CHAPTER FOUR

The Paradoxes of Transparency

One way of looking at the challenge the Real Food frame posed to the food industry was as a public relations (PR) problem. The reputations of the food industry as a whole, individual corporations and brands, and even specific ingredients were in question. Big Food was unpopular, food science more feared than appreciated. But were campaigns using science to fix negative perceptions of processed food and the food industry, like the Alliance to Feed the Future's curriculum, working? Even as the food industry continued to back such efforts, some began to wonder if this approach to defending the food industry's reputation—and commercial interests—needed an overhaul. One organization took the lead in rethinking how the food industry should communicate with the public. The Center for Food Integrity, which describes itself as a nonprofit dedicated to helping the food industry earn consumer trust, published its first academic research paper challenging traditional approaches to communication about the food system in 2009 and went on to develop and disseminate new models that foregrounded values instead of scientific facts. Within a few years, the CFI was everywhere—publishing reports, convening

summits for food industry leaders (including one I attended in 2015), hosting webinars and trainings, and being quoted across local, national, and trade media outlets about how to build confidence in the food system through shared values and transparency.[1] Ultimately, it shaped a new conversation about the relationship between the food industry, the public, and science.

The CFI's 2014 research report, "Cracking the Code on Food Issues," gives a good sense of its core concerns. The central question it explored was: "How do we connect when scientific consensus and consumer beliefs are not aligned? When consumers don't accept what science says is true?" The report noted it may be hard for "those dedicated to improving our lives through science-based technologies and innovations" to understand why the public does not defer to scientific authority, explaining that "many issues remain contentious, no matter the facts, because the social decision-making process is complex." It went on to help members of the food industry understand the social decision-making process so they could intervene in new ways, helping consumers make "informed decisions about food" but not by foregrounding scientific authority and facts. Instead, it provided "a roadmap to making complex and controversial technical information relevant and meaningful" that focused on demonstrating shared values, challenging core assumptions of the Real Facts frame by arguing, "more science, more research, more information" was not the right approach.[2]

In arguing that the long-standing "just tell them the facts" model was not working, the CFI critiqued some of the foundational assumptions of the Real Facts approach to communication and challenged the food industry to respond in more meaningful ways to public concerns. Thus, focusing on their work allows me to explore how the food industry sought to evolve in the face of the Real Food frame instead of just reframing its critical challenges

as a misunderstanding that could be corrected with the right information. This chapter explores what happened as the Center for Food Integrity set out to overhaul the food industry's deficit-driven, facts-first, one-way approach to communicating with the public. In doing so, I find many of the issues that STS scholars have discovered in their observations of public engagement practices that seek to go beyond deficit-driven approaches to communicating with the public about science and technology but end up replicating many of the same problems.[3]

Rather than simply criticize the inadequacies of the new forms of communication the CFI developed, however, I heed Alan Irwin's call to trace the ways in which old and new approaches to communication coexist and view the CFI's initiatives as symptomatic of the evolving state of science-society relations.[4] In his analysis of a series of official reports as well as an orchestrated public debate about genetic modification in Britain, Irwin argues that "at the heart of the 'new' resides some very 'old' assumptions."[5] He describes reports on these events reading "as if two voices are struggling to be heard": a dominant voice stresses dialogue, while the other evokes scientistic assumptions about public deficits and the need for deference to expertise.[6] Similarly, my analysis attends to the coexistence of the "new" and the "old" in the CFI's approach to building trust with consumers, listens for the struggle between two voices striving to be heard, and views the stresses and strains as symptomatic of the evolving relationship between the food industry, science, and the public.

THE CENTER FOR FOOD INTEGRITY

The Center for Food Integrity was founded in 2007 by Charlie Arnot. As a point of reference relative to the emergence of the Real

Food frame (and as discussed in chapter 1), Kelly Brownell—the obesity researcher who drew parallels between the food industry and Big Tobacco and introduced the term "Big Food" into the cultural lexicon—published *Food Fight* in 2004 and was named one of the world's one hundred most influential people by *Time* magazine in 2006. In 2007 Michael Pollan published both the *Omnivore's Dilemma* and "Unhappy Meals," the *New York Times* article arguing, among other things, that we would be better off if we followed "traditional authorities" rather than scientists regarding our eating habits.[7] Meanwhile, Arnot learned firsthand that science was no longer a reliable way to earn and maintain the trust of consumers.

Working in PR for the pork industry for about a decade, Arnot deployed established communication strategies, which he described as using "really good science," attacking "those who attacked us," and engaging in traditional public relations. Over time, however, he found that those strategies were no longer working. In the 1990s the company Arnot worked for was reshaping the pork industry with massive infusions of capital and rapid expansion (a barn a day at one point) and became the focus of intense public scrutiny after some "environmental incidents." According to Arnot, the company had the data it needed to support its claims that water leaving its property was cleaner than when it came in, as well as all kinds of data to support other environmental claims. The company even had benchmarking showing that the steps it was taking to manage its public image should be working. Nonetheless, at one point the company was being sued by the state, the federal government, and a citizen's group. In 1995 Willie Nelson held a protest concert next to one of its farms.[8] Arnot concluded that he needed a new strategy and started a PR company focused on building trust rather than "defending a position," which eventually led to his founding of the CFI.[9]

The vision of the CFI was "a transparent sustainable food system in which practices align with consumer expectations and the public discussion is well-informed and balanced."[10] It described its role as "leading the public discussion in fostering trust and facilitating dialogue with stakeholders across the food chain to bridge the gap with consumers" and pursued this with a range of research, communication, and training efforts. These included the annual "Trust Reports," based on extensive research conducted by the CFI, as well as conferences, webinars, trainings, and coaching, including events designed for specific organizations. The CFI also hosted a consumer-facing website called Best Food Facts and engaged in coalition work on specific challenges facing the food industry, such as sustainable egg production and building trust for gene editing.[11]

