) product of that networking. Our interest here is to look at how part of that networking works, through thematic assurances that relate not simply to the location of production, but the conditions of production, especially through formalised certification about how food is produced.

We can distinguish between two degrees of assurance: *endorsement* and *certification*. Endorsement is ubiquitous in promotion, allying a product with a celebrity or a charity – for example, the British Heart Foundation's logo and 'corporate partnerships' with Flora pro.activ margarine. However, this may or may not involve formal checking by the endorsing organisation and it is difficult for the consumer to know if it does. Endorsements of commercial products by health-related charities have also recently become the focus of debate. In 2002, the Food Commission (2002, p. 60), an independent UK pressure group, suggested that 'health charities and medical associations are trusted by the public to give unbiased advice, free from commercial pressures' and that such commercial partnerships may risk undermining this trust for both the charities and the companies. By contrast, certification should guarantee that claims have been checked against a published standard, so it is argued to provide stronger assurance than endorsement, although in practice there is a gradient between these two, rather than a sharp demarcation. The standard to which products are certified may be negative in banning undesirable practices or content, or positive in requiring desirable ones (Guthman, 2004) or, more usually, have a mix of the two. Products are checked against the standard and, where they pass, they are licensed to use the assurance organisation's logo. Such 'verification processes are argued to make food supply chains legible, traceable, and perhaps less risky' (Guthman, 2004, p. 512) and it is, therefore, networking processes of verification that produce trust in a food chain and reconnect consumers with producers. These verification processes can be:

- first-party through self-regulation by a manufacturer/retailer, usually as part of its corporate social responsibility;
- second-party, through checking by a trade association or similar body closely related to the manufacturer/retailer;
- third-party, through checking by a body independent of the manufacturer/retailer.

Although all three types involve promotion and branding, third-party certification is generally considered to be the strongest and least susceptible to conflicts of interest (e.g. Jahn et al. 2005; Hatanaka et al. 2005). The third-party organisations that do the checking – the 'certifiers' or 'certification bodies' - themselves are checked by an

accreditation body. For example, certifiers for the Forest Stewardship Council and Marine Stewardship Council schemes for sustainable timber and fish have to be accredited by the international headquarters of each NGO, whereas certifiers for organic produce in the UK have to be inspected by the UK Accreditation Service (UKAS) to the EN45011 standard on behalf of the UK government's environmental department, Defra.

Certification is beginning to be researched in the literature, but predominantly from the standpoint of farming and food production (e.g. Guthman, 2004; Mutersbaugh, 2002; Mutersbaugh et al., 2005; Klooster, 2005; Hughes, 2000). This is understandable, because of the strength of the agro-food literature, but it is an incomplete perspective, not least because consumers are often conceptualised very loosely, if at all, and assumptions are made about how they will respond to certification and other such information. Like advertising and market research, such studies tend to deal with an 'imagined' or 'virtual' consumer (Morris and Young, 2004, p. 88; Hughes, 2004), often cast as either ignorant or knowledgeable and invoked by retailers producers, policy makers and campaigners when they are developing strategies for food production and consumption. As Freidberg (2003) suggests, it may be what the retailers think consumers think that influences what is sold and how, at least for new products, rather than what consumers really think (and buy), and this can be exploited politically by campaigners. This parallels the public understanding of science literature, which has also criticised how scientific communication uses simplistic models of 'the public' (Gregory and Miller, 1998), imagining them to be either helplessly ignorant (Maranta et al., 2003) or excessively knowledgeable (Jasanoff, 2005, p. 254), and these model publics are again invoked when policy makers and campaigners are developing strategies for scientific education or public participation. The problem arises where the virtual does not match the actual and such strategies fail. Similarly, where the aim is to provide a knowledge-fix about food production, real consumers may thus fail to behave in the way expected from these 'imagined', 'virtual' or 'model' consumers, as we show below.

Moreover, even studies which are notionally about consumption and 'commodity cultures' often fail to address how consumers think, by analysing marketing discourse rather than the meanings and practices involved in shopping and eating (e.g. Jackson, 2002; Bryant and Goodman, 2004; Barnett et al., 2005). This risks misrepresenting consumers, so we address this by considering not how assurance schemes and certification work and are promoted, but how consumers *think* they work. We thus take a more consumer-oriented approach to food assurance, considering the ways in which consumers perceive, interpret and utilise different schemes and also problematising the simple reconnection that they offer.

The other contrast with much of the literature is that this paper takes a horizontal approach to certification, rather than a vertical one. Much of the agro-food and commodity chain research is commodity-specific and thus tracks long but narrow production/processing chains, whether of chickens (Watts, 2004), flowers (Hughes, 2000), fish (Mansfield, 2003), coffee (Mutersbaugh, 2002) or organic salads (Guthman, 2003). Such studies provide great detail but risk issue determinism in focusing upon the particularities of one commodity type. They also contrast with the consumer's experience of simultaneously buying (and eating) many food products, but knowing each in far less detail. The consumer experience is thus a comparative one, whereas cross-sector comparative cases in the literature are becoming somewhat rare. Moreover,

it may well be useful for a consumer to have less detailed knowledge of an attribute (fairtrade, organic) that can be usefully transferred to other sectors, rather than detailed but nontransferable knowledge about one sector which might be only a tiny proportion of their weekly shopping. Hence, the purposes and applicability of vertical studies and horizontal decisions are somewhat perpendicular.

