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Alison E. Adams
Oklahoma State University

Thomas E. Shriver
Oklahoma State University

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[UN]COMMON LANGUAGE: THE CORPORATE APPROPRIATION OF ALTERNATIVE AGRO-FOOD FRAMES

ALISON E. ADAMS and THOMAS E. SHRIVER*

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Discourses and arguments regarding our increasingly globalized food system include complicated issues such as sustainability, ethical trade, localized sourcing, and food justice. However, recent research has largely glossed over how broader discursive structures can simultaneously facilitate and hinder social movement action in this area. The purpose of this study is to explore broader trends in public discourse and corporate public relations in the alternative agro-food movement (AAF). We conducted a qualitative discourse analysis to identify how powerful corporate agribusinesses use salient AAF frames in organizational literature. Our findings indicate that corporations are selectively using AAF frames to garner public support and increase their consumer bases. We conclude by providing a foundation for future research and exploration of barriers and supports for AAF efforts, and making recommendations for social movement research and framing theory.

Public concern, media coverage, and even policy regarding the food system cannot be essentialized as a debate between organic and conventional agricultural production; rather, discourses surrounding the increasingly globalized food system encompass myriads of perspectives and concerns. In the United States, activism surrounding these diverse issues has developed and evolved to include numerous organizations that work to bring about awareness and social change associated with agricultural and food systems. Several scholars have used the umbrella term *alternative agro-food (AAF) movement* to describe this diverse coalition of specialized factions that address critical issues such as food security, human rights, environmental concerns, and sustainable agriculture (e.g., Hassanein 1999, 2003; Markowitz 2008). Hassanein (2003) has defined the AAF movement as:

[T]he social activity of sustainable agriculturists, local food advocates, environmentalists, food security activists, and others who are working to bring about changes at a variety of different levels of the agro-food system ... The alternative agro-food movement ... is dynamic, multi-dimensional, involving various groups of people situated in particular places, who create and implement assorted strategies, participate in diverse forms of action, and encounter a variety of obstacles and opportunities (p. 80).

*Direct all correspondence to Alison E. Adams, Department of Sociology, Oklahoma State University, 431 Murray Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078-4062; e-mail: alison.adams@okstate.edu. We would like to thank Tamara L. Mix for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Social movement research has recognized the AAF movement as particularly important, because many of their collective grievances are becoming salient in emergent discourse within the public, the media, and the political sphere (e.g., Hassanein 1999, 2003; Hinrichs 2003; Mooney and Majka 1995).

Increased media attention to issues such as food safety scares, pesticide use, and genetic engineering have contributed to a rise in public awareness and concern (e.g. Frewer, Miles, and Marsh 2002), and illustrate a cultural and political climate that is conducive to AAF movement framing resonance (Koopmans and Statham 1999). This developing and dynamic discourse emerging in the public sphere may serve as the basis for social action in several areas (Brulle 1996). Koopmans and Olzak (2004) described discursive opportunity as “aspects of the public discourse that determine a message’s chances of diffusion on the public sphere” (p. 202). We focus here on two aspects of the public discourse—the media and the political sphere—that can shape how the public perceives related social movement frames. For example, the media can bring certain issues into the public sphere, addressing a larger audience than a single organization or even an entire social movement could probably reach. Similarly, new policy and changes to existing policy can highlight developments and contemporary matters within the food system, signaling their importance to the broader public.

We highlight how the AAF movement can take advantage of relevant discursive opportunities created by broader media and political forces to facilitate frame resonance, recruit and mobilize participants, and raise awareness about their grievances. Previous research illustrates how discursive opportunity structures can affect frame resonance (e.g., Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Koopmans and Statham 1999; Snow 2004). Moreover, the way in which organizations construct and publicize messages reflects their own grievances, as well as contemporary cultural and political dialogue (Snow 2004). However, we argue that, even when discursive opportunities are conducive to the resonance of social movement framing, they may simultaneously facilitate frame co-optation. Specifically, oppositional or competing forces can appropriate the discursive structures to exploit social movement messages for their own ends.

Few social movement analyses have specifically unpacked the role that discursive opportunity structures play in frame competition between low- and high-power organizations. We use the case of the AAF movement to extend this literature by illustrating how broader political and cultural discourse can shape the frames used by social movement organizations and their corporate opposition. We begin by providing a brief overview of the historical and contemporary

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contributions to the current public discourse on alternative and conventional agriculture. Our analysis involves a comparative, qualitative discourse approach using data from selected AAF movement organizations' and corporate agribusiness' websites. We identify salient messages in AAF organizational literature that reflect dominant frames within the movement. We conclude by exploring ways in which corporate agribusinesses are utilizing these messages in their own advertising and public relations campaigns.

FRAMING AND DISCURSIVE OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

The framing perspective provides a theoretical framework for understanding how organizations within the AAF movement create messages for public distribution and interpretation. Social movements use frames or "an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (Snow and Benford 1992:137). These frames and their social interpretation can act to legitimize movement action, goals, and assertions (Kurtz 2003). This process involves not only the creation of meaning, but also the formation of a socially-shared ideology (Snow and Benford 2000).