Structurally, the CFI was a nonprofit supported by its members and managed by Arnot's PR firm, Look East, on behalf of a board of directors. It asserted that it did not "lobby or advocate for individual food companies or brands" and described its members as representing "the diversity of the food system, from farmers and ranchers to universities, NGOs, restaurants, food companies, retailers, and food processors."[12] A 2017 membership list included fifty distinct organizations, over half of which were trade groups or commodity boards representing large segments of the food and agricultural industries. These included powerful national organizations such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, Dairy Farmers of America, the Food Marketing Institute, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, and the United Soybean Board, along with about twenty-five state-level organizations primarily representing corn and soybean producers, with some also coming from dairy and pork. Corporate members included giants from the retail sector (Costco, Kroger, Wegmans), the chemical

and pharmaceutical sectors (Dupont, Monsanto, Merk), food production (Cargill, Grupo Bimbo, Hershey's), and animal agricultural (Smithfield, Purdue, Maple Leaf Foods). The World Wildlife Fund and Chick-fil-A were notable outliers among these general trends, and the list also included Michigan State University and Purdue University.[13]

Functionally, the CFI was a cross between a trade association and a PR firm. It represented the interests of its corporate members, as trade groups do, but focused on communication between the food industry and the public. Because Arnot came from public relations, the CFI applied a sophisticated PR tool kit to rethinking how the food industry communicated with the public. The CFI did engage in some public-facing work, primarily through its Best Food Facts website, which stated that its goal was "to load your plate with a balanced diet of data so that you can make informed decisions for yourself and your family."[14] But its main audience was the food industry. Thus, I focus on the Center's industry-facing work to explore how it sought to rebuild the relationship between the food industry and the public. How was the public imagined and projected in this evolved approach to communication? What were the politics and antipolitics of the CFI's "trust-building transparency"?

SCIENCE DENIED: WHAT COMES AFTER REAL FACTS?

In 2009 Charlie Arnot and five other researchers associated with the Center for Food Integrity and Arnot's private PR firm coauthored an article with the Iowa State University sociologist Stephen Sapp in *Rural Sociology*. "Consumer Trust in the U.S. Food System: An Examination of the Recreancy Theorem" established a trust model that would inform the CFI's work for decades to

come, as well as the academic credibility it needed to get the attention of skeptical members of the food industry.[15] The premise of the research was that the cause of growing public concerns about the industrial food system was distance and alienation. It described consumers as increasingly worried about safety and nutrition and the externalities of the food system, such as environmental degradation and the treatment of employees and animals, because "most know little about how food is produced, processed, transported or prepared for sale." The authors noted, "In short, now that Americans no longer live on the farm, they wonder what's going on down on it. And they worry that the news is not good. At the same time, consumer opinions significantly affect the structure and management of the U.S. system, resulting in what some . . . have depicted as *consumer-driven* agriculture." The article went on to also note, however, that social scientists had proven that "'just tell them the facts' was a flawed approach both in its presumptions and its applications."[16] Given this, they argued, there was a need for "sound basic science" to foster public trust in the food system.[17]

In pursuit of this, the article presented research exploring the extent to which lack of public trust in the food system might be explained by something called the "recreancy theorem," which posited that people's evaluation of risk was based not solely on quantitative risk assessments issued by experts but also on their evaluation of societal institutions, in particular their assessments of institutional responsibility. According to the theory, trust was lost when institutions were "recreant," or failed to behave in accordance with the public's expectations. The research sought to measure the extent to which public trust could be explained by perceptions of the "the competence of institutional actors and their belief that these actors will behave with

fiduciary responsibility."[18] Specifically, it tested the effects of competence (skills and expertise) and fiduciary responsibility (the felt obligation to act on behalf of the trusting party) on public trust with respect to food safety, nutrition, environmental protection, employee care, and the treatment of livestock, using two internet surveys conducted in 2007 and 2008.

The results of the research shocked even Arnot himself. He had been so sure that the study would confirm that science and facts were the answer to building trust that when he saw the data sets he thought they had been accidentally switched.[19] The results showed not only that the recreancy theorem did explain consumer trust in institutional actors in the US food system and that most variances in trust were due to competence and belief in fiduciary responsibility but also that the effects of fiduciary responsibility outweighed those of competence by about three to one. In other words, while informing the public about the competence of institutional actors in the food system was important, conveying "a sense of responsibility" to the public might be even more important to building trust. The article advised, therefore, that companies take "actions indicating corporate social responsibility and responsiveness to technology-related problems." It concluded that "exploring approaches to engendering institutional fiduciary responsibility might be more productive than sharpening institutional actors' techniques of risk communication about their skills and expertise."[20] Based on these foundational findings, the Center for Food Integrity went on to conduct ongoing research and develop a host of programs designed to convince and enable institutional actors within the food system to build trust through engagement with the public around values rather than simply asserting facts and expertise.

The CFI introduced its new trust model in the first of its annual trust reports, published in 2011. The opening pages depicted the new trust model as a balance with "shared values" on one end outweighing "skills" on the other, along with text explaining that "shared values are 3–5x more important in building trust than competence" (Fig. 10). The message conveyed in this graphic was also emphasized by a quote, attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." In seeking to motivate food industry communicators to consider this novel approach, the report explained the reason building and maintaining trust was so important: at stake was "social license," or the freedom to operate with minimal "formalized restrictions." If the industry did not act to effectively establish trust with consumers, the report warned, it would face "social control" through regulation, legislation, litigation, or market mandates, which are costly and lead to both the loss of "operational flexibility" and increases in "bureaucratic compliance."[21]

The report went on to explain that the tactics the industry had been using to maintain social license such as "attacking the attackers," using "science alone to justify current practices," and confusing "scientific verification with ethical justification" were no longer effective and even likely to increase suspicion and skepticism. To secure social license, the food industry needed to do something different: namely, embrace "meaningful stakeholder engagement and effective values-based messaging" and ensure practices were ethically grounded and aligned with the values of stakeholders. While these were big steps to take, the report reiterated that "maintaining public trust that protects your social license to operate is not an act of altruism; it is enlightened self-interest."[22] The CFI was not always as overt about this instrumentalization of trust, but its work was ever driven by