There are some studies that have taken a more consumer-oriented approach to assurance about food production, in literatures on food policy, risk and public understanding of science. But they often focus on new food technologies and operations, such as genetic modification (GM) and irradiation, because these highlight the role of novel information rather than, for example, family habits or tacit knowledge in dealing with established foodstuffs. For example, Poortinga and Pidgeon (2004) considered public trust in the regulation of GM food and how this changed during the government-sponsored 'GM Nation?' events in the UK in 2003. Although the majority of their sample were ambivalent or indifferent about GM food at the beginning, their responses to these events were much more likely to be negative than positive. In other words, the overall tendency of information and media coverage was to increase distrust (rather than to increase trust or have no effect). Their sample, they argued (2004, p. 1485), 'became considerably more doubtful about the risks associated with GM food and, by and large, more suspicious and uneasy about the long-term consequences.' Similarly, Scholderer and Frewer's (2003; also Frewer et al., 2003) survey showed that providing information about GM foods did not generally change pre-existing attitudes, but where it did, it was likely to be negative, even where the information provided was positive. The authors suggested that this is because providing information caused existing attitudes to 'surface'. Hayes et al. (2002) similarly gave their participants positive and negative information about irradiated and GM food and found that the negative information was much more influential, far outweighing the influence of any positive information where the two were combined.

One problem with such studies is that they may well report atypical behaviour, because GM and irradiated foods are relatively novel, unlike many products (coffee, bread, fruit, milk) that people are used to buying. Still, Scholderer and Frewer (2003, p. 148) note that 'the very act of providing information seems to trigger the transformation of mere attitudes into action. And since the attitudes were predominantly negative in the first place, the final result is a *decrease* rather than an increase in the probability that consumers will actually choose a GM product.' This suggests that information provision is problematic and not necessarily a 'fix' of any kind. We shall be considering less dramatic cases, in looking at certification for more traditional and everyday foods, and we will be looking at comparative consumer judgements, rather than these very specific examples. However, such studies are still useful because they demonstrate empirically the problem with the knowledge-fix: that people do not simply act on information in a linear or predictable fashion. Drawing insights from public understanding of science, where knowledge is often argued to be the 'fix' for general public distrust in science and its regulation, we can thus challenge the deficit model of a consumption 'knowledge-fix' and instead try to think more carefully about how knowledge is regarded and used (or not) by consumers.

Methodology

To do this, we ran six focus groups, each of 6-9 participants, in the city of York in northern England, in 2005. According to the 2001 UK Census, York has around 180,000 in the local authority area and a sociodemographic profile similar to that of England as a whole, but with slightly more people aged 0-4 and 16-44 and having higher educational qualifications, reflecting the importance of its University-related population. The city is surrounded by agricultural areas and provided with a fair number of organic and farmgate outlets.

It has been argued that the UK is now particularly disposed to consumer distrust, following coverage of BSE since 1996 and GM since 1998, both of which were felt across Europe, as well as other science- and agriculture-related controversies such as Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in 2001. As Jasanoff (2005) has argued, different national cultures will affect how particular issues are confronted, given meaning and regulated. However, we were surprised that the risks of BSE/CJD and FMD were rarely raised in our focus groups, even when participants were discussing meat quality and production (although a larger survey might well have generated more mentions).

Our focus groups included 46 people (27 women and 19 men), aged from 23 to over 70 and from social grades A to E. The first four groups were chosen by a professional recruiter to represent a cross-section of ordinary consumers; the fifth group was of allotment holders who mainly grew their own fruit and vegetables and were recruited through an allotment association; the sixth and final group was of vegans and/or committed buyers of organic foods who were recruited through a local wholefood shop and the Soil Association, a UK NGO that promotes organic farming. All participants had to fulfil two conditions: they had to be involved in shopping for food for their household on a regular basis and they had to be either regularly buying or at least interested in one of several product categories, including organic food and functional food, to ensure sufficient interest in discussing these topics. Such criteria now cover a large proportion of the UK public: the Food Standards Agency (2006, p. 26) reported that 30% of shoppers surveyed in 2005 said that they regularly or occasionally bought organic food and the Soil Association (2006) reported that 65.4% of shoppers surveyed in 2005 said that they had knowingly bought organic food, with 41% doing so at least once a month.

One reason we recruited the fifth and sixth groups differently was to see how individuals who had specific relationships with food differed from our cross-section of ordinary consumers, not least because we saw great similarity across the first four groups and wanted to seek out contrasts. What surprised us was that, although awareness of many nutritional and environmental debates was high, particularly in the vegan/organic group, there was not a great deal of difference in how all six groups discussed confidence and trust in information, as we show below. The National Consumer Council (2001, p. 7) likewise found 'a marked consistency across all socio-economic and age groups of key consumer concerns about food and farming,' suggesting that consumer concerns, other than price, are not subject to strong cleavages of opinion. Hence, in what follows, although we will occasionally draw out comparisons between groups, the differences were much less marked than we had expected, which is itself interesting.

Each focus group had two facilitators and ran twice, with a week's interval during which participants were given information about food assurance organisations to take

home for reading. This comprised fifteen cards, each bearing a logo of an organisation and some text to explain their activities (see Table 1). A range of organisations were chosen for horizontal comparisons from the consumers' viewpoint, rather than a sector- or commodity-specific focus that risks issue determinism. All the organisations on the cards were genuine, but only some of them at the time did certify products in the UK. For those that did, we used *verbatim* text from existing food products on the cards. For the others, we adapted text from their websites or press briefings. Participants were asked to 'imagine you're doing your shopping and deciding what food to buy' and to sort the cards to reflect the amount of confidence they had in the assurance provided.

Talking about assurance schemes

We now move on to discuss the content of the focus groups. The first meeting of each group discussed food topics generally, but we began the second meeting by discussing the card-sorting exercise. Our participants initially expressed a great deal of general support for the principle, with the majority saying that they wanted to put more on the side of 'confidence' than the sorting exercise format would let them, especially the women. Sally (group 1) wrote on her comment sheet when she was doing the sorting that 'they all sounded worthy', which was a frequent comment. However, a minority in the first five groups expressed themselves pre-disposed to be cynical about all the schemes from the outset, because it was easy to 'con' consumers: a claim to promote good food 'doesn't actually mean anything', said Ron in the allotment group.

