"There is no problem with plastics": Understanding consumer and industrial perceptions of the plastics problem

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The proliferation of plastics waste and its polluting effects have been thrust into the public eye following high-profile media attention, which has given plastics a pre-eminent position in UK circular economy research and policy debate. Devising policy solutions, though, requires having sufficient understanding of an issue to frame a problem to which there are identifiable solutions. Although interpretations and preferences inevitably vary (both between and within different social and economic sectors), a level of collective understanding and agreement is needed to successfully design and implement policies. As part of the formal regulatory process of consultation, organisations and individuals independently submit comments for review by government staff. However, circular economy-inspired solutions require practical solutions which need to work for multiple stakeholders. This paper reports on a novel analysis of transcripts from two workshops with diverse regional stakeholders partnering the University of Hull "Evolving a Circular Plastics Economy" project. We posed a series of discussion topics in order to uncover the social actors (stakeholders seen as taking active or passive role in a given context) identified and the representation of the relationships between them. We note how certain actors and their relationships are variously foregrounded or ignored within the discussion, with the discourse therefore legitimising only certain actors, and framing their actions within a market/economic relationship. The fact that the project partners present comprised only a selection of plastics stakeholders demonstrates the need to be part of the debate in order to contribute to the definition of "problems", which is necessary to be accepted as part of the definition of the solution.

Introduction

Plastic is fantastic. It is flexible, light, versatile, resistant to corrosion and cheap. It is also durable; its persistence in the environment, as whole products or as microplastics, means that it increasingly impacts life in the ocean and on land (e.g., impeding soil fertility (Duis and Coors, 2016; Zheng et al., 2019). Of particular concern is single-use plastic, including the vast majority of plastics packaging; an estimated 72% of which is not recovered at all, being sent for energy from waste or to landfill (Ellen MacArthur, 2016). There has been significant research in response to the environmental impact of plastics, focusing on technical solutions (Crippa et al., 2019), such as the need to improve the quality of recovered plastic (Hahladakis and Iacovidou, 2019), or to develop new plastics, such as bio-based, which do not rely on petroleum-based limits for supply, or biodegradeable which might potentially avoid significant pollution issues (Spierling et al, 2018). The plastics issue is at heart, however, a social problem. That is the problem is not necessarily (or primarily) related to the material itself, rather than to how it is used and, importantly, what happens when it has served its purpose.

Since plastic is embedded in our everyday life and is used in a variety of sectors, its ubiquity means that solutions must be varied and involve the application of numerous academic disciplines and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders (which we define broadly as any organisation/individual with an interest, not necessarily economic, in the issue). The circular economy (CE) approach recognizes the systemic nature of resource and (potential) pollution issues. By moving away from waste, and even recycling activities, through better systems and improved design, environmental damage is minimized and resource efficiency maximized (Ghisellini et al 2016). CE has been adopted by policy-makers as offering a means to reduce the environmental impact of plastics (EC, 2014; Defra, 2018). Yet application of a CE approach, potentially attractive to policy makers because of its specific methodologies for implementation (Cecchin et al., 2020), by no means provides straightforward or uncontentious solutions.

CE approaches require the involvement and a reprioritization of a wider and more diverse number of stakeholders, together with an understanding of their issues. Previous research indicates that EU policy documents identify business and consumers as the major actors in the transition to a CE (Lazarevic and Valve, 2017), implying "governance by corporate business" (p 67), with the state in a supporting role. At the UK scale too, plastics have been primarily constructed as a business problem, reflected in the WRAP "Plastics Pact" (WRAP, 2019). Of note, business is not a homogenous group, any more than are consumers. To achieve the UK Government's goal of increasing plastics recovery by means of consistent labelling and recycling schemes throughout the country requires agreement between stakeholders including packaging manufacturers, food wholesalers and retailers, local authorities, waste management companies, plastic re-processors, not to mention the public. To

increase the challenge, not all of those stakeholders are necessarily based in, or entirely operating within, the jurisdiction of UK policies.