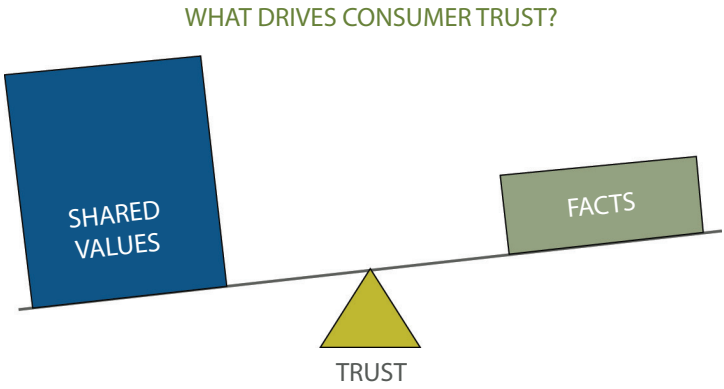

Figure 10. An illustration of the CFI's finding that shared values are three to five times more important than competence, or facts, in building trust between the food industry and the public. Center for Food Integrity, https://foodintegrity.org/trust-practices/first-in-consumer-trust/what-drives-trust. © 2006 CMA Consulting. Courtesy of Charlie Arnot, Center for Food Integrity.

the aim of maintaining social license. As Brian Wynne notes, "instrumentalization of trust" is a contradiction in terms. And his critique is prescient for the CFI: "Instrumentalism itself is not the problem, but the assumption and imposition of the terms of this imagined and instrumental outcome on the other participants while deceiving oneself into thinking that one is genuinely listening to them."[23]

While the CFI challenged the Real Facts frame by advocating a new approach to communication that centered values rather than facts, food scientism shaped the strategies it promoted. This was especially clear in the CFI's second trust report, "Cracking the Code on Food Issues," published in 2014 and mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The signs of scientism were clear in the premise, which was that problems in public trust in the food system were the result of consumers not accepting scientific truth: "Overwhelming scientific consensus tells us that childhood vaccines and genetically modified foods are safe, that humans

contribute more to antibiotic resistance than animals, and that climate change is real. Yet the debate rages on." It defined the goal of communication with the public as "informed public evaluation" of the use of technology in the food system, which suggested the opening up of dialogue, but also fostering "informed decision making that encourages technology and innovation in society's best interest," which hints at the predetermined aims of such dialogue. The opening paragraphs explained that while the use of technology in food and agriculture provided countless benefits to society, some issues remained contentious "no matter what science says," thus asserting a scientistic premise that the problem is not how science and technology are deployed within the food system but the public's unfounded skepticism. However, the report also described consumer concerns as understandable and urged the industry to shift its goals from winning conversations to finding meaningful ways of introducing science and technology into the decision-making process.[24]

"Cracking the Code" set out to get the food industry to accept that consumer decision making was driven by more than just facts and to help readers understand the roles that beliefs, opinions, and feelings played in how people evaluated the use of technology in the food system. Drawing on theories from anthropology, sociology, and psychology, the report explained that the decision-making process was complex and *social*, an orientation that suggested the possibility of taking seriously the kinds of concerns about the food system that constituted the Real Food frame. But the drive toward "informed decision making" reframed what might otherwise have been understood as politics driven by contested values as new forms of deficits that needed to be overcome.

This was depicted graphically in the "Decision-Making Maze," in which a woman pushing a shopping cart stands on one side

of a maze, "informed decision making" on the other. Within the maze, all the pathways that might lead the shopper to "informed decision making" are blocked by orange construction cones, each bearing a flag labeled with the name of a barrier: bounded rationality, tribal communication, a history of contradictions, confirmation bias, bad news bias, big is bad bias, influence of group values, and scientific illiteracy (Fig. 11).[25] Shaped by insights from the social sciences, these barriers looked different from the cognitive deficits of the original deficit model and even the deficits of trust and understanding of the benefits technology Wynne identified in his list of abandoned but reinvented public deficit models. Like them, however, these deficits were accompanied by the underlying assumption that public responses were emotional, "epistemologically empty," and susceptible to misinformation.[26]

Among the barriers to informed decision making in the maze all but "a history of contradiction" pointed to social, emotional, or cognitive conditions, or deficits, affecting consumers rather than industry behaviors that might be a cause for reasonable skepticism. For example, the "biases" in the maze all pointed toward psychological conditions residing within consumers and causing them to be unable to see things how they really are. "Confirmation bias" described a tendency to favor information that confirms existing beliefs and values whether or not it's true, which the report described as particularly prevalent when it comes to "emotionally charged" issues like choosing how to feed your family. "Bad news bias" referred to the tendency for negative information to weigh more heavily on decisions than positive information, which meant that any bit of "bad news" shared about the industry could have an outsized influence on the erosion of trust. "Big is bad bias" pointed to the tendency among consumers to mistakenly believe that the larger a

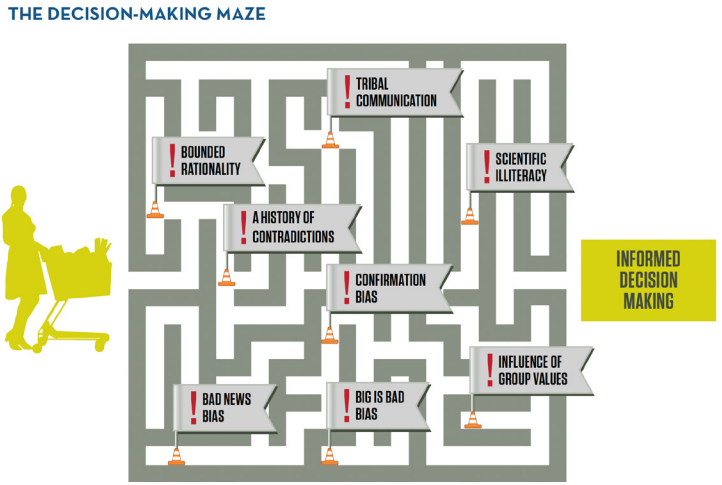

Figure 11. "The Decision-Making Maze" illustrates the social and psychological factors that come between shoppers and "informed decision making." Center for Food Integrity, "Cracking the Code on Food Issues: Insights from Moms, Millenials and Foodies," *Consumer Trust Research*, 2014, p. 6. Courtesy of Charlie Arnot, Center for Food Integrity.

company, the less likely it was to share their values. The report acknowledged that the emergence of "big is bad bias" was connected to a broader erosion of trust in "big" due to deadly incidents caused by technologies that were supposed to be safe, but the examples (oil spills and car crashes) made no mention of such incidents in the food and agriculture sectors, and the "bias" label reinforced locating the problem within the minds of individual members of the public rather than the actions of those who they held accountable.[27]

