

BIG BROTHER IS COMING TO THE FARM

The digital takeover of food

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If you are one of the many people worrying about our food and where it comes from, you're not alone. And now there's a new reason to worry. A silent earthquake is fracturing our food systems. These new cracks are spreading all the way from Silicon Valley and Seattle and shadowy asset management companies on wall street, through the industrial food chain heading for seeds, shop shelves and the food on your table.

Whether we grow, sell or buy food, we're all going to be impacted by these rapidly spreading fault lines. So what's really going on? At first we learnt about recent mergers between big companies and the seed in agrochemical sectors, like Bayer Monsanto. But that is just part of the story.

Giant agro-business firms like Bayer, Cortiva Agriscience, Syngenta group and BASF are now being joined by other equally powerful corporations from outside the food world, who want to shape the food system to serve their interests. Giant asset management companies that most people have barely heard of have been buying up shares in the world of food and agriculture, gaining enormous influence over their future development. A snapshot from 2016 showed that already the world's five biggest institutional investors all owned a slice of all the five largest seed companies. Does this matter?

Yes, it does! This is an anti-competitive practice called "horizontal shareholding", which is fuelling the whole anti-competitive corporate concentration process. It allows a handful of corporations to reshape the entire global food and agriculture industry to feed the interests of company CEOs and shareholders. There is no intention to protect small farmers or people's health, only to feed the wallets of company CEOs and shareholders. It means they don't need to compete with each other because they have common owners. So they can push prices up, making everything related to food and farming more expensive for the rest of us.

But they're not only interested in food. They're interested in data as well. Big finance is interested in the technology sector too, and together they have plans about how to use that data to make money. It all begins with a total transition to automated digital farming. Big finance and big tech companies want farming to go online whether farmers like it, or not. And all sorts of things are in the pipeline: those drones, 5G networks, wi-fi balloons and internet satellites being rolled out across the skies. That's not just about faster social media and cat videos!

That is the backbone for digital farming.

The food system is full of things that can be turned into data for data giants to harvest. There's dna in the seeds, water and soil data on farms. Data on moving commodities from field to factory to the dinner table. And of course all the grocery sales and consumer data. For example there are even commercial operations already underway, using facial recognition to monitor herds of cows and pigs. Other plans on the digital farms include using remote sensing, computer generated data, artificial intelligence, satellites and drones, driverless tractors and robotics. Whoever gathers this data will gain immense power and influence, especially in today's world where data is hoarded and traded for big bucks.

Farm machinery companies are also teaming up with big data and drone manufacturers as well as pesticide and seeds companies. They are investing in digital tech platforms to make sure they don't miss out on the bonanza that's planned.

So where does all this leave farmers?

At the moment it looks like farmers will have to pay for and adapt to complex digital technologies, losing their skills and their privacy and decision-making about what happens on their farms and even the right to repair their equipment.

If digital farming goes big, it's likely to increase companies grabbing land from peasants and destroying forests and biodiversity. Combine tractors are already displacing peasant farmers and farm workers and drones and other digital tech are already beginning to make this worse. The big changes in the food system are not only taking place on farms: off the farm huge internet-based giants, like Amazon, Flipkart and Alibaba are already circling in further up the chain around online food retailing. They are increasingly able to influence who eats what and therefore what farms grow.

Ruthless companies like Amazon are well known for taking down whole industries and dodging billions of dollars in tax payments. In 2018 US-based Amazon made 11.2 billion dollars in profit but paid no federal taxes in the US. That is part of why Amazon's CEO Jeff Bezos became the richest person on the planet during the pandemic. Amazon and Walmart are battling for supremacy in the US and in India, where Walmart brought up Indian e-commerce company Flipkart. Alibaba and Tencent are battling for control of China's exploding 75 billion dollar food delivery market and across Asia and other developing regions. These retailers are also partnering with tech firms to gain access to their automation robotics and voice technologies. In fact, Amazon itself is a driving force in the tech world. It owns the world's largest remote cloud computing services company, Amazon Web Services of AWS, which sells artificial intelligence and facial recognition technologies as well. AWS has made up the bulk of Amazon's operating profits for the last several years. Amazon uses the money it makes from selling shoes, books and cloud computing to break into food and agriculture. China's Alibaba and Tencent are also taking the same path. Combining AI with online grocery shopping is very beneficial from Amazon's point of view. It gains vast amounts of valuable data about what each of us eats every day, analyzes it with AI and then uses the results to profile us and persuasively nudge and push us to consume yet more products.

By collecting data about our behaviour companies are creating psychological profiles they use to manipulate us and shape our choices. In fact, the whole industrial food chain as we know it, is changing fast. Big data companies are becoming big food retailers and vice versa.

It's time to break up, regulate and control these giant companies, before the earthquake they have set in motion becomes unstoppable. They are not part of the post-pandemic pollution, even though they like to claim they are. And it's time to access new technologies in an inclusive and transparent way so that we all have a say in what technologies have developed and for whom. Because data, all those swelling banks of ones and zeros and artificial intelligence isn't really knowledge and it certainly isn't wisdom. The wisdom that we need to feed ourselves isn't to be found in artificial corporate intelligence. You don't need to ask Alexa when we have farmers knowledge

and community knowledge. Localized biodiverse peasant and agro-ecological food systems provide the answer. Decentralizing control and democratizing food systems is the key to feeding our world in a fair and ecological way. It works for farmers, it works for local economies, it produces nourishing food, it protects biodiversity and it will help to stop future pandemic. If we grow our food in a way that protects small farmers and peasants knowledge rather than Silicon Valley's profit margins, working in harmony with our environment and with local communities, we will all benefit.