Importantly, social movement frames are neither created nor consumed in a social vacuum. They are dynamic reflecting the broader discursive context that facilitates their function and resonance (Benford and Snow 2000; McCammon et al. 2007). The process of developing and disseminating messages to the public is "not only a function of the stream of events coursing through them and the cultural resources, interactants, and framing debates that constitute them, but are also influenced by the enveloping political context" (Snow 2004:403).

Previous research has emphasized the role of discursive opportunity structures in understanding frame success or failure. Discursive opportunity structures refer to accepted concepts within the broader social context that can promote the resonance of movement frames (Koopman and Duyvendak 1995; Koopmans and Statham 1999). Discursive opportunities can present themselves in either a cultural (McCammon et al. 2007) or a political context (Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995). Widely held beliefs and values regarding social concepts can significantly influence how the public receives a social movement's frames. For example, in their study of the U.S. women's jury movement, McCammon et al. (2007) examined the influence of salient discursive opportunities on the framing of women's rights issues. They concluded that these broader cultural influences affected this movement's framing

issues. Political conditions and public political attitudes can also affect frame resonance. For example, Koopmans and Duyvendak (1995) examined discursive opportunities surrounding the anti-nuclear movement in Western Europe following the Chernobyl disaster. Their findings provided evidence that the resonance or failure of movement frames was largely influenced by these contemporary political opportunities. Similarly, in a comparative study of feminist frames in the abortion debate in Germany and the United States, Ferree (2003) argued that broader discursive opportunities not only shaped how the frames were constructed, but also played a large part in determining their long-term success.

Discursive opportunities for movement framing efforts are complex and can be unpredictable. For example, broader political and social contexts can create favorable conditions for some movement frames while simultaneously stifling the success of others. In their work on feminist frames in Wales, Ball and Charles (2006) concluded that messages deferential to the dominant discourse can actually work to marginalize more radical frames from the same movement. In addition, previous scholars have highlighted the importance of power differentials in examining the relationship between movement frame resonance and broader discursive conditions. Ball and Charles (2006) acknowledged that framing theory alone does not adequately address the relevant issues of power relationships and social context. In cases where small activist groups challenge large, powerful institutions such as the military (Shriver, Webb, and Adams 2002), economic industries (Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003), or branches of the government (Krogman 1996); there is a clear inequity between opposing sides in terms of political resources, access to the media, and credibility.

Social movement scholars have noted how particular framing of organizational messages can generate conflict with opposing organizations and institutions (Benford 1997). Frames are not necessarily applicable to just one movement; they are changeable, malleable, and can be used for other organizations' purposes (Lounsbury et al. 2003). Frame disputes may occur when organizations try to attribute blame or responsibility, or when one social movement attempts to co-opt another's frames to glean the benefits of a successful message (Jacobson and Soliman 2002). In their work regarding Gulf War Illness, Shriver et al. (2002) noted that successful framing can be the result of an organization's ability to draw from resources of credibility and visibility. Koopmans and Statham (1999) argued that discursive opportunity structures address a broader perspective wherein "institutional structures, power relations [and] the strategic stance of potential alliance partners" are acknowledged along with "the ways in which social

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movements mobilize symbolic resources to advance their cause” (p. 228). Thus, analyses of salient discursive fields can provide insight into the construction and function of social movement frames (Benford and Snow 2000; Johnston 2002; Snow 2004).

The framing perspective and discursive opportunity structures have particular relevance in contemporary discourses regarding the agro-food system. As mentioned above, both political forces and media attention can greatly influence how social movement frames regarding the food system resonate with the public. For example, Frewer et al. (2002) argued that public perceptions of genetically modified foods are highly related to the rate of media coverage and the framing of information. In their work on consensus frames surrounding food security, Mooney and Hunt (2009) explored how these frames can reflect the differing interests of those who choose to incur them, and provide evidence that power differentials within the food system contribute to frame contestation over the problem of food security. Other research has highlighted the importance of broader public discourses regarding trust in government, science, and other information sources in public opinion regarding food and agriculture (Reilly 2006). The case of the AAF movement illustrates the dynamics between discursive opportunity structures and frame co-optation between movement organizations and their powerful corporate counterparts.

SALIENT ALTERNATIVE AGRO-FOOD DISCURSIVE STRUCTURES

Brulle (1996) argued that the historical context of movement development and discourse expands the understanding of social movement organizations and their discursive efforts. As such, we provide a brief overview of the AAF movement’s progression in terms of its social and institutional implications. The crucial elements of salient AAF frames can be better understood if they are situated within the current sociopolitical climate using a historical perspective on the development of the movement.