The rest of the barriers in the maze focused on how "informed decision making" was also compromised by the social context in which decisions were made. For example, "tribal communication" among communities of shared values online was described as giving anyone a platform by which to influence others, leading people to "assign credibility to those who share tribal values

but lack technical expertise to support decision making that incorporates factual information." Furthermore, people tended to endorse positions shared by their social group and interpret any new evidence through the lens of their existing biases (aka "Influence of Group Values," a concept developed by Yale Law School's Cultural Cognition Project). "Bounded rationality" described how decision making was inevitably limited because most decision makers did not have the resources to fully understand a complex issue and therefore decided based on very little knowledge. Old school deficit thinking, with its emphasis on cognitive deficits, also got a mention with one barrier labeled "scientific illiteracy." Moving beyond both psychology and the social context for decision making, "a history of contradictions," was the only barrier to refer outward toward the actual conditions of the food system, noting that "informed decision making" had been compromised by ever-changing nutritional advice, such as about whether foods like butter, eggs, and coffee are "good for us." Nonetheless, this depiction narrowly implicated nutrition rather than its uptake in industry marketing or industry influence on the production of contradictions through the funding of self-interested studies.[28]

CONNECTING THROUGH SHARED VALUES

The central message of the CFI's 2014 report was that "connecting through values" was the first step in "cracking the code on food issues." As it explained, "Only after you state the values-based connection are you given 'permission' to introduce technical information."[29] This message was at the heart of all the CFI's work as it taught industry communicators that barriers to "informed" decision making could not be overcome with information alone; "shared values" had to come first. Centering values represented

a significant departure from typical Real Facts–informed approaches to communication with the public and opened possibilities for industry actions to be influenced by consumer values and concerns, which is explored in the next section. But a look at how the CFI trained industry members to interact with individuals and the media through shared values also reveals the persistence of scientism and its antipolitics.

The Engage training was one of many means through which the CFI prepared industry members to communicate and build trust through shared values. The training was initially offered as interactive workshops teaching participants how to communicate with consumers, the media, and online audiences, as well as on college campuses through a program called "Engage Young Leaders" that focused on training college students to "advocate for their industries."[30] Starting in 2017, the Engage training was also available in five interactive online modules modeled after the in-person course, which a press release described as having trained thousands in the food and agricultural industries since it first launched in 2009.[31] The first two modules of the online training explained the social context for the erosion of trust in agriculture and introduced the importance of shared values as the foundation for building trust. In the other three modules—"The Power of Shared Values," "Engage in Three Simple Steps," and "Your Values Message"—participants learned and practiced how to connect through shared values.

One aim of the training was to teach participants what a values statement was and how to recognize the difference between values statements and those based on science or economics, so they could learn to lead with values. Thus, the lessons asserted both the inclusive aspiration to center values and the scientistic assumption that economics and science were distinct from values. In

one activity, for example, the learner was presented with a series of statements and prompted to choose whether the statement reflected science, economics, or values. While the lesson acknowledged that both consumers and producers had values, it also presented industry views on controversial technologies as scientific rather than values-driven. Consumers' values needed to be engaged with because they could get in the way of their acceptance of what the industry already knew was right based on science and economics, which were seen as separate from values.

After they practiced distinguishing values statements from those based in science and economics, participants in the Engage training learned that the first step in having values-based conversations was actively listening, without judgment, so as to understand how people's concerns about the food system were connected to their values. In one exercise participants viewed a clip of a consumer talking about her Real Food frame–informed concerns. While these concerns might normally be dismissed as irrational, here participants were prompted to select the values the consumer was expressing, such as "this person values food source and safety," "this person values trust," or "this person values animal welfare." They were then guided to find shared values by asking questions that helped to further the conversation. One exercise presented a series of statements consumers might make about modern agriculture or food processing and prompted participants to select responses that showed interest and helped invite further conversation. For example, in one scenario a consumer says, "What I hear about industrial agriculture affecting the environment today is very concerning. I just have a lot more trust and respect for family farmers." Wrong answers: "Aren't all farmers local to someone?" and "Agriculture affecting the environment? Let's talk about all the others at the table!"

Right answer: "When you say 'industrial agriculture' what do you mean?" A pop-up response explained that this kind of question would give the industry communicator insight into the consumer's values and perceptions and offered some encouragement for difficult encounters: "Don't let your feathers get ruffled!"[32]

The next step in the Engage training's communication process was for the industry member to share their own perspective through values, adding facts only after the connection had been made. While centering values suggested the possibility of dialogue and even disagreement, the process of engaging values the CFI taught was about finding areas of agreement. The point was not to explore the values driving different visions of how technology should be used in the food system, and toward what ends, but to find common ground. The training prompted participants to reflect on and identify their own values but also explained that connecting through shared values did not require sharing personal values with your audience because universal values such as compassion, responsibility, respect, fairness, and truth are widely shared and can be a "go to" for quickly finding common ground. After learning to listen for common ground and ask questions for clarification, participants were coached to talk about why they do what they do through slightly more specific yet also very abstracted values, such as "protecting the land, ensuring a safe food supply, caring for your employees, contributing to your community and taking care of your animals."[33] While politics resides in the details of how these values are acted upon, Engage enacted antipolitics by teaching communicators not to discuss or deliberate these differences but to establish agreement around abstracted principles in order to pave the way for the industry member to then introduce facts, framed as value-neutral.

The training ended with a series of scenarios in which the entire Engage process was put into practice; industry

members bumped into the Real Food frame in public settings and participants selected options for moving through difficult conversations by finding common ground. When Ben starts a conversation in the produce section about how he has heard that GMOs are harmful and prefers to buy food "that's grown the natural way," the right response was not about research showing there are no nutritional or safety differences in food with GM ingredients, or citing extensive safety testing, but acknowledging shared values around food safety: "It's understandable you want safe food for your family—of course, I do too. Being part of this industry, I know farmers feel responsible for growing safe food for their families and ours." After Ben says he has also heard GMOs are bad for the environment, tempting wrong answers included, "Yes, but that's just not true. Have you done any research on how regulatory agencies test to ensure GMOs don't adversely affect humans?" The right answer was empathetic rather than dismissive and ostensibly established a shared value (protecting the environment) before presenting facts: "I have. Protecting the environment is so important to farmers. It may be surprising, but did you know that GMO crops actually help farmers reduce their environmental impact?"[34]

Similarly, in an encounter at a petting zoo Mia shares her concerns about animals being raised indoors without access to "natural things like grass and water." Wrong answers were confrontational and facts driven, addressing perceived cognitive deficits: "Pictures that are floating around give modern agriculture a bad rap. We've kept animals indoors for centuries. Animal welfare regulations promote the welfare of animals." The right answer was understanding, assumed a deficit of trust rather than information, and used abstractions that were easily agreed on to endorse practices that were harder to agree on: "Animal health is important to me too. The indoor environment allows me to

ensure their health and respond quickly should they become sick."[35] Nowhere were the commitments to GMOs, antibiotic use, or indoor animal agriculture discussed in relation to the larger values driving the use of such technologies in the food system. As the next section explores, such concerns about values were seen as forms of "bias" to be overcome through new communication strategies rather than legitimate disagreements that might be engaged through debate or dialogue.