In this paper, however, we are taking a step back from attempting to directly solve the problem of plastics. Instead we want to uncover some of the assumptions behind policy prescriptions, in order to shed light on the process and improve the likelihood of policies succeeding. We are applying a cultural political economy (CPE) approach (Jessop, 2010; Sum and Jessop, 2013), which asserts that the language within which policy is set is not neutral (Jessop, 2010). Instead by a process of inclusion and exclusion of stakeholder perspectives it normalizes certain possibilities within what becomes effectively a simplification of reality (called an 'imaginary' in CPE terminology). CPE can provide an account of how objects of governance come to be defined and operationalised. Even evidence-based policy making is not an objective process: the solutions selection will reflect the problems definition (Bacchi, 2009), which in turn reflects who is part of the process of definition of the problem.

In order to operationalise CPE in this paper we are employing critical discourse analysis to explore the rapidly developing collective conceptualisation of plastics as a "problem" to be addressed in the UK economy. Critical discourse analysis is an established academic approach which studies language in text to highlight agency and uncover structural inequalities between governing and governed (Farrelly, 2019). The language in which issues are articulated is important because of how it shapes expectations: language inspires action; legitimises and sets up the conditions necessary for co-operation. The use of a shared language makes policy and legislation formation and implementation more effective and quicker; allows participants to understand issues and barriers, thereby saving time and costs. Language itself thus contributes to the construction of a collective programme for action based on a very partial understanding of a problem. Language is an important aspect of the legitimising or construction of narratives contributing to the collective imaginary, i.e., definition of the problem to be governed. A key question arises, though, as to which stakeholders (or social groups) are recognized as legitimate participants in the process.

Innovatively, the text analysed in this paper comprises transcripts from a workshop organized for the plastics stakeholders collaborating with the University of Hull's "Evolving a Circular Plastics Economy" project. Consideration of the language used provides a significant additional insight as opposed to simply seeking opinions, or trying to derive information ("facts") from the discussion. Following Farrelly (2019), we are primarily concerned with 1) identifying how the plastics stakeholders comprising our project partners represent the "plastics problem" in terms of who are the relevant social actors and 2) are those actors represented as having active or passive roles in the problem?

The next section outlines the key aspects of the approach from CPE and CDA; we then provide a detailed account of our methods; then analyse the social actors emerging from the workshops, before providing a discussion of the findings and offering brief conclusions.

Building a critical approach

Cultural political economy (CPE) (Jessop, 2010) examines how we make sense and meaning from our interactions with the world and is a relatively novel way of analysing policy. According to Jessop (2010) economic governance inevitably involves a process of complexity reduction:

Because the world cannot be grasped in all its complexity in real time, actors (and observers) must focus selectively on some of its aspects in order to be active participants in that world and/or to describe and interpret it as disinterested observers. (2010, p. 338)

Thus, those who govern, in the absence of full knowledge and control, engage in practices of complexity reduction. Collectively, institutions of governance, and the people at work in them, are able to create what is, in effect, a subset of an economy and develop methods for measuring and controlling that subset. These complexity reducing practices entail prioritising certain elements of economic activity and, no less importantly, de-prioritising others. The products of complexity reducing practices are, in CPE terminology, "imaginaries": these imaginaries both reflect and constrain individuals' experience of the complexities of the world and thereby influence collective understandings of how to respond to/manage situations (Jessop, 2010). Imaginaries become the objects of governance; or in other words, imaginaries are collectively constructed simplifications of real economies. In this paper we examine the plastics "imaginary" constructed by the stakeholders involved in this project.