The AAF movement as we have defined it above developed out of significant transformations of the organic movement in the United States. In part, the modern U.S. organic movement emerged via the efforts of agrarian activists such as Jerome Rodale, who in the 1930s and 1940s took the pioneering, back-to-the-earth ideas of European philosophers and applied them in the American agricultural context (Conford 2001). However, the efforts of these activists did not garner widespread support until public attention turned toward problems associated with agricultural production and management practices. The publication of Rachel Carson’s book,

Silent Spring, in 1962 sparked a significant dialogue in America about the misuse of chemical pesticides and their ecological consequences. Concerned about more than just environmental harms, activists and consumers focused on other unhealthy facets of the food system. “The organic pioneers wanted to go forward, but on the premise that human, animal, and environmental health were not worth sacrificing for greater production” (Fromartz 2006:6).

The evolution of the discourse within the modern American organic movement encompassed ethical concerns such as animal rights (Fromartz 2006); environmental stewardship (Lockie 2006); and human issues such as workers’ rights, right to food, and equality in the food system (DuPuis and Goodman 2005). Additionally, the movement emphasized anti-globalization themes in reaction to loss of local production, a reduction in small farms, nutritional issues (Lyson 2004), and food quality scares (Friedberg 2004). Essentially, the focus of the organic movement addressed technical and environmental impacts of agricultural production using an ideological and value-based perspective.

During the transformative times of the 1960s and 1970s, the organic movement’s ideology appealed to many consumers’ values of equality, responsibility, or political beliefs regarding the food system (Guthman 1998). People encouraged social and political change by buying organic products or foods that were produced using sustainable methods, a practice later labeled as “green consumerism” (Allen and Kovachs 2000). Movement activists promoted a lifestyle that was in touch with nature and disconnected from the profit-driven, non-sustainable practices of dominant agriculture (Guthman 1998). Organic movement activists not only shunned conventional production methods, but also turned to producing their own food and participating in community food programs.

Over time, the movement clarified as well as broadened their ideals, goals, and definitions of an alternative agricultural industry. The organic movement gained popularity as it embraced the interests of more groups, representing a widening consumer base for the food market. Whereas people once had to seek organically grown foods from smaller food retailers, popularity and demand drove the market to make more organic, sustainable, fair trade or otherwise alternative products available (Fromartz 2006). The organic movement established itself as a movement that addressed all aspects of the food system, rather than just production and processing methods. Numerous specialized organizations and factions have emerged to focus on specific food system issues. Indeed, many scholars have begun to use the term “alternative agro-food” to describe this multifaceted and complex agricultural movement in the United States. This overarching movement is a conglomeration

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of the ideological concerns associated with the original organic movement and the contemporary grievances and fears regarding developments in agricultural policy, technology, and practice.

Concerns and suspicions regarding the contemporary food system are not limited to social and political activists, but extend to the broader public. Mainstream media addresses food system-related problems regularly, such as mad cow disease (Reilly 1999) and outbreaks of E. Coli in domestically-grown produce (Yeung and Morris 2001). Media coverage has associated risks with the consumption of genetically-engineered food (Frewer et al. 2002) or produce sprayed with pesticide or fungicide chemicals (Miles and Frewer 2001). In addition, much attention has recently been paid to the issue of rising food prices, food scarcity, and hunger issues. Nutrition and obesity, localized food systems, organic agriculture and produce, and environmental and agricultural sustain ability are often highlighted topics. Meyers and Abrams (forthcoming) noted that rising media coverage of organic foods often frame issues as “part of a moral and ethical responsibility for the environment, society, and consumers’ health.” In this way, salient AAF issues and grievances may be increasingly influenced and shaped by media coverage and attention.

Public concern regarding AAF movement issues also manifests itself in agricultural policy changes. For example, the 2008 Farm Bill reflects concerns regarding conservation and farmland use, “support for local foods, farmers markets and healthy diets,” and “funding for renewable energy to advance environmentally responsible energy production” (American Farmland Trust 2008:2). The amendments to the bill also speak to social justice within the food system. The Conservation Title within the 2008 Farm Bill specifically addresses needs for socially-disadvantaged and beginning farmers (American Farmland Trust 2008). In addition, new policies are consistently developed to address and regulate emergent food system issues, such as food scarcity, food safety, and even bioterrorism. The amount of political attention paid to these types of concerns can also affect how the public views organizations and activists within the AAF movement.

The emergence of the AAF movement and the broader discourse on these substantive issues provides the contextual backdrop for our data collection and analysis. The movement works to address production- and value-based problems associated with local and global food systems. The issues that have become salient in social and institutional contexts increase public awareness and concern. In this way, the nature of current discursive opportunities may be particularly conducive

to the broader resonance of AAF movement framing. We use this contextual background to guide our analysis of the frames used in AAF movement organizational literature.