TRANSPARENCY MEETS "BIG IS BAD BIAS"

In the Engage training, transparency was evocatively depicted as an empty picture frame gripped by two raised hands in the middle of a sky dotted with white clouds. While the intent seemed to be to conjure the notion of transparency as a window onto an unobstructed reality, together the sky continuing beyond the boundaries of the empty frame and the hands wrapped tightly around that frame suggested the inevitable and even intentional circumscription of what is "revealed" by transparency (Fig. 12). Similarly, the title of the CFI's 2015 Research Report, "A Clear View of Transparency and How to Build Consumer Trust," conjured the promise of transparency to provide an unobstructed view of reality, but the strategies behind creating the experience of transparency for consumers were clearly more complex than the simple, honest revealing of reality that was implied.[36] The historian Anna Zeide notes that transparency has been a core problem facing the food industry since its inception. According to her research, in the early days of food processing manufacturers sought various ways of overcoming the fact that consumers could not see into cans, including scientific research meant to ensure safety and thus trust. She notes that transparency has ever since

Figure 12. A graphic from the CFI's Engage online training illustrating the paradoxes of transparency. Center for Food Integrity, "Engage Online," 2017. Courtesy of Charlie Arnot, Center for Food Integrity.

remained a complicated and shifting goal for the food industry, used strategically and for its own purposes along with other marketing tools.[37] At the same time, transparency has been a goal of many Real Food frame proponents who have sought to "lift the veil" on the food system, teaching people where their food comes from as a foundation for bringing a better one into being, as seen for example in *Food, Inc*. (see chapter 2).[38] Yet scholars of the food system and beyond have also explored the limits and contradictions inherent in the pursuit of transparency.

Speaking broadly of the culture-wide embrace of transparency, the scholar of contemporary culture Claire Birchall notes it has become "the secular version of a born-again cleanliness that few can fail to praise," a sign of both cultural and moral authority. Yet, she argues, secrecy is not the opposite of transparency so much as it is integral to and constitutive of it.[39] Writing about practices of auditing, quality assurance, and accountability in the university setting, the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern similarly

notes there is "nothing innocent about making the invisible visible." She argues that while such practices produce a lot of information, they tend to ignore if not obscure "the 'real' workings" of institutions, such as their values and social structure.[40] Building on these insights, Susanne Friedberg explores the "paradoxes of transparency" in specialty produce supply chains as retailers in the UK responded to growing consumers demands for transparency. Notably, she found that transparency in practice not only produced new forms of vulnerability and exploitation in food exporting countries but also left these power dynamics entirely outside of the frame: "what transparency concealed, ultimately, was the power that made transparency possible."[41] The CFI's pursuit of transparency built on the long history of transparency as a food industry marketing concern, responded to the Real Food frame's interest in the promises of transparency, and was fraught with paradoxes.

The CFI developed and advanced an approach to transparency that was based on "7 Elements of Transparency." The foundational element was "Motivation," which was about overcoming "motivation bias," also known as "big is bad bias." According to the CFI, this bias caused the public to believe that the larger an institution was, the less likely it was to be motivated by the public good as opposed to profit. As previously discussed, the CFI generally portrayed this "bias" as having little to do with the behavior of the food industry, locating it instead within the minds of consumers, a point driven home by an illustration in its 2015 report showing a human head with "big is bad" written in the brain area (Fig. 13).[42]

More specifically, the CFI understood motivation bias as the result of an unfortunate confluence of broader changes in institutional trust and advancements in agriculture. According to their oft-repeated narrative, 1968 was a watershed year in which everything started to change for trust in institutions through the

Figure 13. Illustration from the CFI's 2015 Trust Research suggesting that the idea that larger institutions are likely to be less motivated by public good than profit is a bias residing in the minds of consumers. Center for Food Integrity, "A Clear View of Transparency and How It Builds Consumer Trust," *Consumer Trust Research*, 2015, p. 8. Courtesy of Charlie Arnot, Center for Food Integrity.

unfolding of events such as the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and soon after the Kent State massacre, then Watergate. The violations of trust in institutions kept coming in a "cascade" that included Three Mile Island, Iran Contra, Exxon Valdez, and scandals involving Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the Clinton scandal, Arthur Andersen, Abu Ghraib, the subprime mortgage crisis, the BP oil spill, and more in the 1990s and into the 2000s.[43] According to the CFI, while these assaults on trust occurred outside the food system, they coincided with the food system becoming larger and more integrated, industrialized, and consolidated, thus increasingly resembling the kind of institution the public was learning to distrust.[44] Because of this, positive advancements in agriculture and the food system were mistakenly caught up in the growing worldview among consumers that large institutions were not to be trusted. According to the CFI, those working in the food system had "assumed that consumers would think our advancements were good," but because of its size Big Food was increasingly perceived as "out of touch with the values of the consumers and likely to put profit ahead of public interest."[45]

For the CFI, the fundamental aim of transparency was to overcome this mistaken perception that the bigger a company was, the more likely it was to be motivated by profit rather than public interest. That is why the first element of transparency entailed acting "in a manner that is ethical and consistent with stakeholder interest."[46] The CFI taught that companies should both adopt and communicate motivations that responded to the public's desire to see that "ethical principles seem to guide the behavior of the company." According to the first element of transparency, the public also wanted to know that a company was "interested in the well-being of people like me, not just itself." They wanted to see that a company wants to be accountable for its actions, that it does not intentionally mislead people, and "when making decisions, [it] takes public interest into consideration rather than only considering profits."[47]

