SPEAKER_00:
Hello and welcome back to the Food Fight podcast from EIT Food, a show dedicated to exploring the greatest challenges in our food system and the innovators committed to solving them. I'm your host Matt Eastland and today's episode comes to you live from Next Bite 2025 in Brussels. Next bite is EIT Food's flagship annual event where researchers, innovators, entrepreneurs and policymakers from across Europe come together to reimagine the future of food. At the heart of this year's gathering is a question many of us have been grappling with. How do we shape public trust, innovation and progress in an increasingly divided world? To help us navigate this, I'm joined, very, very delighted to be joined by our keynote speaker, Jack Bobo, CEO of Futurity, former U.S. State Department advisor, behavioral science expert, and a globally recognized thought leader in food policy and strategic communication. Jack's keynote titled, In the Age of Outrage, The Best Story Wins, explores why the future of food depends not just on what we invent, but how we talk about it, and how storytelling in particular can help us bridge divides, reduce backlash, and invite more people into the conversation. Jack, welcome to the Food Fight Podcast. What a pleasure to have you here. Oh, so delighted to be here. Thanks very much. And also, welcome to Next Byte. So how are you finding the event so far?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, it's been great. I did arrive this morning, so I am a little bit tired. But it's been great one running across people that I know, but I didn't know would be here. So that's always exciting. But also, I've met a few people that had reached out before I got here. And we've had some really great conversations.

SPEAKER_00:
Let's talk about your background, Jack. So you've worked across law, diplomacy, food systems and strategic foresight, all in spaces where public perception really matters. So can I ask you just what sort of first drew you into this work? What made you so interested about this?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, I spent 13 years with the US Department of State doing global food policy. And one of the things that I recognized early on was that science, at the beginning of a conversation, often polarized the audience. Those who agreed with you agreed with you more, but those who disagreed became more entrenched in their disagreement. And so I ended up going back to my psychology undergraduate roots and started reading about cognitive psychology and behavioral economics and marketing and advertising, trying to understand how do people come to believe what they believe and know what they know, and when do people actually change their minds?

SPEAKER_00:
Okay. And the title of your keynote is The Age of Outrage, The Best Story Wins. Bold statement. So what kind of sparked the framing of all of that for you?

SPEAKER_01:
Yeah, so I read a really interesting book probably six months ago. It's called The Age of Outrage and it's by Kartik Ramana, who's an Oxford professor. And it identifies three drivers of outrage, which really resonated with me, and I'm sure they will resonate with you in the audience. The first is when we feel our future is threatened. The second is when we feel the system is rigged against us. And the third is when our identity is attacked. Well, in food, we do those things every single day. You know, the plant-based food companies talk about ending animal agriculture, so they threaten their future. Then they work with government to create regulatory barriers for plant-based products, and now the plant-based people feel the system is rigged against them, and then they're both attacking each other's identity. And what we miss in all of this is that it's that vicious cycle that we're contributing, but we only recognize when it comes back to us. And because of that, instead of having a virtuous circle where if we communicated differently, people would respond differently, we end up doing it in a way that just makes everything worse.

SPEAKER_00:
And do you find that the food space is particularly polarizing then? Is it the most polarizing you've come across?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, you know, I think it's pretty bad because, you know, food is, you know, at the core of many of our identities. And so when somebody attacks the food we eat, it's like they're attacking our family, they're attacking our culture, they're attacking our identity. And so we hold those things incredibly close.

SPEAKER_00:
And just talking about your keynote, so you said that the outrage travels faster than the understanding. So why do you think our food conversations have become so polarised? Is it that cultural element you're talking about or is there a history behind this that we need to unpick?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, I think there's definitely a lot of history. And a lot of this goes well beyond food and agriculture. So since the 1980s, there has been a decline in sort of confidence in authority. We're less likely to listen to the doctor, less likely to listen to the government.

And some of that's good. We're challenging authority. But it also reaches a point where you don't necessarily know who to trust. And so then you end up trusting people that say the thing you already think. And you're not asking tough questions of them like you were asking of the government, show me the science, show me the data. It's just that they're saying what you believe. And so there's a confirmation bias that exists. And that's all been amplified in the last five or 10 years by the algorithms. If I click on something, well, then the algorithm just gives me more like that. And so we don't even realize that we have become more polarized. because over time we're still, we would probably say I am exactly in the middle of all the stuff that I see, but the middle has moved. And so we don't realize that. And so we have become more liberal or we become more conservative or we have become, you know, more polarized in our ability to find people that just agree with us. And so There are a lot of things going on at the same time that are separate from food and agriculture, but are playing out through food and agriculture.