RESEARCH APPROACH

We used a purposive sampling technique to identify representative organizations of the AAF movement and the American corporate agribusiness sector. We chose four prominent entities in each category. We developed two parameters for the organizations for the corporate sector: 1) the organizations are incorporated, and 2) they have a significant influence on the American food system (i.e., they are documented as a major commodity supplier at one or more points in the agro-food system). We assembled a list of twenty corporate firms that met these selection criteria. From this list, we drew a random sample of four organizations using a systematic sampling procedure. We used the following corporate firms for our analysis: 1) Monsanto, a multinational agricultural production corporation known for its work in the field of biotechnology; 2) ConAgra, a food-processing company that markets foods for individual and wholesale markets; 3) Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), an international agricultural corporation that focuses on different aspects of agricultural production, processing, transportation, and storage; and, 4) Wal-Mart, an American-based corporation that is currently the largest retailer of grocery foods in the United States.

To select organizations within the AAF movement, we drew on Hassanein's (2003) definition to guide our sample selection. With this broad framework in mind, we defined eligible AAF movement organizations as: 1) nonprofit organizations; 2) having a usable and comprehensive web presence; and 3) containing information specific to their ideology and actions regarding the AAF movement. Based on the definition, the organizations included those that advocated sustainable agriculture, local food production and consumption, food security, and/or issues associated with justice in the food system. Again, we assembled a list of fifty organizations that fit these criteria and used a random, systematic sampling procedure to narrow the list down to four organizations. The first was Slow Food USA, a nonprofit social movement organization that opposes industrialized and corporatized food systems. The organization works to provide activities and programs that educate people on foods, agriculture, and the principles associated with a healthy food system. The second organization was La Via Campesina, a social movement organization that works to defend marginalized agricultural workers internationally. They focus on issues regarding gender, social justices, and fair trade, as well as sustainable

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agriculture, workers rights, and the preservation of natural resources. The third organization, the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), is an organization of groups, programs, and partner organizations that focus on a diversity of food system issues such as food access, nutrition, sustainable agriculture, social justice, community development, and poverty. The International Fair Trade Association (IFTA), the fourth organization, is a network for international fair trade organizations established to advocate and support fair trade movement efforts, on the part of both organizations and producers.

Following Johnston (2002), we used a qualitative discourse approach to analyze each of the corporate firms' and social movement organizations' websites. This method differs from more traditional content analysis because it focuses on intensive analysis of frames occurring within organizational discourse, while acknowledging the broader contexts that affect and influence that discourse (Johnston 2002). In this way, we drew connections between salient AAF frames and the discursive opportunity structures that facilitate frame resonance among the broader public. Specifically, we used each organization's website to examine dynamic textual data that represented organizational discourse as well as the contemporary cultural and political climate.

We also utilized aspects of media content analysis, as described by Carley (1993) and Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (1998). In 2007 and 2008, we examined the AAF organizations' websites for frequently occurring themes in AAF literature and media coverage about AAF issues. These themes were identified by use of key words and key word synonyms (Carley 1993). We included those that were common between the organizations and recurring within each: *sustainability, fairness in trade and other points within the food system, the environment, local food systems, justice for workers and producers, organic production methods and products, and community*. We used these key words and phrases to structure the content search for the AAF organization and corporate sites to bring up relevant documents, news releases, and other web pages. This technique is a combination of interactive and predefined concept choice (Carley 1993). We used an interactive procedure for the initial definitions of the key themes to provide the predefined search terms for the remainder of the analysis. These key words defined the conceptual parameters for inclusion or exclusion of web content. After identifying the web pages and content that contained pertinent text, we analyzed each page for occurrences of the key concepts in context using a line-by-line approach. This process followed the procedures of a single coder manifest content analysis of media text (Riffe et al. 1998), or an examination of the surface meaning of the messages within the web

pages. We felt that a transparent and subjective interpretation of data was appropriate as the content was framed for public consumption. We examined single word representations of the key concepts as well as explicit representations of those key concepts in context. Because the website content did not lend itself to interpretation of latent content, we focused on the use of the defined key words or explicit reference to these key concepts in the web page text.

ALTERNATIVE AGRO-FOOD MOVEMENT FRAMES AND CORPORATE APPROPRIATION

Our analysis of the data is organized into two parts. First, we discuss the results of our analysis of AAF websites to examine the most salient frames used by major social movement organizations in the AAF movement. Second, we discuss the results for the corporate agribusiness' websites to illustrate the ways in which agribusiness corporations use particularly resonant AAF frames.

Themes in AAF Organizational Literature

Five overarching frames emerged in the textual data, and we identify subcategories for each of these frames. In total, we used 32 different codes to describe all relevant textual data in the AAF movement organizations' websites (see Table 1).

The first overarching frame is *Institutional Regulations*. This frame includes any text that referred to officially mandated or 'top-down' rules or regulations for things such as food production, choice of labor, or trade regulations. We further refined this frame by differentiating between external and internal regulations. External regulations include references to rules such as federal laws, governmental standards, and governmental policy. Internal regulations include descriptions of self-imposed standards. For example, one organization wrote about an affiliated program creating its own list of "food system indicators" to help identify food system issues as well as to evaluate their own effectiveness in dealing with these issues.