Paradoxically, while these suggestions were designed to address public concerns about the role of profit in decision making, they did not include the role of profit within the scope of what was revealed by transparency, instead redirecting attention to ethical principles and public interest. According to Claire Marris, strategies like this are based on a persistent misunderstanding of the public's concern about profit. She argues that skeptical reactions of the public "are often reactions to the *absence* of any mention of commercial purposes in public communication. Thus, public responses are misinterpreted as a negative response to profit-making *per se*, rather than to this lack of transparency." The misunderstanding, she notes, creates a "vicious circle whereby public communication actively promotes grand societal promises, while minimizing profit motives, thus generating more public alienation."[48] Seen in this light, the CFI's trust-building strategy was built on a fundamental paradox in which concerns about the role profit played in "Motivation" were addressed through forms

of transparency that occluded, rather than included, the role that profit played in motivation.

The other six elements of transparency that the CFI promoted also generated paradoxes as they reached for meaningful engagement with consumer values but generally delivered deficit-driven tactics that did little to address legitimate concerns the public might have about the effects of consolidation in the food industry. The second element, "Disclosure," was described as treating consumer concerns as "real" and sharing information, both positive and negative, that is useful, easy to understand, and timely. Element 3 was "Stakeholder Participation," which was explicitly about moving beyond the deficit-driven facts-dumping approach of the Real Facts frame by explaining how decisions are made and asking for opinions and input before making decisions. "Relevance" entailed sharing information deemed relevant by stakeholders; "Clarity" emphasized providing information that was easy to understand; and "Accuracy" meant the information was accurate, reliable, and did not leave out relevant information. The final element, "Credibility," required that the company apologize when it made mistakes, demonstrated it cared, engaged critics, and presented more than one side of controversial issues.[49]

Despite the potential for meaningful engagement, and even politics, that these elements suggest, the practices that followed were heavy on one-way disclosures of information that seemed designed to address perceived cognitive deficits and focused solely on downstream impacts rather than the value commitments that drive Big Food. As Wynne argues, even when public discourses are enlarged to include the public's ethical concerns about science and technology, they often "exacerbate pubic alienation and mistrust" by imposing a limited definition of what counts as an ethical issues, attending only "to downstream impacts" rather than the "upstream (usually unaccountable) driving human visions,

interests and purposes" that shape the development and uses of science and innovation.[50]

In a 2015 webinar series on transparency the CFI recommended best practices related to a variety of topics. When it came to food and health, for example, the webinar explained that the best practice was to "engage in a meaningful and two-way dialogue." However, examples of how to do so were heavy on the distribution of "information" such as providing ingredients glossaries, using simple names for ingredients, including information about preservatives and GMOs on product labels, and making product information easily available through QR, or quick response, codes. With regard to food safety, the webinar pointed out that consumers wanted to hear "both sides of the story" but emphasized the "accurate presentation of risk," conceived through a narrow scientistic lens of quantitative risk assessment. Best practices also included taking concerns about animal well-being seriously, addressing them by providing videos demonstrating the treatment of animals and describing the training of animal caretakers.[51] While responsive to consumers' concerns that previously may have been dismissed as misinformed, videos about animal treatment—like many of the other best practices suggested in the webinar—provided a highly curated, one-way flow of information already constrained by embedded normative assumptions about the goals, purpose, and values of the food system.

While consistently paradoxical, the "7 Elements of Transparency" as envisioned by the CFI did open the possibility for public concerns about the food system to have an impact on the decisions of corporate actors. Theoretically at least, aligning industry behavior with consumer values and expectations was the ultimate aim of trust-building transparency, and the CFI emphasized that transparency was not, and could not

be, simply PR. Arnot explicitly argued that transparency had to be "genuine and authentic" and warned that if a company approached transparency as PR it was likely to end up worse off than it was before.[52] The Center's communication and trainings around transparency emphasized that motives, practices, and communication all mattered. Communication without a true commitment to "doing what's right" was described as pointless, as was a credible commitment without effective communication strategies; "genuine transparency" comes from a combination of the two.[53] Arnot explained that once the "curtain is lifted" through the practices of transparency, consumers would either appreciate that company practices aligned with their values or discover that practices were "fundamentally inconsistent with their values and demand change or reject the brand." In either case, transparency resulted in alignment of consumer values and corporate behavior.[54] Thus, while the transparency promoted by the CFI functioned as PR aimed at maintaining social license for Big Food, because it had to be grounded in behaviors that were adapted to consumer concerns it also had potential to effect changes in how companies operated.

The mandate for transparency to act as a feedback loop between consumers and corporate practices was present throughout the CFI's publications, trainings, webinars, and so on, intermingling with another "voice" similar to the older voice Irwin observed, which he described as operating "within a narrower universe in which objectives are clear and decision-making involves choosing between alternative methods for attaining them."[55] This was especially evident in the "Optimizing Sustainability Project," which launched in 2018 as a series of printed reports and in 2020 as a website with click-through modules. The project was designed to provide a framework to help companies respond to

pressure from "stakeholders to adopt or reject a specific practice." It viewed "sustainability" in a way that was consistent with the concerns of the Real Food frame, defining it as "incorporating interconnected sets of issues tied to being a responsible consumer and responsible citizen" and including not only environmental issues but health, wellness, animal welfare, labor issues, food waste, packaging, and "impacts on local and indigenous communities."[56] The modules taught companies that before they could be ready to respond to a request from the public related to sustainability practices they needed to set their own sustainability priorities through an eight-step process that included appointing leadership; identifying objectives, internal and external stakeholders, and relevant sustainability attributes; extensive data collection and analysis of stakeholder concerns to identify priority issues; and evaluation of potential trade-offs between priority attributes using techniques such as life cycle assessment. When it received a request to change its practices, the company should then undertake another process in which it conducted research to understand the issue, evaluated the source of the request, and assessed the relationship of the request to current sustainability priorities. If the request aligned with the sustainability strategy and priorities, the company should then communicate about how the issue was already being addressed. If not, the company should undertake an extensive review of trade-offs and implications and then decide whether to "agree to or decline to take the requested action or position" and finally plan its communication strategy.[57] This process clearly set up the potential for the public's values and concerns to influence corporate practices that was not present within a typical Real Facts–informed, linear model of communication. At the same time, these moves toward openness and inclusion remained constrained by food scientism.