A minority (six out of 45 participants, including five men and one woman) said that they did not read labels at all (and were often proud of it), because of lack of time, or expressly avoided doing so because this was their habit, because they distrusted information generally or because they did not want to encounter negative information and have to worry about it. This approximates the Food Standards Agency's (2006, p. 49) findings that 12% of shoppers surveyed said that they did not read labels at all. There was a partial gender divide here: by comparison, the people who said that they did read labels regularly in first four groups were all women and all the vegan/organic group were label-conscious, but this self-recruiting group included only one man and eight women.

So, we started out with a majority of optimism and trust in the possibilities of the assurance schemes, but a minority of scepticism. What surprised us was when we began to discuss the schemes in detail in the second meetings, after our participants had read about the schemes at home, participants began to undermine the initial confidence that they had reported. As with Poortinga and Pidgeon's (2004) sample, the information we provided did not necessarily create the trust that was intended. Although their results were quantitative, our qualitative results show a similar asymmetrical effect that tends towards more distrust. However, in our case, this came not from newspaper coverage or government announcements about GM food, but from discussing and arguing with others about information and classification: the group dynamic of consumers was key to constructing meaning about knowledge. This process reflects a vernacular way of talking about food assurance and thus how attitudes are built in everyday life cumulatively and interactively, rather than a one-off questionnaire response to a piece of information. The overall effect was, by the end of the second group meeting, to undermine rather than bolster their trust in the assurance schemes. The following sections consider the several ways that this happened.

Who are you? Names as brands

First, there was a lot of confusion caused by the names of assurance organisations and this tended to undermine consumer confidence. As noted above, many participants seemed to have sorted the logo cards at home quite realistically, by reading the information very quickly, as they would in a shop, and often it was only when they were sitting in the focus group meeting with us and with the cards in front of them that they really began to read the text that we had given them. When we asked Dawn why she had confidence in the Assured Food Standards logo, she said:

Dawn Well, I don't know. You've got to rely on something, haven't you? I wouldn't say I'd buy it as against something else, but I thought, oh yes, that looks quite good. But I hadn't really thought about what it meant and it wouldn't necessarily influence my purchase. I would have assumed that it was British goods, though. (*allotment group*)

What interests us about these arguments were how easily consumers' confidence was undermined – they assumed that if they had misunderstood the name of the certifying or endorsing organisation, then their confidence was misplaced. The most common example that participants identified (in the case of dietary advice) was that they had confused the World Heart Federation (WHF) with the British Heart Foundation (BHF) or the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) when reading the cards alone at home and then realised their mistake in the group. This shook their confidence in WHF/BHF being a 'real' organisation. There was similar confusion over the General Medical Council (GMC, which regulates doctors and medical education in order to protect patients), and what participants referred to as the British Medical Council, by which we assume they had in mind the British Medical Association (which represents the medical profession). In the allotment group, Steve said that when he was reading the cards at home, he thought the GMC card was the BMC and 'I didn't think until I looked at it tonight that it said General Medical Council. It shows that we don't read labels very well.'

It also shows that it is the name which is recognised and the organisations themselves were therefore treated as we treat brands on other products, in a quick test of familiarity. The organisation, the brand, the logo, stands in for a multitude of other practices and knowledges – it is a shorthand learned through the prevalent capitalist logic of shopping, even where a scheme sets out to challenge that logic, such as with Fairtrade (Goodman, 2004). Moreover, many participants found their earlier confidence in the logos disrupted by focus group discussions or by simply re-reading the cards at more leisure while in the second group meeting. Perhaps because our instructions had been to 'imagine' they were shopping, several participants asked us if the logos they had been given were 'real'/'genuine' or 'made up'/'bogus' (imagined) – that is, whether the *organisations* were real, not whether the *assurance claims* were real. Mark pushed us to tell him:

Mark I did wonder when I was doing it, are they actually real these or are they things that you've created for the research?... I thought they were just creations, to be honest. (*group 1*)

In the allotment and the vegan/organic groups, we were similarly (but less insistently) pushed to say which organisations we had invented. In all three cases, when we explained that all the organisations existed, everyone was surprised that none of the logos or names had been invented by us. In particular, several participants said that the following were ‘made up’: Assured Food Standards (‘Red Tractor’ symbol)³, especially in the vegan/organic group, the General Medical Council and the World Heart Federation.

Chantal I did kind of wonder if some of those logos were just completely made up and what kind of credibility they’d have – if they are organisations that were just set up, yeah, like you just sort of made one up, just like you said. If you brought out a new product, you’d make up some kind of ‘guaranteed by Chantal’ – what does that mean?! You get a lot of those, don’t you? You get guaranteed by some random thing that you’ve never heard of. You just think people are [*we think she wanted to say ‘gullible’*] - I mean they rely on people liking the word ‘guaranteed’ or, don’t they? You do get that on a lot of stuff, don’t you? And it doesn’t actually mean anything. (*vegan/organic group*)

It was also interesting that although participants had a week between focus group meetings to read and sort the cards, none of them checked the logos for ‘reality’ on the internet or elsewhere. When asked, one person said they thought this would be ‘cheating’, if they were following our instructions to ‘imagine you’re doing your shopping’, because they did not shop accompanied by a live internet connection. In the end, a lot of participants said they based their judgement about the schemes on ‘familiarity’, i.e. whether they recognised (or thought they recognised, *pace* the problems with names above) the organisations, because, as Brenda in the vegan/organic group said, ‘How could you trust ones you’d never heard of before?’