We also identified textual data that were framed using *Supporting Evidence* to give credibility to the AAF organizations' claims. Within this category, we differentiated between references to extramural research (e.g., government research, university research, or references to peer-reviewed materials) and anecdotal evidence (e.g., personal biographies, accounts of organizational events, and narrative recounting of organizational successes, and failures). Whereas the extramural research was most often quantifiable or supported by scientific evidence,

TABLE 1. SALIENT FRAMES IN THE ALTERNATIVE AGRO-FOOD MOVEMENT.

FRAME	INSTITUTIONAL REGULATIONS		SUPPORTING EVIDENCE	EXTERNAL RESPONSIBILITY	THE ENVIRONMENT	VALUE-EMBEDDED ISSUES
Sub-Frames	Internal regulations	External regulation	Extramural research evidence	Environmental stewardship	Sustainability/ sustainable agriculture	Ethically
	Organizational (self-imposed) regulations		Anecdotal evidence	Partnerships/ collaborations	Natural resources	Fairness and Justice
				Community building	Waste/pollution	Justice
						Food security Local community empowerment

the anecdotal evidence was much more qualitative in nature. These types of anecdotal evidence were pervasive throughout all of the AAF organizations' websites. One organization included a story about a successful program in one of its member newsletters:

This project has developed workshops and publications to boost the efforts of African-American farmers based in the southeastern United States; immigrant farmers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America living in Maine; and other limited resource farmers across the country to market to local institutions.

Slow Food USA's web pages had an abundance of anecdotal evidence about successes in their struggle for fairness in the food system. They highlighted the potential for collaboration across stakeholders in the food system:

An international network of farmers, food producers, cooks and academics from 148 countries, Slow Food first envisioned Terra Madre as a way for sustainable food producers and farmers to connect and share their practices with others across the globe. If Terra Madre 2004 was the first opportunity for a gathering of international land stewards, Terra Madre 2006 introduced two other vitally important groups into the equation: Cooks and Academics. Together, they represent those who produce, sell, market, harvest, purchase, cook, educate and promote sustainable food.

La Via Campesina provided news regarding their protest activities, events, and conferences throughout the website: "On the 22 May in Bonn activists from all over the world hung a banner, banged on teacups and handed out messages from Via Campesina, the international peasant movement." Although there were examples of supporting evidence from extramural research, the AAF organizations far more frequently used this type of personal account to convey their messages.

The AAF websites consistently framed content with *External Responsibility*. This frame includes references to any sort of responsibility between people and the land, the organization and the environment, or between organizations and people. The text often referred to either the organizations' or others' responsibilities to be good stewards of farmland and the environment. La Via Campesina described their goals as including: "increasing production and supply of food through sustainable agriculture and government policies prioritizing community autonomy,

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environmental stewardship and cultural integrity.” *External Responsibility* includes descriptions of partnerships and collaborations that are instrumental in achieving the goals of the organization or the movement. For example, Slow Food USA used the term “convivium” to describe the local and national level partnerships fostered within their organization: “Each convivium offers educational events and public outreach that promote taste education, that advocate sustainability and biodiversity and that connect producers and co-producers.” *External Responsibility* also included references to community-building, or the relationship between AAF organizations and the community. The CFSC argued that inclusion of all people within a community food system is crucial in the “successful design and implementation” of community food projects.

A frequently occurring theme in the data was *The Environment*. There were many general references to the environment as an overarching issue, but there were also more specific references and discussions regarding this frame. We differentiated between references to the environment in the context of: sustainability (including agricultural sustainability), references to natural resources (e.g., air, water, soil, energy and energy use, land use, and cultural resources), and references to waste and pollution (e.g., recycling, ecological footprints, global warming, and/or climate change). The AAF websites primarily contained data that fell into either *The Environment* overall, sustainability, or natural resources. Slow Food USA described their commitment to environmental sustainability in their mission statement: “Slow Food Nation will deliver a transformative food experience, based on enjoyment and pleasure, which will lead to a greater understanding of the role of food choices in environmental wellness and sustainability.” Another organization described concerns regarding natural resource conservation and the preservation of land for agricultural use. “We support farm policies that provide farmers with a greater share of the food dollar, encourage conservation, reduce the monopoly power of agribusinesses, preserve farmland...” The AAF organizations each acknowledged their commitment to environmental sustainability and responsible production methods. La Via Campesina posted to their site:

Research to improve environmental sustainability would lead to a de-intensification of current input-intensive agriculture. It must contribute to a strengthening of existing farmer based production systems. Family farm based organic agriculture is one of the options that needs more support.

There were also mentions of waste and pollution, but to a lesser extent than the first three categories.

Finally, we created the overarching frame *Value-Embedded Issues*. We developed several definitive codes to explore this frame. We identified text that referred to ethicality in the food system, such as fairness or justice. Organizations that focus on agricultural trade issues highlighted both issues. Another AAF organization described their standards for the organization as “promoting fair trade” and “paying producers a fair price.” The global organization, La Via Campesina, also focused on the rights of marginalized actors within both the local and the global food system. For example, they discussed gender parity within the food system:

Seeing our struggle as part of the fight for equality between the sexes, we are no longer prepared to submit to the oppression of traditional or modern society, nor to the oppression of the market. We want to seize this opportunity to leave behind all sexist prejudice and build a new vision of the world based on respect, equality, justice, solidarity, peace and freedom.