The Optimizing Sustainability training included examples for evaluating trade-offs related to cage-free egg production, conservation tillage in corn production, rBST-free milk, and slower-growing chickens (broilers) that were shaped by predetermined notions of relevant expertise and embedded assumptions about the values and priorities of the food system. While seeking to exemplify a balanced appraisal of trade-offs, each of these case studies drew on a single source of scientific information that was already heavily influenced by industry interests. The broiler production case drew on a study by the National Chicken Council and the milk production case on a study by the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, both major industry trade groups. The corn tillage case drew on research conducted by the US Department of Agricultural Research Service at UC Davis and the egg production assessment drew on research by the CFIs Coalition for Sustainable Egg Production, whose members included over 20 poultry trade groups and corporations, plus a handful of academic scientific groups and the American Humane Society. In each case, while the evaluation of trade-offs was presented as objective, it was laden with normative assumptions about how the food system should work, and the values driving it. For example, in the broiler case, the assessment found that raising slower growing birds would cause a "sharp increase in chicken prices" noting that such increases "would increase food instability for those who can least afford to absorb increased in food prices." Among other things, this assumed that all costs would be passed on to consumers while ignoring, for example, the well-documented role the food industry itself played in creating widespread food insecurity among its own workers through low wages.[58] When it came to the question of whether any of these trade-offs might be worth it because of benefits to health and

welfare, the assessment cited the absence of research in this area, not surprising given the politics of "undone science."[59] Each of the cases, similarly, folded normative values into the assessment of what were called "economic attributes," such as "food affordability," and disregarded the politics of expertise that informed them, thus delineating a purview for transparency that did not include how knowledge was produced or came to matter.[60]

The many assumptions that informed and constrained these case studies were a microcosm of the ways in which the CFI's vision of engaging through shared values and building trust through transparency opened new opportunities for listening, understanding, and engagement between Big Food and the public while also enacting antipolitics through what was either taken for granted or entirely left out of the frame. Across the CFI's work, the technological promises of "modern agriculture" were both explicitly and implicitly taken for granted. Public concerns were framed as emotional and psychological and as focused on downstream impacts rather than "the upstream driving purposes" of the food system. The only options that animated these antipolitics of transparency were acceptance or rejection; despite the promise of engagement and dialogue, there was *still* no room left for what Wynne describes as "constructive negotiation of possible alternatives, multiple trajectories, and different technologies, including of different social ends."[61]

"THE MOVEABLE MIDDLE"

Throughout its efforts to promote trust building through shared values and transparency, the CFI also offered guidance to the food industry about who *not* to engage with, when to *disengage*, and where to focus to have the most influence. The very first trust report defined the CFI's aim as a food system that was "truly

sustainable and supported by our stakeholders and a rational majority of consumers," thus subtly but clearly signaling that some audiences were too "irrational" to be part of the conversation.[62] Advice in the Engage training about where to focus and not focus communication efforts also illustrated this point of view. In Engage, the target audience was referred to as "the moveable middle." A slide depicted "the moveable middle" as the center of a bell curve, with arrows noting to "focus here," while at either end of the curve more arrows warned "don't concentrate here." Conflating malleability toward predetermined ends with sincerity and rationality, Engage lessons described people in the movable middle as "the reasonable majority that craves balanced information about food from trusted sources" and "those who have sincere questions and a desire to know how their food is produced."[63] This implied, in contrast, that those outside the middle were not worth engaging with because their views were too extreme or entrenched to be considered reasonable, or "moveable." This focus on malleable audiences in the Engage training and beyond mirrors the "high valuation on mobility of citizens and their opinions" that Javier Lezaun and Linda Soneryd found in their analysis of "the configuration of legitimate constituencies" in exercises designed to elicit the public's opinions on technoscientific matters. They describe an antipolitics enacted through the "fundamental moral imperative" that participants "allowed themselves to be moved."[64]

Throughout its work, the CFI sought to help the industry identify and influence members of the public whose opinions and attitudes about the food system were likely to change through the encounter and/or who were likely to influence change among others.[65] The first trust report introduced the idea that "winning public acceptance of a new product, process or system is more easily achieved with the backing of a segment of the population known

as early adopters." The report referred to the "Diffusion of Innovation" model developed by Everett Rogers in the 1960s, which showed that "early adopters" are opinion leaders and drivers of social change. It described early adopters as "more rational, intelligent, and able to deal with uncertainty than others" and also "information seekers" interested in "sources they view as balanced and credible." [66] The report primed food companies to influence these drivers of public opinion with insights into how they got information about food issues (increasingly from the Web) and details about their Web use, such as how often they went online, the devices they used to do so, and the topics they most frequently researched when looking for food information. The report also included a detailed look at what it called "Messages That Matter," that is, those messages "that had a statistically significant impact on the attitudes of early adopters" in relation to nutrition, food safety, the humane treatment of animals, and the responsible use of technology. The messages themselves took the familiar form of establishing vague values-based foundations before introducing science and economics, which I have already discussed as enacting antipolitics in and of itself.[67] The point here is that antipolitics was also enacted by identifying early adopters as the audience of choice for "messages that matter" because of the likelihood of their opinions changing (in the desired direction) and their ability to influence others toward mobility.