The text that we had provided to explain the schemes and describe their monitoring and standard-setting activities prompted little discussion compared with the organisations’ logos and names. As Laura (in group 1) summarised: ‘I would say the name stood out and swayed me before I’d even read [the text].’ So, participants’ judgements often boiled down to brand recognition, which was highly variable and unstable for different participants. As we had expected, the vegan/organic group particularly identified the Soil Association logo as so familiar that they did not bother reading the text we had provided to explain it. As Chantal said, ‘I don’t think I read through that one because I know it so well. I only read ones that I wasn’t familiar with.’ Like a brand, the logo itself functioned to assure a specific product quality and different consumer-participants had different brand awareness. This ironically suggests that familiarity and branding for assurance schemes in the interests of mainstream appeal can re-fetishize the product, or at least re-work the fetish (Goodman, 2004), so that a logo that seeks to provide knowledge and stimulate consumer reconnection itself becomes something not to think about.

What are you? The problem of independence

As well as name recognition, we also talked to our participants about how certification schemes might operate in practice, but this proved difficult. First, our participants tended to assume that all food was closely regulated in Britain and did not really see

how voluntary schemes could fit into this process or go beyond this baseline. They expressed a lot of uncertainty and confusion about whether the government is (or should be) the body responsible for checking the claims on products. This was not helped by the way that several assurance schemes describe their standards as including legal compliance, because this seemed tautological to many participants: legal compliance should apply to every food product that they can buy, not just to ones differentiated by a special logo, whether they expected the regulators to be government departments like Defra or MAFF (as was) or local regulators like Trading Standards officers. As Sarah in group 1 noted of the Tesco organic claim, ‘of course they adhere to the strict EU regulations, because they all do. They have to!’ This was particularly noted for the Assured Food Standards scheme:

Chantal What does it mean? Doesn’t all food get checked through the whole process? It must do. (*vegan/organic group*)

Julie You’d have thought the Ministry of Agriculture would be checking on farms, surely. (*group 1*)

This is precisely why UK consumer groups like the National Consumer Council (2001, p. 24) have criticised such farm assurance schemes for ‘failing to offer any more than the legal minimum’ by way of production standards (also Morris and Young 2004, p. 91). In this sense, even the anti-government participants said that the baseline of safety and animal welfare should be the business of government, because only government was powerful enough to check fully and impose meaningful sanctions on transgressors.

But many certification schemes argue that independence and transparency are essential to their credibility, particularly when ensured through third-party certification, and hence give them power to influence demand and to promote sustainable production. For example, independence is argued to ensure rigour for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC 2006), the Assured Food Standards ‘Red Tractor’ scheme (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002) and certification in general (Jahn et al. 2005) and also to distinguish it from mere corporate endorsement or sponsorship. But our participants did not all share this priority and varied greatly as to how they judged independence and whether it influenced their trust. For some, independence meant that the assurance organisation retained autonomy to criticise powerful actors, to be outside their control, so it was a very positive attribute:

Philip They’ve almost got to be independent because it’s all about money, isn’t it? Who funds these people? People, probably the big farming community and the retailers are probably the ones who’re funding the government, MAFF, or whatever, so they want the Ministry for Farming and Fisheries or whatever the results to suit the retailers. You almost want somebody totally independent who’s not linked in to the government or anything, that isn’t under pressure and just says it the way it is rather than saying ‘you can’t say that because Tesco is a big, they give us £10 million, £100 million into the government funds so we can’t say that they do bad things.’ You want them to be totally independent.

Facilitator Is there anyone like that?

Philip Probably Greenpeace or something like that are the only ones. (*group 4*)

The reference to Greenpeace was also made by Paul in group 3, but neither references were picked up for more discussion by others (nor was the Friends of the Earth 'GM-free' logo). Both do value an NGO that has made independence a key attribute and indeed this is one reason why Greenpeace refused to become a member of the Marine Stewardship Council's scheme to certify sustainably sourced fish, because of the possible compromise required with industrial interests (MSC, personal communication 2005). But such views were unusual because participants were more interested in whether certification schemes were powerful enough to inspect, sanction and thus change things.

Cathy The thing that put me off that one [Assured Food Standards 'Red Tractor'], it said that 'food is produced to independently inspected standards'. Who's inspecting it? Independently? Who's this independent person or persons?

Facilitator Who would you want it to be?

Alison It would need to be somebody who had some clout, somebody who could take them to court or something like that. (*group 3*)

The question of independence was seen differently amongst our participants. Government backing of assurance schemes was seen as good by some, because it offered the only possibility of strong regulation, but bad by others, because they took a neo-liberal line against regulation or 'intervention' in general. This emphasised power but had the disadvantage of lack of independence.

Steve I think there should be some government body that checks on these, checks on the statements, checks on the company. (*allotment group*)

The other irony here is common to many environmental problems: people want government to act, because they are the only ones powerful enough to regulate production, but at the same time many participants say elsewhere that government (as 'the nanny state') is too intervening and untrustworthy. Again, the tension between independence and power is problematic: only government has the ultimate power, but it is not trusted as much as the not-for-profits and charities.

Philip We fund the government, don't we, with our taxes? And the government's supposed to be looking after us. (*group 4*)

By comparison, commercial assurance schemes or forms of endorsement were generally seen as bad in principle because they lacked independence and were in the interests of the company, not of the consumer. The Tesco organic logo generated dichotomous views from Tesco shoppers and non-shoppers, who contrasted the power of Tesco to check (and thus control) its suppliers with its lack of motive to spend money protecting consumers.