Although we can view imaginaries as a necessary part of the practices of governance, we can also view specific imaginaries as contingent - that is, neither inevitable or necessary. Instead, we can see specific imaginaries as subject to processes of variation, selection and retention. There are several modes of selection - ways in which imaginaries come to be selected. Particular agents occupy social positions of influence and the abilities and preferences of those agents comes into play in the selection of imaginaries. Drawing also on the terminology of critical discourse analysis, we can refer to those influential agents as social actors (Farrelly, 2019). Social actors, in this sense refers to the representation of human participants in texts. An analysis of these representations can reveal biased representation, witting or unwitting on the part of a speaker or writer, toward certain social groups or individuals. We contend that the analysis may reveal that patterns or habits of textual representation are not fully adequate to describing current circumstances or desired policy outcomes. As Farrelly argues "the representation of social actors in texts can reveal important underlying conceptualisations of the circumstances of policy interventions" (2019: 147). Non-human actors can also be ascribed the properties of a social actor by the practice of anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007), by which they

are implicitly or explicitly credited with motivations and agency attributable to humans. Although a fairly common figure of speech, and not necessarily motivated by an intention of dissembling, the practice of anthropomorphising can contribute to the non-representation, or exclusion, of potentially significant actors within imaginaries. The explicit identification and analysis of the actors perceived as relevant in the developing collective imaginary remains a significant gap in the literature which we address in this study.

Methods

This paper draws on University of Hull's "Evolving a Circular Plastics Economy" project, which involves researchers from a range of disciplines and partners drawn from industry, local government, and NGOs in the region (Figure 1). The partners, who have formally agreed to participate in the research, are drawn from the wider population of stakeholders, who could be representatives of any organization with an interest (economic, environmental or social) in the production, use or recovery/disposal of plastics. Our partners were largely drawn from the Hull and East Riding area of Yorkshire. Hull is a coastal port of c260,000 (Hull data Observatory, 2019) located approximately 180 miles north of London. The fourth largest city of Yorkshire, following the decline of its fishing industry, Hull ranks as the fourth most deprived local authority in England on the index of multiple deprivation which considers income, employment, and health outcomes (2019). Current major industrial sectors include chemicals, healthcare and food processing. The East Riding of Yorkshire, which surrounds the Hull area, is the largest unitary council area in England and significantly more affluent than Hull (overall), and predominantly rural rather than industrial.

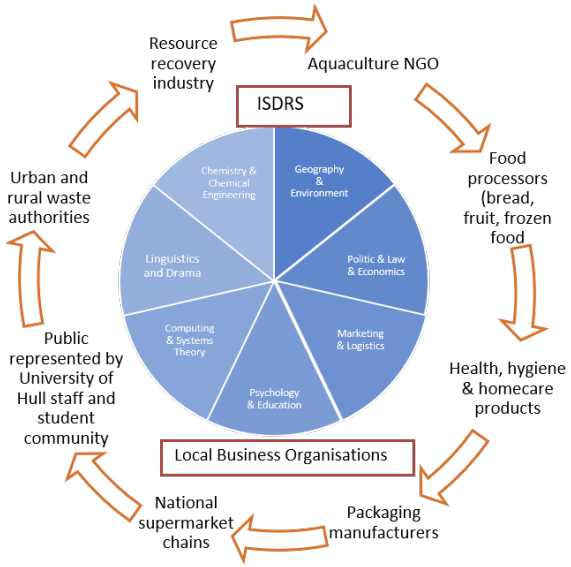

Figure 1: The Evolving a Circular Plastics project network comprising 15 disciplinary perspectives industry, government and non-governmental organisations with representation in the region. Not shown here is the advisory board with national and international non/governmental and academic representatives.

Data for this paper is drawn from two stakeholder meetings held 28 February and 6 March 2019 at the University of Hull. The same event was run twice to accommodate the availability of the project partners. These workshops served an important function of communicating the relevant research capacities to the partners. They enabled connections to be built between them and not only the stakeholder-facing (i.e., social science) researchers, but also the laboratory-facing (science and engineering) researchers. A number of subprojects emerged as a result of these connections, specifically focusing on partners' interests. More relevant to the present paper, however, is the other function of learning from the partners what their perspectives on plastic were. We thus aimed to establish a common understanding as we embarked on a shared journey.