As the CFI developed increasingly refined approaches to delineating relevant audiences, the virtue of mobility was increasingly intertwined with projections of both cognitive and psychological deficits. Audience segmentation and lines of influence between different segments were a major focus of the organization's 2016 and 2017 trust research. In 2016 "Inside the Minds of Influencers: The Truth about Trust" moved on from the broad generalizations

of the movable middle and early adopter frameworks to offer a more fine-tuned understanding of "the voices that impact the decision of others as they make choices at the grocery store or form opinions about the products, processes, people and brands that define today's food system." Ultimately, the research identified one group, representing a third of the population, as the prime target for engagement because of deficits that made them particularly mobile. It described "Providers" as open to influence because they "never feel quite good enough," and "when a food issue is placed before them they feel anxious that they don't have the information or trusted sources they need to decide what is right and wrong." This made them vulnerable to the influence of "Peak Performers," who seemed to be influencing Providers in a way that the CFI wanted to interrupt.[68]

The report described the influence of Peak Performers on Providers as the reason "more Americans are flocking toward various attributes of food they consider evolved and that signify progress" such as less processed food, clean labels, and GMO-free claims. The opportunity the report focused on was for the industry to step in to offer Providers the guidance they needed, thus coming between them and Peak Performers. The projection of deficits as an opportunity to move people toward desired ends was frank and explicitly gendered. "Pam the Provider" is shown standing in a grocery store reading a cereal box with a thought bubble over her head that contains nothing but a question mark. In the same image, "Paul the Peak Performer" stands beside Pam, taking advantage of the mobility created by her deficits of knowledge and confidence with the simple question, "Do you have any idea how processed foods impact your performance?" Pam was also described as pressured to stay away from processed food in her Facebook feed and at soccer games. This left her full of angst,

because in trying to feed her family convenient heathy meals on a budget she often used foods that "aren't considered particularly 'clean' by the influencers whispering in her ear." The report urged its audience to take advantage of Pam's mobility themselves rather than allow others to do so, suggesting that companies use the CFI's communication strategies to "support and empower her; provide balanced information; instill confidence about the value of processed food; earn trust."[69]

The CFI's focus on segmenting consumers to better understand and target lines of influence between them took a fascinating turn in 2017, with a report called "Connecting with Consumers in a Post-Truth Tribal World: What Makes Food and Information Credible," which divided the public along a continuum of relationships to "the Truth." The premise itself rejected the Real Facts frame's insistence on a singular science-driven Truth and, therefore, its inability to understand skeptical publics as anything but misinformed or antiscience. The central contention was that how people assessed the credibility of information about food was shaped by where they stood on a "belief spectrum" between "rational scientific objectivity" and "values-based subjectivity." While on one end truth was grounded in evidence-based science, on the other people's "assessment of news credibility and information is not as much about its scientific validity, than it is about the emotional resonance it has and the extent to which it 'gels' with their other deeply held desires and beliefs."[70]

The research identified five "archetypes" along the belief spectrum, each representing a set of shared beliefs in the context of credibility, and then mapped the lines of influence among them. Following the CFI's critique of Real Facts, the report found that "Scientifics," located on the farthest "rational" end of the spectrum, might be "technical information pioneers," but they had

very little influence because they were too "dogmatic," lacked clarity, and were unable to simplify conversations to make them relatable. Far more influential was the next group, whose approach to credibility mirrored the CFI's: "Philosophers" learned about research from "Scientifics" but integrated it with ethics and morality to convey "a story that relies on scientific evidence, but is communicated through an ethical and moral lens." The target audience for engagement was once again identified based on mobility as both a virtue and a feature of deficits that made particular consumers vulnerable to influence. The report deemed 52 percent of the population to have opinions too entrenched and extreme and/or to have too little influence over the mobility of others to be viable for "engagement." This included "Scientifics" who overcomplicate, "Wishful Thinkers" who "spiritualize" and "over-exaggerate," and "Existentials" who were too "politically charged in their discussions about food." The central opportunity was to target the 39 percent of the population who were "Followers" and the "Philosophers" (9 percent of the population) who influenced them.[71]

Followers were the prime target for engagement because they were both mobile, because of deficits that made them "vulnerable," and influential. Located in the middle of the objective/subjective truth spectrum, Followers were described as less scientifically literate, overwhelmed by the amount and complexity of scientific information, anxious about "doing the wrong thing," and looking for "reassurances." The report identified them as both "the largest cohort that is malleable" and as well positioned to influence others, particularly those segments closer to the subjective end of the truth spectrum. Each archetype was richly developed, with sections explaining what food news symbolized to them, their demographics, what motivated them, how they acted

on their beliefs, and what type of information they preferred. When explicitly discussing how to influence them, the focus was on understanding "triggering vulnerabilities" that might lead them to change their beliefs.[72]

The report explained that Followers' perspectives on both sugar and omega-3's had recently changed, and in both cases communication leading up to the changes followed the same formula. Experts removed ambiguity and repackaged the science simply, attached simple recommendations to the information, and addressed "a specific vulnerability": wanting to be a good parent. The three-step formula they recommended for "evolving the beliefs of Followers" was, therefore, to communicate through trusted experts, deliver unambiguous information and simple solutions, and address a specific vulnerability of the Follower. The report explained that these vulnerabilities stemmed from the fact that "Followers fear they will miss something or do the wrong thing, thus jeopardizing the health of their families or themselves." The simple version of the communication formula was, "trusted expert + relevant info + addresses vulnerability."[73]

This approach to delineating relevant audiences based on their propensity for mobility made it clear that while the CFI promoted a broad emphasis on engagement through shared values and transparency, the kind of conversations worth having were the ones in which the public participants—not the industry communicators—were likely to be moved. Members of the public holding strong opinions and unlikely to be moved were defined as outside of "engagement," while the most important targets were those who were seen as the least knowledgeable, informed, and confident in their opinions or concerns about the food system. There was little interest in conversations that enacted politics by producing disagreement over values, or conflict over the

direction of the food system, or even in which the result was a public unmoved.

Despite—and alongside—its efforts to overhaul the approach the food industry typically took to communicating with the public, the Center for Food Integrity's work reproduced many of the foundational assumptions and limitations of the Real Facts frame. The central paradox of the CFI's approach to building trust with consumers through transparency was that, much as Friedberg discovered in the supply chain, it maintained a veil of secrecy around the power dynamics that produced transparency itself.[74] Connecting through shared values and practicing the seven elements of transparency left embedded assumptions about the aims and purpose of the food system unexamined and assumed that public concerns about the food system were narrowly focused on impacts rather than the power dynamics that determined what questions mattered and which forms of expertise were relevant. The CFI's critique of deficit-driven communication produced new forms of communication and even engagement between the food industry and the public but at the same time remained shaped by deficit thinking. It projected a view of the public not only lacking information and understanding but also compromised by social and psychological hindrances to rational, science-informed decision making, not to mention plagued by insecurity. While the CFI taught corporate actors that their motivations, practices, and behaviors all mattered for building trust, it also located the emergence and persistence of lack of trust in the minds and social contexts of the consumer rather than the actions, inaction, and assumptions of industry actors. In other words, the Center for Food Integrity produced an antipolitics of transparency.