We also identified text that referred to physical manifestations of problems within the food system such as hunger and food security. The CFSC focused on both issues, working to “provide local food security, support urban agriculture, and meet health and public safety needs.”

Under the category of *Value-Embedded Issues*, we also included references to support and empowerment of local communities. Some organizations focused on communities in the context of the global market, whereas others often resist global market forces altogether by promoting the support and sustainability of localized food systems. La Via Campesina used the context of a “dramatic global food crisis” to illustrate the severity of their grievances. They use the term “food sovereignty” to describe a response to this crisis, saying: “Food sovereignty gives priority to local and national economies and markets, and empowers family farms while promoting environmental, social and economic sustainability.”

Themes in Corporate Agribusiness Organizational Literature

In our analysis of the textual data available on the corporate firm websites, we identified framing strategies that were similar to those revealed in the text of the AAF websites. In fact, the corporate websites used all five of the salient frames in their messages. However, the coding structure for the corporate websites differed in several ways. Under the frame *Institutional Regulations*, we added internal

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regulations presented in the context of empirical data resulting from the firm's program or process evaluation. Under the frame *Supporting Evidence*, we found that corporate websites also used in-house research results to provide verification for their claims regarding salient AAF issues. Under the frame *External Responsibility*, the corporations highlighted examples of organizational and employee philanthropy in addition to the other categories in the AAF coding scheme. Finally, we added a category that referenced corporate work toward improving quality of life.

Under the first overarching theme, *Institutional Regulations*, several firms focused on their environmental standards and values, and how these are regulated and enforced. ConAgra described their attention to air quality: "We embrace environmentally friendly energy resources in our plants, which operate within strict state and federal guidelines. Where clean-air regulatory permits govern our operations, we strive to keep air emissions within permitted limits. Often they're even better." Wal-Mart, a mega-retail grocery outlet, provided an example of the internal regulations that included descriptions of self-imposed standards or reports of empirical evaluations of programs or outcomes of organizational efforts. Their website content included the outcomes of the "Sustainability Index," an organizational program designed to track the sales of products that can help consumers live more sustainably: "At the six-month mark of the Index ... adoption rates for eco-friendly products are up overall, showing that customers are embracing eco-friendly product options."

In the context of *Supporting Evidence*, the corporations often focus much more on quantitative, scientific evidence than did the websites of the AAF organizations. ADM discussed its ongoing research that will contribute to the creation of new biofuels.

ADM is a recognized leader in the production of cleaner burning ethanol and biodiesel fuels. Beyond these, we are active in research to develop and commercialize the next generation of biofuels, which will include new feedstocks, new process technologies and new products that offer the potential for even better environmental footprints than today's biofuels.

Monsanto, a major corporate entity in the U.S. agricultural sector, continually referred to its reliance on "independent market research" and used data reported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and "outside researchers" to back up their claims.

The corporate firms used references to qualitative or anecdotal evidence as described by customers or clients to support their research-based findings. One example included quotes from a farmer who is a customer and supporter of Monsanto products.

“Those of us who farm care deeply about the total environment — the total surroundings. If we contaminate or destroy or ruin our soils and our environment, we only hurt ourselves,” says [name], a husband, father of three children and fourth-generation farmer. “We have a vested interest in seeing that there’s good stewardship and good environmental practices occurring in our farms.”

Many messages on the corporate websites were couched within the theme of *External Responsibility*. These messages included information about how the organization was either being or promoting others to be good stewards of the land, environment, or food system. Wal-Mart routinely offered entreaties to live more sustainably by working *with* Wal-Mart.

Common future [italics added] represents the commitment we can make together to improve our quality of life and that of future generations. By taking certain actions, like reducing waste, being more energy efficient, and preserving air, water, and soil, we can be stewards of the environment and help sustain and protect it. Join us won’t you?

The data also involved references to *External Responsibility* in the context of responsibility to take care, tend to, manage, or even save the environment. ADM posted a response letter to a group who had expressed dissatisfaction with their environmental, human rights, and agricultural practices. In the letter, they disagreed with the group saying: “We do support the protection of environmentally sensitive or endangered ecosystems.” Also included in this frame are any references to organizational philanthropic efforts, sentiments, or statements of responsibility to donate resources to charitable organizations. Finally, this frame also includes any references to community-building. All four of the organizations referred to their own efforts to build up both proximate and distant communities as well as to organizational ideals regarding community-building efforts. The corporate websites offered information about organizational charity and outreach. One of ConAgra’s web pages described their multiple philanthropic efforts saying, “From childhood

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hunger programs to disaster relief, from waste reduction to clean air, water, and land, ConAgra Foods makes it a priority to support our communities.”