The concept of the World Café (World Café, 2015) was used to structure proceedings. The World Café method aims to encourage diverse participation and co-creation of knowledge in an informal setting which is designed to break down barriers to contributions. Participants are encouraged to share tacit information in a non-hierarchical way, to encourage collaboration. Attendees were split small groups (Figure 2) comprising a mixture of both partners and academics to discuss a number of questions with academics and stakeholders evenly spread as much as possible. The workshops were divided in two sessions a) Problem exploration and definition and b) Defining the circular economy. This paper focus on the first of those sessions, which addressed the questions "Why do we (society) use plastics?" and "What problems do plastics cause and why?" These very broad, and superficially easy to answer, questions, were designed to generate discussion amongst participants in order to capture their perspectives at the outset of the project. We sought to uncover how the participants are understanding issues relating to plastic, and to derive from that who are seen as the groups with agency, or actors. Each session had a dedicated scribe to take notes: participants also completed post-it notes on questions. Full-group discussion allowed for the most important findings to be shared, permitted partners to ask questions and make further comments.

Figure 2: World Café workshop with regional stakeholders

Participants gave written consent for audio recording, photographs and the use of anonymized and/or generalized contributions in publication.

The data were transcribed, and texts analysed utilizing NVivo software in order to compare how different stakeholders construct the plastic imaginary. For the identification of actors and their roles we used the critical discourse analytic framework first developed by Van Leeuwen (1996, 2008) in which he gives an inventory of the ways social actors can be represented in (English) discourse (1996, p. 32). Following Farrelly (2019), our analysis of the representation of social actors has two distinct elements:

1. Identification of representations of social actors – who is being represented
2. Categorisation of those social actors – are they passive or active?

First, we identified the processes and actions that were represented in our data which would require the participation of human beings. Where these actions included a representation of human participants, we coded those as "social actors: included"; where the actions were not represented with a human participant we coded them as "social actor: excluded".

Second, we categorised the "social actors: included" as for further aspects of how they were represented. That is, whether they were represented as passive (influenced by the actions of others but lacking agency themselves) or active (having and apply the ability to influence outcomes to some extent).

Analysis

Our analysis shows that the partners collectively had four major categories of social actor in their understanding of plastic in the UK economy. Three of these were society, business, and the consumer. In addition, and less expectedly, plastic itself is often seen as having agential qualities, as though it were a social actor. We present detailed analysis and examples of each category in the following sections.

The Representation of "society" as a social actor

Society is represented as one of the major social actors throughout our data, society is common in how the contributors to our data conceptualised the contemporary plastics problem. In this paper we focus on explanatory examples.

In example 1, sentence 1 shows society as having shared, and historically common, problems:

Male 5 : Yes… it [plastic] solved so many of the problems that human society had lived with for thousands of years, you've got this wonder substance that does all things for all men and you can just find more and more uses for it and more and more ways in which it can make people's lives easier and…

Male 6: Convenience, yes.

Male 7: It's replacing other resources…

The most obvious social actor in sentence 1 is "human society"; but this is a social actor that is the passive recipient - or at least is seen as being unable to deal with - many problems. Less obvious as an actor, but important none the less, is the personification of plastic. Plastic, "it" is the entity that "solved" the problems that human society had lived with.

Furthermore, in sentence 3, plastic is represented as though it is the active agent in "replacing" other resources - it is not people, or social organisations, that are repressed as undertaking the actions of "replacing" other resources.

The Representation of "business" as a social actor

Business is represented as one of the major social actors throughout our data, business is ubiquitous in how the contributors to our data conceptualised the contemporary "plastics problem".

In example 1, sentence 1 shows business being contrasted with the personal motivations of the speaker:

1. So there's two aspects to it. (4.42) There's why do I use it and why does a business use it.

2. So flexibility of use, you know plastic covers many different aspects of packaging so it's just convenient for us to use.

3. It's incredibly cheap compared to other solutions so consumers are incredibly price sensitive and so we try and offer the cheapest solution that we can, especially compared to what else is in the market.