SPEAKER_00:
It's fascinating. It's basically because we're constantly seeing that confirmation bias, seeing the opinions that we already have being reflected back to us. We don't see the polarization as a result.

SPEAKER_01:
Yeah, and so a lot of my interest is helping people to see their own biases. So I'll give you an example of my own. So again, confirmation bias, the idea that we seek out information that's consistent with our beliefs, and we discount information that's inconsistent. So we're all really good at seeing bias. in other people who are terrible at seeing in ourselves. So if I were to read an article that said organic food is more nutritious than conventional, well, that's inconsistent with what I believe. And so I would ask the question, who are the authors who funded the research and what was their methodology? That's pretty reasonable things to do, right? But what if the article said organic, no more nutritious than conventional? What would I do? I'd tweet it or X it. I don't actually know what we do anymore. But the point is we ask tough questions of the things we disagree with and we don't ask those tough questions of the things that we agree with. And so we're the ones that bias. So like even if you found something in the research methodology of that other organization, it might suggest that they're biased, but it definitely shows that you're biased because you even looked. And we don't see that piece of it.

SPEAKER_00:
And then where does outrage come into it then? So, I mean, okay, I get it. You see something you disagree with, you might question it, you might challenge it harder than something you agree with, but outrage is quite a strong thing. So, where does that feature, what's making us so outraged?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, so again, the example I gave, you know, if you're a plant based food company, if you're vegan, if you're vegetarian, and you're talking about ending animal agriculture, well, I mean, that's an existential threat to many people's livelihoods. But it also it's a moral judgment about every person who likes me. that you're a bad person. And so that kind of makes us mad that somebody is saying that. But if you're in the livestock sector, it makes you worried. And so it makes you want to take action. There's a fear element which is built into this. There is. And a lot of these are just false narratives. So if you think about things like alternative dairy, plant-based dairy. Well, a lot of those companies would say the reason that milk consumption has declined so much in the United States is because of what we're doing. And they take credit for that. But if you look at USDA data, the number one driver of reduced dairy consumption or milk consumption in America is bottled water. And that's because we live our lives differently today than we did in 1980. We drink our hydration on the go, and we don't take a glass of milk with us. And so because of that, but the dairy industry is not going after big water, because big water doesn't care about dairy. But that narrative that alternatives are driving the reduction is being responded to. And so they say, well, we shouldn't be able to use dairy terms. And guess what? Dairy consumption in America is at an all-time high because we're eating more cheese. So not only is it a wrong narrative, but it's not even achieved. The reality is that we're just eating more anyway. And so those narratives lead to resistance and backlash and all sorts of things that make everything harder, even when they're not true.

SPEAKER_00:
And you talk about narratives, and I know that you're big into storytelling. So you make the case in your keynote that storytelling might be our most underused tool for progress in food systems. Can you break that down for us? Why is storytelling so powerful?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, the stories we tell determine the future that we get. And today, the story we're telling is one about doom and gloom, and that things are bad, and they're going to get worse. And that story does not motivate people to action. It leads to apathy. And so the stories we're telling today are actually making it harder for us to mobilize society to make things better. And it's also, in many ways, just wrong. Because if you were to look at the history of food production, well, we produce vastly more food today than we did in 1960 on almost exactly the same amount of land. Childhood mortality, the lowest point in all of human history by a long shot. And 10% of all the people on the planet are going to go to bed hungry today. But 60 years ago, that would've been 30% of all the people on the planet. So instead of saying things are bad and getting worse, they're good and getting better, but not fast enough. And that is a

very different narrative. It invites us to work with farmers and food companies and others to do better faster. Well, everybody will jump on board with that conversation, with that narrative. And so that's also, that historical context is what's missing from a lot of these conversations. So I'll give you another example. CO2 emissions in the UK, five and a half tons per person. Your listeners may not know, but it's a terrible number. It's higher than the global average. It's also 150 year low. So a number that can cause despair when placed into historical context can be inspiring. CO2 emissions in the UK, 40% below 1990, GDP 40% higher. We can have a better future and a more sustainable future at the same time. Instead of asking people to sacrifice for the future, the goal is to invite them to embrace it.