All four of the corporate websites included messages framed in terms of *The Environment*. Similar to the AAF websites, the corporate websites discussed environmental sustainability and natural resources. Wal-Mart described their stance on environmental sustainability by saying, “Environmental sustainability is a part of the Wal-Mart culture. It lives within our company.” Monsanto’s website discussed the issue of natural resources and sustainable agriculture:

Seventy percent of the fresh water on the planet is consumed by agriculture. That’s 70 percent. So, if you think about the U.S., two to three percent of the population – that’s how many work directly in agriculture – consume 70 percent of the water in the country ... So, the supply of soil is finite. The supply of fresh water is finite. When you combine the two, you get one really big challenge.

However, the corporate websites addressed issues associated with waste and pollution far more often than did the websites of AAF organizations. ConAgra described their efforts to reduce waste:

We are often able to improve processing time while also reducing energy usage. Advancements in food packaging – which lead to reduced use of paper products, adhesives, inks, and plastics – also help. Whenever possible, we use recycled packing and recyclable packaging.

Another corporation included information about their role in addressing waste and pollution issues:

Increasing the amount of recyclable materials we use, reducing our solid waste, working with suppliers to reduce packaging, and creating sustainable alternatives for our private brands are all examples of actions we’re taking that we believe can actively and significantly reduce cost as well as the amount of waste going to landfills.

In comparison to the AAF websites, few of the corporate firms’ web pages included text categorized as a reference to fairness or justice within the frame of *Value-Embedded Issues*, and only two of the four corporations referenced these issues

at all. ADM posted a statement intimating that they supported human rights in agricultural production systems.

At our annual meeting of shareholders and on our web site, we will make public a clear statement against forced labor and other inhumane working conditions throughout the world and detail our policies and practices in support of this position.

In the context of food security associated with the *Value-Embedded Issues* frame, Monsanto reported the money it had donated to programs dedicated to nutrition education. ConAgra described its products as an expression of their commitment to human nutrition. “Quality also means responsible nutrition and choice. We offer a wide variety of nutritious and convenient foods that fit many tastes and lifestyles.”

Monsanto included notable emphasis on localized food systems and economies. They discussed how their initiative “builds on existing programs driven by the Malawian government and local NGOs [non-profit organizations] working on the need to increase self-sufficiency at a local, family farm, level.” Wal-Mart’s website described the results of their community-level efforts to build local economies by “putting business leaders with life experience in direct contact with the employees of tomorrow.” Finally, Wal-Mart included references to their efforts in making food products (among other things) more affordable for consumers, specifically in the context of being “eco-friendly” when they stated: “Wal-Mart will continue to pursue its goal to make sustainable products accessible and affordable to consumers.”

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of organizational websites provides evidence that overarching AAF movement themes are heavily utilized in corporate organizational literature. The websites were remarkably similar in terms of the broad concepts identified in the AAF literature. However, seemingly small differences in the frames used between AAF movement and corporate websites provide important insights. Both types of organizations used institutional regulations to give credence to their claims. This is a logical finding, as most media coverage of food system-related issues is supported with “expert” opinion or recent research findings. However, our results indicate that the small differences in AAF and corporate framing reflect the broader discourse regarding technological aspects of food and agriculture.

We found that the corporate websites were more likely to provide quantifiable data, especially in discussions of scientific information. The media often addresses

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advances in technology advances such as genetic engineering or the effects of artificial pesticides. Moreover, many news stories refer to scientific results or opinion to lend legitimacy to their claims. Miles and Frewer (2001) have noted that public risk perceptions associated with food consumption are strongly influenced by trust and credibility of information sources. Corporate agribusinesses' tendency to focus on research results may reflect this public interest in legitimacy. Importantly, while we found that the corporate firms were much more likely to rely on data and scientific evidence to *substantiate* their claims, they often relied on anecdotal narratives to *illustrate* these claims. The AAF websites used this type of anecdotal supportive evidence to make their claims without the use of quantifiable research findings. This is particularly important in terms of the more abstract or value-laden AAF movement frames, as they may be difficult to represent in quantified form. Corporations can also utilize their access to research facilities and personnel to provide this type of scientific evidence, whereas smaller and less powerful organizations simply lack the necessary resources.

This study provides additional insight on how these types of framing conflicts can center on issues of power inequity. Our findings indicate that power and trust may not go hand in hand in the context of public perceptions of agro-food-related frames. In other words, it is possible that the more powerful corporate firms must rely on quantifiable data because the public would not "trust" their unsubstantiated claims. On the other hand, AAF organizations may garner more public confidence because of their nonprofit status, or their less powerful influence on the commercial food market. As such, public audiences may accept their claims with less empirical evidence than they would require for those of their corporate counterparts. Indeed we found that AAF movement organizations strongly favored anecdotal evidence to illustrate the salience of their issues or their successes, while the corporate websites often rely on extramural or in-house research results.