4. It allows us to maximise product life so protecting the integrity of the products as well as increasing shelf life.

Interestingly, the conceptualisation of the plastics problem shows a significant absence of social actors. In sentence 2, we see that business is represented as the only social actor, and this is interesting because there are several important social actions that are included but for which social actors are either implicit (backgrounded) or absent (suppressed). These actions are:

- flexibility of use

- to cover

- to package

The action "to cover" means something like "we use plastic for several different purposes" but in the actual representation of the business and its needs and preferences for how it uses packaging are backgrounded. Similarly, in sentence 3, the use of the word

"solutions" implies a problem that business has without stating so in direct terms.

Note that plastic is represented as though it is a social actor with a metaphorical capacity for agency in sentence 4: it is plastic that is said to allow business to maximise product life. This analysis is not a criticism of the individual speaker, rather, we suggest that it is revealing of a discourse in which causal effects are attributed to plastic. This representation suggests that, in this conceptualisation, businesses are limited in their capacity to act.

The Representation of "the consumer" as a social actor

"The Consumer" is the third major representation of social actors in our data, and is a clear part of how the contributors conceptualised the contemporary "plastics problem".

In example 3, shows the consumer in relation to the business that we saw above in example 2:

*1. It's incredibly cheap compared to other solutions so **consumers** are incredibly price sensitive and so we try and offer the cheapest solution that we can, especially compared to what else is in the market.*

2. It allows us to maximise product life so protecting the integrity of the products as well as increasing shelf life.

3. Alternatives seem to fall down at those aspects.

4. There's the protection during transport as well so plastic is incredibly useful for that.

5. The ability to print and customise and create your own designs, effective printing direct onto products and creating your new and bespoke mould.

*6. And from a **consumer** perspective I think there's just very few alternatives available.*

*7. Also when **you're **in the shop and **you're** looking to buy products, there's very few kind of plastic free alternatives out there so you're almost kind of shoehorned into buying plastic and using it.*

Sentence 1 represents an aspect of the consumer identity, that is a quality of what it means to be a consumer, that quality is that they are "incredibly price sensitive". In representational terms this sensitivity is show here as a reaction to price, rather than being the result of a more active decision-making process.

Sentences 2-5 describe the qualities of plastics that allow business to accommodate the price sensitivity of consumers and, in sentence 5, to allow business to market products to consumers.

Sentences 7 and 8 describe consumers as being rather helpless in the face of the ubiquity of plastics. Interestingly, the "consumer" is represented without any hint that consumers may be a heterogenous group; as a consumer one has little choice: "you're almost kind of shoehorned into buying plastic and using it"'.

Plastic as an "anthropomorphised social actor"

As mentioned, there was a significant representation of plastic as an anthropomorphised social actor. We found, in the discussion of the question "what is the plastics problem" that of the 139 instances of the word "plastic", 118 of those referred to plastic in a material sense, but 21 referred to plastic as though it had some human, agentive or causal property. Table 1 shows each of the 21 instances in which plastic is represented in these anthropomorphise' terms. For example, "It's unnecessary, problematic plastics, that are proliferating in to society"; represents plastics in a way that makes it appear that plastic has the ability "to proliferate" without representing the human activity, social organisation and group decision-making that leads to the greater production, circulation and use of plastics in society.