SPEAKER_00:
OK, but I mean, we're talking about trying to use facts to people to kind of convince them that this is the right narrative. Why is it, though, that facts aren't enough?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, I mean, facts have never been enough. We pick and choose the facts that we're going to believe to support the stories we tell ourselves. And that's why we need to package those facts in a way that people get. So the current approach of most food companies, when they talk about the challenges we have, they talk about problems and solutions. We're hearing a lot about that. If you walk around the booths today, people will be talking about problems and solutions. I was at New York Climate Week, all about problems and solutions. People believe the problems, but if they don't trust you, they don't believe the solution. So you end up leaving people mildly concerned. And that's where historical context comes in. It's proof that change is possible. And so a different narrative would be to talk about the problems we can agree on. That could be climate change, food security, food safety. And we also need to talk about the future that we want. And if I talk to the public about the problems we face and the future they want, my guess is their next question would be, how do we get there? Well, let me talk to you about alternative proteins, gene editing, all sorts of technology. It's a narrative that brings them into a conversation around solutions instead of thrusting those solutions on them. So it's reframing it. It's reframing it into, it's changing their mindset. So the reframing changes the mindset of the person. And so I'll give you another example. Last year I was working with an academic at the University of Nottingham and he works on regenerative soils. And he said, look, I was giving a talk to regenerative farmers and it did not go well. God, I did. And he was pretty shocked because these are the people he's really out there trying to help. And when I asked him, well, how did you talk about it? He said, well, I was talking about moving from these intensive farming systems to a regenerative system. So I said, oh, so you were telling them to stop being bad farmers, and you, an academic, were going to tell them how to be a good farmer. We can imagine the body language, the crossed arms,

lean back in chair, end of conversation. But instead, if you had said farming in the UK is becoming more regenerative, here are some ways of accelerating the transition. Well, now the body language is they lean in, like, tell me more. That reframing either invites people, puts them in a mindset of solutions, or shuts it down.

SPEAKER_00:
It sounds really, really tricky, to be honest. And it sounds like something which is very hard. Is it hard to teach this to people? And are people receptive to it?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, I think most people think that it's obvious and they don't know why they weren't doing it before. So they're just like, oh my gosh, I can't believe I was offending the very people that I was trying to help. And so sometimes it's just inadvertent. sometimes people think they're achieving one goal the way they talk about it and they realize that maybe they're doing something different. So I'll give you another example. So I was doing some work with a international organization that often talks about our food system being unfair, right? And there are a lot of things that are unfair about our food system. There are hungry people, there are bad labor practices, there are animal welfare issues. But when an advocacy group or an activist group says it's unfair, Well, food companies and farmers expect the next thing they're going to say is, and it's your fault. Right? Unfair creates a barrier between those who are in the food system and those advocacy groups. And so our recommendation instead is if you said, our food system has done some amazing things, but it's left too many people behind. Well, now the audience is thinking, wow, that's unfair. Like you've literally put the idea of unfairness into their heads. They're already thinking about solutions and they want to talk to you about them. You put them in a solution mindset versus a defensive mindset. And we would often blame the other, right? If you said that it's unfair, we should try to solve this, and the companies don't want to do it, you'd be like, they just don't want to work on fixing the food system, instead of recognizing that maybe how you had framed that issue put them in the mindset of not wanting to solve the problem.

SPEAKER_00:
So then what role do the likes of companies, researchers, scientists, what role do they then play in reducing the temperature of the debate? you know, how can they influence this then?

SPEAKER_01:
It works both ways. The rhetoric that one side is using or the other side is using all matter. And recognizing that these organizations are contributing to a better food system. And so we saw some of this in the Eat Lancet report and the livestock sector pushing back on it. Well, the original Eat Lancet report, the livestock producers

felt it threatened their future and they responded. And instead of saying that, so the launch of the 2.0 was last weekend. And so instead of it being the same defensive posturing at the launch of the report, there was a lot of conversation about this is what we learned from our critics. So there was an acknowledgement that even though they may have felt that some of that was unfair, that the new report is better because of that. And that's the kind of shift in conversation that opens dialogue instead of shutting it down.

SPEAKER_00:
Okay. But I mean, I use Eat Lancet as an example. I remember when the first report came out, and I remember some of the controversies around it, for example. As a result, It got into loads of media. Lots of people were talking about it. Some people were outraged. Some people were really on the side. And I totally get that. It was very divisive. But at the same time, it absolutely elevated that argument to a really high level. So is there something in that about the fact that when something needs to be aired and needs to be seen, that actually having a bit of outrage is not a bad thing?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, I would say that the Eat Foundation and the Eat Lancet sort of team felt that it was counterproductive.

