

## Growing food in the post-truth era

Written by Alana Mann, Chair of Department, Media and Communications, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney

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Critics fear the merger of agricultural giants Bayer and Monsanto will drive an increase in use of pesticides, as well as genetically modified seeds. [AgriLife Today/flickr](#) , [CC BY-NC-ND](#)

*This article is part of an [ongoing series](#) from the [Post-Truth Initiative](#) , a Strategic Research Excellence Initiative at the University of Sydney. The series examines today's post-truth problem in public discourse: the thriving economy of lies, bullshit and propaganda that threatens rational discourse and policy.*

*The project brings together scholars of media and communications, government and international relations, physics, philosophy, linguistics, and medicine, and is affiliated with the Sydney Social Sciences and Humanities Advanced Research Centre ( [SSSHARC](#) ), the [Sydney Environment Institute](#) and the [Sydney Democracy Network](#)*

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The global food system has been operating in post-truth mode for decades. Having constructed food scarcity as a justification for a [second Green Revolution](#) , Big Agriculture now employs its unethical marketing tactics to selling farmers “climate-smart” agriculture in the form of soils, seeds and chemicals.

The cover of Monsanto's 2016 annual report, [A Limitless Perspective](#) , presents a vista of galaxies worthy of a George Lucas production. The brightest star is an [A\\$88 billion merger with German chemical company Bayer](#) , to be finalised this year.

Critics have described this as a “ [marriage made in hell](#) ”. They fear the new mega-corporation will impose even more pesticides and genetically modified seeds on the world's farmers.

Monsanto's oft-stated aim is to [“consolidate the entire food chain”](#) . That means a

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corporatised food regime that concentrates knowledge and power in the hands of a few.

This cedes control of food security to profit-making companies. The democratic governance of food and agriculture policy is under threat.

## The myth of scarcity

Framing market opportunities as moral imperatives, the agribusiness narrative is to “[feed the world](#)” . That’s while making exorbitant profits at the expense of small-scale farmers and consumer health.

The rhetoric of scarcity is hollow; [excess production](#) is the problem. The food industry is a major contributor to overproduction, food insecurity and environmental degradation.

This includes the production of up to one-third of [global greenhouse gas emissions](#) , when fertiliser production, food storage, and packaging are included.

Yet “Big Ag” is committed to raising output, intensification of farming, mass processing, mass marketing, homogeneity of product, monocultures, and chemical and pharmaceutical solutions.

The post-truth claim that the powerful US agribusiness lobby uses to justify these practices is that America’s farmers [must double grain and meat production](#) to meet the needs of a global population of 9 billion by 2050.

In reality, the surplus, heavily subsidised production of the US grain-livestock complex makes little contribution to ending global hunger and malnutrition. Some [90% of US exports](#) go to countries where people can afford to buy food.

## The corporate capture of climate change

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Ironically, a new enemy within threatens Big Ag's market opportunities.

When US President Donald Trump met his election commitments by stepping out of the Paris Agreement on June 2, 2017, he stepped on some big toes. Following Trump's election, Monsanto and Du Pont had joined more than 360 US-based multinationals in signing a letter to Trump demanding action on climate change:

Implementing the Paris Agreement will enable and encourage businesses and investors to turn the billions of dollars in existing low-carbon investments into the trillions of dollars the world needs to bring clean energy and prosperity to all.

The altruism of these motives is questionable, given the profits to be made in the corporate capture of climate change. The low-carbon economy is big business.

[Archer Daniels Midland](#), which bills itself as "supermarket to the world", is investing in carbon capture and sequestration projects with the aim of reducing emissions and storing them underground.

Bayer is [developing](#) stress-tolerant oilseeds, maize and wheat varieties that will cope with extreme weather.

Global Swiss agro corp Syngenta's [Good Growth Plan](#) assures us the private sector can deliver on "the promise of sustainable and inclusive development" while mitigating the effects of climate change.

## If you tell the same story five times, it's true ...

Rising global temperatures will bring new varieties of pests and disease, and a new twist on the time-worn post-truth spin that pesticides are the solution to feeding a fast-growing population.

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### World views collide

This frank dismissal of alternative production systems represents a collision between competing frames, stakes and forms of expertise in food and agriculture policy.

Big Ag relies on the myth that large-scale, conventional agriculture generates higher yields and is more efficient than small-scale, family farms. Yet the latter produce [more than three-quarters of the world's food](#)

Concerns about the lack of sustainability and resilience of industrial farming practices has led to critical questions about the way we produce food. Notably, in 2008 the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) recognised the need for changes in “[paradigms and values](#)” to include alternative, agro-ecological production systems.

A multi-year study involving 44 scientists from more than 60 countries, the IAASTD considers the political conditions that contribute to food insecurity. This includes damaging structural adjustment policies and unfair international trade agreements.

The findings highlight how poverty rates, levels of education, knowledge of nutrition, war and conflict marginalise those most vulnerable to hunger and malnutrition. Importantly, the report emphasises that critical communities, by raising questions of ownership and control of technologies, play a vital role in food systems governance.

These include the global peasant farmers' movement [La Via Campesina](#), which openly rejects climate-smart rhetoric as [promotion of an agribusiness agenda](#)

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Promoting the concept of food sovereignty, La Via Campesina denies simplistic linkages between population growth, climate change, conflict, and resource scarcity. We are reminded that technological solutions are not neutral. The [2007 Nyeleni Declaration](#) of the Forum for Food Sovereignty asserts:

the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems.

These farmers are the vanguard of resistance to Big Ag's efforts to further intensify agricultural production at the expense of people and environments. We have a responsibility to join them in challenging the logic of an industrial food system that is about growth at all costs.

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*You can read other pieces in the post-truth series [here](#).*

*The [Democracy Futures](#) series is a [joint global initiative](#) between The Conversation and the [Sydney Democracy Network](#). The project aims to stimulate fresh thinking about the many challenges facing democracies in the 21st century.*

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