Table 1: Examples of the anthropomorphising of plastics by workshop participants

Example number	**Content**
1	And, it is important that you don't end up demonising plastics because there are so many ways in which it does provide positive results for society and it does allow us to live longer and healthier and more fulfilling lives.
2	Male: You can't blame the plastic bag; it's the – what does that famous rapper(?) say?
3	Yes, it's not the plastic bag, it's the person who threw it away.
4	So, we're now at the point of single use, throwaway is now associated with plastic, whereas we wouldn't (inaudible 0:04:30) have people? there are – we're at the point where we're vilifying it because it's poorly managed.
5	It's unnecessary problematic plastics that are proliferating in to society.
6	It's a generalisation, but the older you get, so generation x, y and z, huh, the older ones of us, we're the harder ones to bring round, purely because we've been indoctrinated into plastic is good, it's the new way. It's the generation.
7	This is why not all plastic is bad. Plastic is good.
8	Plastic is good. It's more about educating people what to do with it.
9	That's where plastic is-Male 2: But because there are all those different categories of plastic, and there is some plastic, I think it's the thinner type of- Propylene, why it's not recyclable and there's-
10	And that's even worse than pure plastic.
11	I mean plastic has been demonised and not all plastic is bad. Some are worse than others.
12	Equally, not all plastic is bad, but some are worse than others. Male 2: Did you say PVC, sorry, did you say?
13	The plastic acts- A good frame to bond all that, everything, together. Male 1: Yes, I mean-
14	So that's why plastic has a lot of benefits, so people use them more and more. I think I remember figures, water

	produced worldwide each minute, 1 million, I think a couple of years ago.
15	And that's partly because the problems associated with plastic are outsourced to society, not held within the businesses that develop or they create products and outsource to everybody. So, they've socialised the costs.
16	The responsibility of plastic.
17	Plastic is just part of that one simple- of that, that's facilitated or enabled that to happen.
18	So, plastic does have benefits through the supply chain. So, when it's transported to us before it's used, it is very lightweight.
19	I think what plastic enables a society is to move from canned food to more frozen food.
20	There's nothing inherently wrong with plastics, it's what you do with them when you just use them, that's the problem. That, for me, is the ___[0:11:51].
21	Plastics have a role and use within society, but there are places where it's about how we can more effectively recycle them and remanufacture and reuse them in other products.

Some of these instances represent plastic as being evaluated in moral terms – as good or bad; some represent it as though others have evaluated it in terms of human morality – "I mean plastic has been demonised and not all plastic is bad". It is notable that more than half of these examples are supportive of the use of plastic, emphasising that the material is not an active agent in the environmental harms often credited to it. The raises questions as to what the participants may consider the causal factors to be, and consequently what might be effective and acceptable solutions. Interestingly, many potentially active agents are not defined as social actors in our data.

Absent social actors

Our analysis found important absences in social actors from the texts. No contributor referred to any of the following:

- government
- citizens
- voters
- electorate
- scientist
- academic
- manufacturer

These political, research and manufacturer categories were entirely absent from our data on this question, suggesting, perhaps, that the discourse is not one in which plastics are seen as a political, research issue. Indeed, representations of these social actors was absent from our entire set of transcripts for all questions. This is more surprising since we found a range of activities and processes in our data which might be considered to belong to the realms of political economy, research and innovation, or the manufacturing industries but still, the social actors involved in those processes were excluded. For example:

- political economy: *"It's globalisation"* - the processes of globalisation is represented without reference to the political or economic actors which enact it

- research and innovation: *"a lot of the innovation has happened in the developed world"* - those who carry out research and development for innovation in plastics are excluded here

- manufacturing: *"At the moment it's easy to manufacture the different types of plastics*." - although the manufacturing process is included, manufacturers are not.

What this indicates is that, in our data at least, there is an important selectivity in who is represented in discussion of plastics.

Discussion

In this section we consider the answers to our two research questions (who are the social actors and are they represented as active or passive actors) together.

Although the question posed to the workshop was framed in terms of why we as a society (i.e., collectively) use plastics (not, why do "you" use plastics), the ensuing discussion was strongly influenced by the identify of participants. The inclusion of business and consumers amongst the social actors is not surprising, given the composition of the group (including consumer facing businesses). This is consistent with the nascent plastics imaginary that already exists at the EU and UK scales of governance (e.g., Lazarevic and Valve (2017; WRAP; 2019). The prominence of the food industry (broadly defined) amongst the partners reflects composition of industry in the region, and steered discussion towards packaging examples although we had no-predisposition towards that product.