Andrew I think places like Tesco's, they do go round, they have their own auditors that go round these farms and things like that and check. And they go round the manufacturers – meat manufacturers and places like that – they do go round regularly to check regularly that they're producing their products to their standards, to their specifications. (*group 3*)

- Harriet I'm not sure about that, but would you trust Tesco Organic because you know Tesco is behind it?
- Chantal Yeah, I wondered about that.
- Harriet You know, something that has a business behind it is [less trusted]
- Tim I found that one of the most interesting, because I know from experience that certainly government organisations don't have the resources to check everything, so things that have government labels are checked periodically but not so rigorously, and I would think that the same is true for non-government organisations, so the only people that really do have the resources to inspect things carefully would be commercial organisations like Tesco's, but, of course, they've got a commercial reason why they're doing those inspections, so whether you'd believe that. (*vegan/organic group*)

Such commercial distrust is ironic when food shopping in the UK is dominated by big retailers like Tesco, which had the largest single share of the food market, selling 30.5% of UK groceries in 2005 (BBC, 2005). 'When people do go food shopping, they almost always go to a supermarket' (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002, p. 16), with 92% of consumers surveyed by the FSA saying that they buy most of their household food from supermarkets (FSA 2006). Most organic food in the UK is also sold through multiples like supermarkets, with about 90% of shoppers surveyed by the Soil Association (2006) saying that they bought their organic food in supermarkets. In 2005 Tesco had the largest single market share of the UK organic food market and organic produce sold in its York store was independently certified by third parties like the Soil Association and Organic Farmers and Growers. Despite this, our participants retained the right to be sceptical about Tesco's lack of independence:

- Paul Tesco are just pushing their own stuff. It's just to get the sales up for them. If it had said Asda's or Sainsbury's organic, all they're doing is trying to push their own food. (*group 3*)
- Tom I like thinking that dolphins are being protected [*by the Marine Conservation Society*], whereas I know that Tesco's couldn't give a damn one way or another. (*allotment group*)

By comparison, not-for-profit NGOs and charitable organisations were seen as independent and thus good. Gabrielle was a member of the Soil Association and said of them (in the vegan/organic group): 'They're the real thing.... They're totally independent and totally ethical and high standards.' Fairtrade was another example mentioned in two groups as a positive and trustworthy independent organisation. As another example, the Marine Stewardship Council certifies fisheries that are sustainably managed, in the interests of long term stocks, but it is noticeable that it is not the certification process (whether third-party or otherwise) that generates our participants' support, but the nature of the organisation itself.

- Alison I think 'non-profit organisation' leaps out at you [from the text on the card], because they're doing it for the good of it then, aren't they? Not for any monetary...
- Paul Not doing it to make any profit or anything like that. (*group 3*)

This echoes other studies and surveys that show higher trust in NGOs than in other sorts of organisation (e.g. Worcester 2001). In the Food Standards Agency's (2006, p. 66) survey, consumer groups came top for the 'reliability' of their information, whereas the bottom three were, in descending order, government, local councils and supermarkets (although the gaps between the top and bottom scores were fairly small). A MORI poll in the UK in 2000 reported 78% of respondents had a great deal or a fair amount of confidence in scientists working for environmental groups, but only 48% in industrial scientists. Frewer et al. (1996) also found NGOs (both consumer and environmental) more trusted than government and industry in the case of providing information about food risks in the UK and Frewer et al. (2003) found that a (fictional) consumer NGO was consistently rated by their respondents as more expert and more trustworthy than governmental and industrial sources. Similarly, Hayes et al. (2002) found that information about irradiated and GM food attributed to what they termed 'advocacy groups' was the most influential, showing that trust is produced not merely by information, but by its source (a point they seem to have missed). In other words, the messenger, not necessarily the message, matters.

However, this inclination towards trust is unstable: if the ideal is independence, there remains doubt that this is possible in practice. Sceptics in our groups suspected even 'independent' organisations were funded by government and/or commercial monies. Because the Organic Farmers and Growers card did not state that the organisation is not-for-profit, Chantal in the vegan/organic group trusted it less than the Soil Association, because 'I'm thinking it could just be a cartel of farmers that have decided to stick that on their products.' Similarly, Sarah (in group 1) thought the Assured Food Standards logo 'meant sweet FA! So you know, do you know what I mean? It's an independent body that's looking after its own.'

Moreover, people often did not classify organisations very clearly, so that independence was muddled or confused, raising many questions in discussion, such as: is the Food Standards Agency the government? (Yes.)⁴ Does the World Heart Federation get government money? (Not strictly, it is an umbrella group for national foundations, which may access government grants but are not directly paid for by government.) Does the Soil Association do certification for Tesco? (Yes – but even the people recruited via the Soil Association were confused about this.) The groups struggled together to try to define the characteristics of organisations, especially the extent of their affiliation to government. Mark and Matthew tried various ways to define the independence and power of assurance organisations, producing a confusing typology where 'regulatory' character was not necessarily connected to government but was about having power and muscle and being able to enforce sanctions or other consequences for transgressors, like a certification police force. Moreover, they ascribed regulatory qualities to a mixed bag of organisations, including both NGOs and quangos or nondepartmental public bodies:⁵

Mark I tended to look at them as to whether they were regulatory bodies or voluntary organisations, on the basis that if they were regulatory, their standards were more likely to be enforced than the ones where 'we'll all just get together and this is a good idea' type arrangement.

Facilitator And which ones did you classify as regulatory?

- Mark World Heart Federation, Soil Association, GMC, National Consumer Council, Fairtrade, which is a voluntary body, Food Standards Agency.⁶
- Matthew You see, I did actually put the RSPCA quite high up because I know that they do prosecute. They will take you to court. They're one of these [organisations] that do actually have teeth.
- Facilitator Is that what you were meaning by regulatory? Having teeth?
- Mark Yes, something that can enforce a standard, and people have to adhere to a standard if they're going to operate in a particular market. (*group 1*)

Our participants thus had difficulty evaluating the intermediaries providing the knowledge-fix, regardless of the information on the cards. The character of 'those who know' was highly contingent and dependent upon a range of validation mechanisms – so trust had to be earned and maintained, it was not a given.

