

PROPAGANDA



The Raghavan Report

The cost of "Anti-industry" propaganda and the need for busting myths and half-truths

by Raghavan ('Ragha') Sampathkumar



Continuing from my last column, let me explain the costs of negative propaganda that is spread by people and organisations with vested interests.

Diversity in this world is the primary reason for the very existence of the human species.

Diversity in culture, social norms, rules, language, food, culinary preferences, crops grown and ideologies. Here ideologies are critical, and one must understand the differences in perspectives that form belief systems in every culture and race. Asian cultures are typically hierarchical and bound by strong social norms. Often individual choices and preferences are overruled by societal expectations or norms. But this is not the case of Western cultures. All these factors influence how people perceive and respond to information.

Of late, we have seen many ideologies are borrowed as such from Western countries, which are nowhere close to the realities – social, economical, cultural, and political – in Asia.

One of such borrowed ideology is about “Utopian green” agriculture wherein people want to take precautionary (often negative and time-consuming) perspective towards any new technology but expect agriculture to continue to feed the growing population with affordable, safe and nutritious food.

How is it possible? Any technology, be it a drug, a trait, or a chemical, will have its own advantages and disadvantages as well as risks and benefits. Risks are to be weighed against the benefits and that must be the main objective while taking a neutral and balanced stand on assessing any new innovation.

However, it does not happen this way in the current world particularly after the explosion of social media. Governments and policy makers are always watchful and most sensitive about public sentiments on any issues.

For example, privacy on social media became an important concern for everyone and Governments are

scrambling to act swiftly. Ever increasing clamour and need for sensational news are actually impacting the confidence that public have on the food industry.

This is not to say no one is doing anything wrong and everything is correct. Social media is an effective medium to communicate and connect with the public. But, with unfounded claims against the food industry, from red meat consumption, chemical residues, labour and welfare issues to environmental stewardship practices in the food value chain, general public are being influenced heavily.

Often the industry is not as vocal or articulate about their perspectives as the other groups and often falls short in terms of money and taking proactive initiatives. It doesn't end here. Policies are getting heavily influenced by public sentiments and the groups with vested interests aptly gauge this to ensure which ever innovations or technologies that they wish to block or delay, are portrayed negatively in the eyes of the public. They do it steadily and in a concerted manner that the public, unless they care to understand, do not know the real hidden objective of these groups in spreading these claims.

The cost of these counterproductive propaganda is enormous if one looks at multiple dimensions. Generally, cost of doing business particularly, regulatory compliance increases. This is true only in case of the organised players who have the responsibilities to fulfil in terms of their ESG mandates. More and more time, efforts and money need to be spent to counter these myths and lies spread by those who don't have any other objective but to simply spread lies through unjustified scaremongering.

Genetic engineering and the myths surrounding it is one of the classic example. For example, innovations like Golden rice can truly benefit millions of underprivileged particularly, children with Vitamin A deficiency.

However, due to borrowed ideologies and unjustified negative propaganda, many beneficial technological innovations do not see the light of the day.

It is time now for the industry to fight back and let consumers understand the truth. For that it needs to speak in a language that they can understand.

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