Despite the focus on issues relevant to participants, society also emerged as a significant social actor, but more as a repository of collective problems, than as a source of solutions. Interestingly, plastics themselves emerge as more heroic actor – with the ability to solve society's problems. This writes out of the story the scientists and industrialists who developed new forms of plastics, not to mention the advertisers who promoted them, and the consumers who rather swiftly and comprehensively adapted their behaviour in keeping with, and simultaneously constructing, the narrative that plastics are virtuous.

Regarding plastics as a social actor suggests it has agency outside that of human control, meaning that arguments for political control are immediately undermined. The lack of specificity around the many different types and uses of plastics suggests that it is easier to

discuss plastics in this generic way but also that it exists in its own right, with other properties usually limited to human actors such as a moral sense. This framework underlines how much plastics are perceived as a part of everyday life, to such an extent that they are accepted and resistant to change, a comparison might be made to the weather or another force of nature. Our stakeholders were drawn from industries which might be expected to effect change in societal use of plastics, such as food packaging companies or supermarkets, but they clearly found it challenging to conceive of ways in which plastic might not exist.

A key relationship to emerge from the discussion is that between the social actors of business and consumer. In this discussion, again reflecting the fact that although everyone in the room was a consumer, we were all present in our professional capacities (which for a significant proportion was business). The consumer is portrayed in the text as the more passive actor e.g., choosing from what is available, primarily sensitive to price. This is seen as a constraint to business; it is portrayed as the consumers fault somehow that businesses cannot do more. However, the problem perhaps is not so much the fickleness of consumers as the need to compete with other businesses. A notable absence was the mention of government or policy-makers, who, after all, could remove the element of competition by regulating for more packaging that is easier to recover (or whatever approach to circularity might be adopted).

Notably, the discussion lacked a nuanced view of the social actor categories. In particular, there is a very one-dimensional view of people as consumers, i.e., not citizens, or victims of pollution – or for that matter as voters, or campaigners. Indeed, even consumers are highly variable in their tastes, budgets and behaviours. The emphasis was therefore on market relationships – consumers are customers, or potential customers. The implication is strong that the plastics imaginary is financially defined as least as much as it is environmentally (though perhaps this is a sign that the discussion was conscious of solutions more than driven to the nature of the problem). Thus imaginable (i.e., acceptable) solutions to the plastics problem are likely to be pre-defined by affordability to business.

Conclusions

In this paper we have argued that understanding who is considered to have agency is an important part of finding a consensus and policy solutions, particularly within a CE framework.

It is striking how social actors with market relationships (primarily business and the consumers) are foregrounded in the discussion, with government actors and policy tools such as regulation almost totally absent. Plastics are conceptualized as intrinsically part of the market economy, suggesting that solutions will need to fit this picture too. Government, citizens, environmental groups etc have a very limited role, it seems, in bringing about changes. Therefore, there is wider work to be done in cultural terms to extend understanding of the CE concept, and move away from a very market-based story.

Given the way in which plastics have become materials of choice in society, and are seen as problem solvers even whilst new problems are recognised, there is an implication that change can be dramatic if it is suiting the purposes of enough stakeholders and maybe also suiting a very visible common purpose. Keeping food fresh, one example of the benefits of plastic mentioned, is difficult to argue against as a goal. But a focus on that goal suppresses alternative solutions such as increasing the accessibility (significantly including in terms of cost) of locally grown produce, or homemade (as opposed to processed) food. A more radical option, not arising from this discussion, would be to increase the ability of consumers to afford these more expensive non-plastic solutions.

This research is of course a product of the time and place in which it took place and reflects the interests of those partners who participated. Similar comparative research in the future with the same group or in other non-UK locations might provide interesting comparisons around the problematisation of the issues discussed. Yet notwithstanding the limited sample size, the research sheds interesting light on this issue. In microcosm, the research speaks volumes for the influences, or influencers, on the policy process. If you are not at least in the figurative room, you are not contributing to the collective imaginary.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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