This reflects current debates about how knowledge is produced in social contexts. Many ethical trading and environmental assurance schemes depend upon a heterogeneous mix of commercial, non-governmental and governmental entities to build credibility, particularly in the face of a more sceptical and potentially distrusting public (Irwin and Michael 2003, p. 147). Unfortunately, this can make judgements about trust even more complicated for consumers. In the fourth group, we tried to clarify the vernacular classification of 'independence', but the discussion very soon became quite confused and disparate. In the vegan/organic group, Gabrielle argued that government is run by big business, so differentiating those two is also pointless, because 'a lot of government decisions about what they'll allow in food are very, very influenced by marketing processes and big corporations [lobbying].' Even in cases of specialised knowledge, scepticism often won out. The allotment group all recognised the Soil Association's logo, but still found it difficult to decide its status:

- Dawn Who's the Soil Association run by? [Do we know] That they're not a government organisation?
- Steve It's an independent body, but I don't know.
- Ron They're a body set up to legitimise people... [*unclear*] to organic food, basically. Most organisations are based either governmentally or financially. And I think the Soil Association originally – in fact, still is – a financial organisation, because if you've got the Soil Association logo, it means your soil's clean and you can charge more.
- Facilitator When you say 'financial' do you mean profit-making?
- Ron Oh yeah. Money. Money, money, money. Only one thing.
- Steve Is it to make profit, though, or is it done to break even and provide that service?
- Ron I think the Soil Association itself is a non-profit-making organisation, but the farmers within the organisation are profit-making.
- Steve And one assumes they pay a fee to the organisation to keep it going – the growers. (*allotment group*)

So, some participants subscribed to the notion of independent (third-party) certification being more trustworthy, just as the literature does (e.g. Jahn et al., 2005; Hatanaka et al., 2005). However, this was not widespread and classifying individual schemes as independent was also difficult for many.

What do assurance schemes do?

Moreover, when we did manage to get our participants to tell us what they thought was involved in voluntary certification schemes, they did not talk about principles or the higher standards (beyond legal compliance) but about possible practices, especially the strict inspection regime that they imagined. To do this, they applied models transferred from regulatory modes of inspection and enforcement, such as for the Assured Food Standards scheme:

- Matthew I get the feeling that there's someone checking the food. If it's chickens they're checking the welfare of the chickens. If it's a slaughterhouse, they're checking how it's slaughtered, checks whether it's healthy meat, or not healthy meat, it's given the stamp to then go on to be diced and sliced and packed. I'm assuming that's what it covers.
- Julie I think it would include the vets – looking at the animals while they're still on the farm, because they're independent...
- Matthew I would imagine that the carcasses for beef, pork, are inspected visually and possibly one in however many are taken as samples off to be tested for bacterial content.
- Sarah No, I don't think they'd do that. Not the bacteria bit but the first bit, yeah.
- Julie Now doesn't every animal have its own little passport that you can't move animals even from farm to farm without...
- Sally It's got to have got tighter with mad cow disease, hasn't it? But I couldn't tell you how it's got tighter, or what they do. (*group 1*)

This is one of very few mentions of mad cow disease/BSE that we heard in over twenty hours of discussion and even this one was not followed up. This seems to contradict the frequent argument that the legacy of BSE in the mid-1990s is important in the UK because it has changed public debate and expectations and has engendered distrust. For our groups, BSE had receded into the background, rather than disappeared altogether as a concern (also FSA 2006). However, the legacy of the 2001 FMD outbreak also cropped up occasionally, not least because it again gave consumers models for imagining certification processes and especially traceability:

- Julie You can check from the supermarket, can't you, you can trace it back to where the animal's come from and when it was born and when it was...
- Sarah Because they did with the first Foot and Mouth, didn't they? They knew where it had come from.
- Mark That's only to trace it back in case they're diseased. It's nothing to do with how old it is, or they slaughtered it three months ago (*group 1*)

Indeed, this legacy of the difficulties of monitoring also led our participants to doubt how rigorous certification processes of checking could really be, for example, in the case of organic certification:

- Rob I think you have to look at the Foot and Mouth [case]. They didn't have enough vets and people to get to all the farms to stop the Foot and Mouth spreading without seeing them going to all these places to verify that everything's right. They had a small crisis which turned into a massive

crisis obviously. But they couldn't handle that, so how can they handle this! (*group 4*)

Particularly when imagining certification processes in international supply chains and small (non-governmental and charitable) groups, people foresaw problems. Not-for-profit organisations, even where well-meaning, were assumed not to have the size or the capacity for inspection, because there is too much to check, especially in international supply chains. This sees NGOs as independent but less powerful agents of assurance:

Robert *[talking about the Assured Food Standards 'Red Tractor' scheme]* I can't see them being there right from the start from the farm til it goes in the pack – it would take forever. And to monitor every farm and what's produced and things, I just can't quite see that to be honest. I just think it would be a lot of time, money and effort, and I don't think it's viable really.

Debbie It's not realistic to think that we can see everything, is it? (*group 2*)

Simon *[talking about the Marine Stewardship Council scheme]* I can't see how they could do that. How can you tell what boat's gone out? I don't know how it works. They can't tell me they don't have x, so they throw it back. I mean it's dead anyway, so why throw it away? But how do they know they haven't got loads of fish underneath in the freezer. They're just getting there what they've been quoted. There could be some in the bottom that they can sell privately or something like that. That they've over fished. I can't see how they could count every fish that comes on shore in Europe accurately. I can't see how it works. (*group 2*)

As well as inspection, imports were seen as problematic, because, as noted above, although participants assumed that British regulations applied to all food, they were much more distrustful and uncertain about other countries' regulations, because of geographical distance but also variability in regimes. In the vegan/organic group, Gabrielle said, of organic food, 'a lot of it's sourced from abroad, where it's hard to check,' not least because of the large volumes that have to be processed.