Results indicate both AAF organizations and corporate firms highlight their roles and responsibilities within their respective communities. However, again we identified differences in how these frames were referenced in each type of organizational literature. Corporate websites emphasized organizational and individual philanthropy, and identified economic and social development in their surrounding communities. More specifically, these firms focused on micro-level social change that resulted from their specific efforts. These anecdotes and narratives most often came as short, sentimental stories that fostered trust and respect for the firm. On the other hand, the AAF movement websites identified their efforts to foment change on a more macro level. We argue that the differences in

corporate and AAF organizational descriptions of social change can be attributed in part to media coverage. While the AAF organizations' descriptions of their social change efforts are hard to encapsulate and were more complex, the corporate stories were packaged in a way that was easy for the media to briefly cover and for the public to understand. For example, we found that the AAF organizational websites often described their efforts to affect policy and work within existing governmental structures to address salient food system issues. In contrast, the corporate websites did not mention policy changes or other activities addressing any of the overarching themes through governmental action.

Both types of organizations focused on salient issues in the broader media and political discourses in terms of the environment. Importantly, the corporations' websites addressed two concepts that were largely overlooked on the AAF movement sites. Corporate websites were more likely to highlight waste and pollution in terms of their own efforts to curtail their ecological impact. Often, the corporations would describe themselves as significant actors in environmental campaigns. Wal-Mart included information about their role in "saving" the environment. In contrast, the organizations affiliated with the AAF movement focused on the environment more broadly, including environmental sustainability and natural resources. We argue that the key differences in the framing of environmental action between the two types of websites can be attributed to broader public perceptions. Specifically, the corporate websites' framing of their environmental efforts focused on "selling" an image of stewardship, whereas the framing of environmental action on the AAF organizational websites "promoted" environmental awareness and involvement.

Finally, both AAF movement organizations and their corporate counterparts addressed value-embedded issues, although, here again, there were several differences in the tone and content. The movement organizations addressed issues associated with fairness in the food system, whereas the corporations were much less likely to delve into these types of issues. Based on the contextualization of movement frames, as well as broader discourses in the media and political circles, we argue that value-based frames such as these may be much more difficult for corporations to substantiate. Again, this slight difference in framing may reflect broader public perceptions of trust and power in corporate firms versus social movement organizations. Moreover, there was an interesting discrepancy in support for local food systems. AAF movement websites emphasized food related crises on a global scale, as well as problems associated with an increasingly globalized food system. Their concerns included the preservation of small farms, the

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importance of localized food systems, and a resistance to corporate dominance of agricultural production. The corporate websites glossed over these salient AAF movement concerns. In the two instances that corporations mentioned issues associated with globalization, it was to laud their efforts in bringing local community into the global food system.

CONCLUSION

In this study we explored framing in the AAF movement and considered how broader social discourse can influence the messages associated with social movements and their corporate counterparts. Our findings have several important implications for research on agro-food movements and discursive opportunities for framing. The data show that while the messages on the AAF movement and corporate websites appear similar at a cursory level, they differ in several notable ways. The AAF movement organizations were more likely to address issues of justice and sustainability in the food system, whereas corporate agribusinesses often focused on more scientific or technical issues supported with concrete evidence. Our results suggest that corporate firms are taking advantage of AAF movement frames only insofar as they benefit their own broader political and economic interests. The corporate websites do not address negative issues associated with globalization because they are key actors in the globalized food system.

Previous work has focused on the role that discursive opportunity structures play in determining the success or failure of a social movement in accomplishing their goals (McCammon et al. 2007) or in power relations within a movement (Ball and Charles 2006). This study explores the role of discursive opportunity structures in the AAF movement by identifying how existing public discourse can simultaneously facilitate the success of movement messages and make them vulnerable to appropriation, co-optation, and commodification. While this case provides valuable insights into the dynamics between discursive opportunity structures and AAF movement framing, it also raises important questions for future research. The corporate use of AAF movement frames may reflect a unique form of contentious social movement framing. Whereas previous studies have focused on the co-optation of frames (e.g., Jacobson and Soliman 2002) or competitive framing (e.g., Dugan 2004), our research documenting the corporate use of AAF movement frames differs from these cases.

Our findings suggest that corporations can *appropriate* successful movement frames to increase profit further. This type of co-optation serves to muddy the waters of public discourse regarding salient movement messages. Corporate

agribusinesses are reaching into the increasingly significant “green” market in the United States not only by offering organic products, but also by tapping into the broader social consciousness of citizens concerned with justice, sustainability, local food systems, and producer-accountability. If the public cannot discern the source of the frames, they may be willing to side with a comparatively more powerful organization or institution over a grassroots group.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Alison E. Adams is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Oklahoma State University. Her primary research interests are social movements, political sociology, and environmental sociology.

Thomas E. Shriver is a Professor of Sociology at Oklahoma State University. His primary research interests are health and environment, social movements, political sociology, and inequality. He is currently studying environmental activism in several contaminated communities and in post-communist Czech Republic.

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