Lorna Can you imagine how many boxes of [organic] bananas are imported a day?

Peter They're not going to check them all!⁷ (*group 2*)

Moreover, British standards were often assumed to be stricter and more enforced through regulation than those overseas. Several participants were both nationalistic in wanting British produce because of good regulation (or xenophobia, depending on their mood), but also anti-regulation because of 'nanny state' arguments, noted above. This contradiction was highlighted when they talked about the Assured Food Standards 'Red Tractor' scheme, which they interpreted as quasi-regulatory. Whilst supported by government and quasi-non-governmental agencies, such as the Food Standards Agency (2006) and the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (2002), this scheme is a voluntary one run by the farming industry (Assured Food Standards 2006). Moreover, the logo was changed in 2005 to incorporate part of the British flag (Assured Food Standards 2006), and this visible clue prompted several participants to express

greater confidence in this scheme,⁸ particularly older participants like Mabel, who were very distrustful of other European countries' regulations:

Mabel I trust British things more than foreign things – especially for food. You hope you can trust them anyway, put it like that. More locally grown. I know you buy your chickens all from Taiwan or wherever, but British is best – I think so anyway... You'd trust that they [i.e. *British foods*] would be healthier for you, that they were being better looked after
(*group 4*)

A lot of the arguments boiled down to support of the principle of certification but scepticism about the practices and powers of the certification bodies to carry it out with sufficient rigour across complex supply chains that included big companies:

Steve I think the biggest [problem] is how do they check everything. Like Tom said earlier on. How many inspectors do these people have? How do they check everything? I think the checks must be rudimentary.
(*allotment group*)

A minority of participants were distrustful of certification throughout the discussion, considering it readily open to abuse or fraud. Referring to the 'dolphin-friendly' Marine Conservation Society logo, three people in the fourth group argued that such claims were not trustworthy because the dolphins killed by the fishing crews would be hidden from the inspectors, i.e. the well-meaning but gullible NGOs would be fooled by the dodgy practices of commercial interests: the claims were merely paper ones, not real ones. They also questioned the independence of the inspections process for organic produce, projecting their own lack of agency in being unable to verify it for themselves and often seeking to persuade other participants in their groups to share their scepticism:

Rob If you want to believe it, you can believe but what's to say that Farmer Brown's not best mates with the bloke from the Soil Association. Says 'I've not had much money this year – we'll just push these through.' We'll never know. A cynical look at it but they'll put a rubber stamp on it but you'll never know. (*group 4*)

Given all this scepticism, many of our participants argued that they had no option but to trust the information provided to them, because of their own lack of knowledge and agency in the face of the massive (and remote) food industry. This suggests that they did not feel empowered by the assurance schemes, as their organisers might hope.

Mabel We take them at face value, because that's what we read and that's what we're told and so we take it as true, so it should be true, because otherwise it's...

Facilitator How about when you go to the supermarket to buy beef or something like that and you go to the shelf and it's all packaged up. How do you know that's organic?

Sarah Because it says so. You take their word for it! (*group 4*)

Indeed, some of the confidence that participants like Steve had expressed at the beginning of the meeting ebbed away by the end, especially once it came under assault from the more sceptical members of the group, such as Ron in this case.

Steve We don't know. We believe, but we don't know absolutely factually that it is what it says, does what it says. (*allotment group*)

Conclusions

We have taken a more consumer-oriented approach to assurance schemes in order to look at how they are given meaning, by comparison with the more common producer-oriented focus upon direct sales and shorter supply chains. We have some rather downbeat conclusions. Our results problematise the knowledge-fix urged by the academic and campaigning literature, because our participants do not necessarily respond positively to assurance information and schemes and often it is not clear to them what is being assured about food production or how. Although people initially expressed lots of confidence in the food assurance examples, this confidence was destabilised by subsequent discussion and the difficulties of articulating reasons for such confidence, as might happen in 'real world' conversations about shopping. Hence, the effect of assurance schemes and information can be counter-intuitive, in that more information and discussion caused our participants to re-consider, often negatively, food production and regulation processes, which tended to increase scepticism rather than reduce it. We also felt that participants were worried about being gullible and suggest that a history of well-publicised problems in UK food and agricultural regulation have perhaps made consumers feel that there is safety in scepticism.

This obviously is not good news for assurance schemes, suggesting that they do not necessarily re-assure and may even increase scepticism if people ponder the difficulties of creating and maintaining an effective inspections regime. However, if they are also prompting increased awareness and discussion, and even enthusiastic debate, as our groups showed, we could see that as positive in at least addressing the 'distancing' and thus consumers' habit of ignoring food production, given the many other demands on their everyday lives. Moreover, if Freidberg (2003) is correct, and retailers are swayed by what they think consumers think, rather than by what consumers actually think, then consumer scepticism does not matter as much in practical terms, so long as the campaigns for consumer information and assurance continue to have political clout.

Moreover, participants found it difficult to work out what certification involved and the status of the organisations that were providing assurance. Although our two 'specialist' groups were more knowledgeable about food production, especially about growing and sourcing organic fruit and vegetables, their views about assurance and certification were very similar to those of the other groups. Our participants built vernacular typologies and comparative judgements to give assurance schemes meaning, but these did not necessarily identify or prioritise third-party certification as more independent than other forms of certification or endorsement, as the literature might suggest (see above), not least because of the practical difficulties of monitoring complex supply chains. The details of certification chains, however complex, are thus wrapped up in general recognition (or not) of logos and organisations, again stressing the horizontality of the consumer experience and its *necessary* lack of depth when shopping is done at speed.

So, we need to move beyond a simple argument that providing information will change consumption or even be readily understandable. Labelling and other forms of assurance are assessed by consumers in the context of myriad historical and contemporaneous factors connected with food, science, government and business, not in splendid isolation. As we noted above, the literature's detailed studies of individual commodities such as chicken, salad leaves and fish (Watts 2004; Guthman 2003; Mansfield 2003) contrast with the consumer experience of encountering many commodities in the same space, vying for attention on the shelves of a shop. Consumers must weigh the products and the information about them alongside each other, when buying perhaps thirty different products in as many minutes, so that consumer knowledges, therefore, are not highly detailed and commodity-specific, but broad and comparative. We have to bear this in mind when we consider that increasing sales figures suggest that, for organic and fairtrade food at least, scepticism is not necessarily affecting behaviour: people continue to buy. This makes sense, however, when we consider that these sectors remain very small compared to others - and the other sectors may promote far more scepticism as being even less well managed and assured. Again, in a world of consumer choices, judgements about food are highly comparative and complex.

Our point is that the reconnection agenda imagines consumers too simplistically, seeing them as disconnected (and therefore ignorant) and ready to respond positively to information about the supply chain. People buy food all the time and know a lot about it and, when prompted as they were in our groups, they can imagine even more. Yet they often do not change their behaviour simply in response to information from assurance schemes, even where they seem to agree with their principles. To put it simply, we do not always do what we say we do or what we think we should do - the history of smoking shows us this very obviously. As researchers, therefore, we need to examine further how knowledge about food is produced and consumed in different contexts and how ongoing debates and activities can both give meaning to food assurance but also destabilise and undermine it.

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Table 1. Assurance organisations used as prompts in the focus groups.

Name	Type of organisation	Did they assure/endorse products in UK in 2005 and for what theme?
Soil Association	NGO (UK)	Yes, certification body for organic food
Organic Farmers & Growers	NGO (UK)	Yes, certification body for organic food
Tesco Organic	Commercial retailer	No, but their organic products are certified by other bodies
Conservation Grade (run by the Jordans cereal company)	Commercial manufacturers	Yes, for environmental and wildlife impacts
Friends of the Earth – GM-free campaign	NGO (international)	No, off-product campaign
RSPCA - Freedom Food	NGO (UK)	Yes, for animal welfare
Assured Food Standards	NGO (UK)	Yes, for animal welfare, environment, safety, legislative compliance, see
Marine Stewardship Council	NGO (international)	Yes, for sustainable fisheries, see
Marine Conservation Society	NGO (UK)	No, off-product guidance
Fairtrade Foundation	NGO (UK)	Yes, for human welfare and economic impacts
Food Standards Agency	Quango (UK)	No, monitors food safety and labelling
National Consumer Council	Quango (UK)	No, advises government on consumer issues
CORE	NGO (UK)	No, supports those suffering from digestive disorders
World Heart Federation	NGO (international)	Yes, endorses for human health impacts
General Medical Council	Quango (UK)	No, regulates medical profession

Notes

¹ We have capitalised this term when we refer to the specific assurance scheme run by the Fairtrade Foundation, but not capitalised it when we refer to the general principle of guaranteeing producers a fair and stable price (see Fairtrade Foundation, <http://www.fairtradeatwork.org.uk/>, accessed 10 May 2007).

² As one of our referees noted, we could refer to these as (1) a spatial fix and (2) a knowledge fix to the perceived problem of disconnection. However, they are more similar than that dichotomy implies, because farm shops and farm markets are still remote from the fields and factories which produce their foods. Knowledge is still important, although consumers rely more on face-to-face mediation and interpersonal knowledge, than the more detached, depersonalised knowledge offered by assurance schemes. We deal with some of these interesting issues in another paper, due to lack of space in this one.

³ In contrast, the Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (2002) reported that the Red Tractor had 33% recognition amongst UK shoppers and wanted it to become the 'baseline standard', whilst being very lukewarm about other schemes with higher standards.

⁴ As one referee noted, this might give the impression that we, as researchers, were more knowledgeable than consumers. We should point out that we often could not answer questions put to us in the groups, but we did what any consumer could do and looked on the internet or phoned someone in a key organisation to find out the answers after the group - what our participants had referred to as 'cheating'. On other matters, such as diet or growing vegetables, our participants were more knowledgeable than we were; indeed, one participant who worked in a government agency was able to answer some questions raised by other participants, thus illustrating the considerable knowledge gradients between different consumers.

⁵ A quango is a quasi-nongovernmental organisation, which looks separate from government, in that it is not directly part of a government department or ministry, but has connections to government, usually because government appoints its senior staff and gives it statutory duties and responsibilities, often to do with monitoring and policing regulation. An example in the UK is the Environment Agency for England and Wales. The degree of independence from government is clearly both important but also difficult for our participants to decide.

⁶ The Soil Association is an environmental campaigning group; the GMC is a charity but with statutory functions under UK legislation; the National Consumer Council is a quango primarily funded and appointed by government and the Food Standards Agency is a quango set up by government in 2000 and reporting to health ministers. So, out of Mark's list, only the FSA has any powers that could accurately be called 'regulatory'.

⁷ In practice, the UK government's environmental ministry, Defra, regulates and spot-checks all imports of organic produce against national and European criteria (Defra, personal communication, 2006), so this is a regulatory process.

⁸ This problem of nationalism and the difference between 'British' and 'local' agendas is rarely noted in the literature on quality and authenticity in food assurance, which is unfortunate because there is a big geographical and sociopolitical difference in emphasis. With respect to AFS, where the produce originates in Britain, part of the British flag can be added to the 'Red Tractor' logo, but it is not an essential condition of the scheme (Food Standards Agency 2006).