SPEAKER_00:
Right.

SPEAKER_01:
You know, because so much of the media coverage was about the controversy, and they wouldn't have found that to be helpful. So they themselves, I would say, you know, weren't happy with it. And I think in retrospect, wish that they had communicated it differently. And that that's part of the reason that we, I work specifically with the foundation on the language to think about how to frame the launch differently.

SPEAKER_00:
Okay. I see. That's interesting. Because I always wondered about it. I wondered whether or not it was sort of designed almost that way, because it did get like real great coverage, but maybe not in the way that they'd intended. And then, you know, for people here, you know, all the startups, people developing products at NextByte, can you give them some advice on what are some of the pitfalls that they need to avoid, let's say, when launching their new products and services, you know, when you're talking about communication specifically?

SPEAKER_01:

My advice is probably a little different than what they would expect. The first is, I don't think they need to worry about some of the things they're worried about. So some companies might be worried about using gene editing or biotechnology or other things because they would say, oh, the public doesn't want that, so we shouldn't use it. And I don't think that's true. I think when we have controversy around science, it's almost never about the science. And so I'll give you an example that you're probably, well, the listeners are probably, many are familiar with the impossible burger, which uses a genetically engineered heme to give it its bloody taste and sensory aspects. But imagine for a moment that Monsanto created the impossible burger. I think we know that every newspaper in the world would have said, it's a terrible idea and the public doesn't want a GMO burger. But that's actually obviously not true. Of course they do. But Monsanto would have responded to that pushback and said, well, let me explain the science and let me explain the regulatory path. In other words, they would end up in a conversation around science when it actually had nothing to do with science and the public couldn't articulate what it really had to do with because it doesn't exactly know. And so that's part of the problem is that most people in the public don't actually care when small companies that are trying to save the planet use technology because it's not about the technology. And so understanding that means that one, they can just use more tools than they thought they could. But the other is to understand that how they choose to frame themselves today constrains who they are in the future. And so companies that say, we're clean label, non-GMO, we're doing things in a certain way, well, you can't change that in the future. But if you just say we're a company that's trying to reduce carbon footprints and save the planet, and we use technology in some instances and other things.

SPEAKER_00:
Give yourself more space to grow and freedom.

SPEAKER_01:
Right, because they're not going to care either way. But you can't shift who you are. And so an example of that is nobody cared that the Impossible Burger was a GMO ultra-processed product when it was $25, $30 a burger in high-end restaurants. They only began to care when it went into 18,000 Burger Kings and poor people could afford it because their relationship to the product changed. And so the people who loved it before were kind of those innovators, early adopters. But if you look at the marketing of Impossible Foods today, it's all about indulgence. They have the indulgent burger. They're not even marketing to innovators and early adopters anymore. They're marketing to the 85% early majority in the rest of the world. And so they've kind of given up on those people, whereas Beyond Meat is actually still marketing to that innovator early adopter. And so they've actually completely segmented their markets. They don't even market to the same consumer anymore. And so again, understanding what's really going on at a more granular level,

because from the outside, you know, you could say, well, Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat are two plant-based food companies, and I can learn from both. you need to know who your customer is. And so it's very hard for impossible or for beyond to ever market to that early majority on indulgence because they're marketing their product as clean label, they're marketing it as green packaging, none of which appeals to that broader audience. The reality is that most people eat hamburgers for indulgence. They're not trying to eat a healthier burger. And so there's a challenge with that positioning is that people that want healthy products probably aren't eating hamburgers and it will never be clean enough to not be ultra processed. Yeah, I see. So that's a challenge. It's a shrinking market, whereas the other markets quite large.

SPEAKER_00:
Does that mean then on the flip side that the big corporates of the world then have a massive challenge? Because if you're saying to me that actually startups have, if they do it right, they have a lot more kind of freedom in the way that they communicate or to your point, they don't need to worry so much about what they worry about. Does that mean that corporates really do need to worry about what they're worrying about and the multinationals?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, they're already worrying about it. They're just worrying about it for the wrong reasons, right? If you ask big food companies, you know, people say big food can't innovate. But if you ask them why they say it, because you know, they're, they're large, they're slow, they're indecisive and risk averse. but they're not even mentioning the fact, you know what? People who try new stuff don't buy big food companies products. So people are innovators and early adopters are never buying Quaker Oats, they're never buying PepsiCo, they're never buying. And so the people who love those products don't try new stuff. And so what those big food companies really should be doing is they should stop trying to create new product categories and they should just come in and dominate categories. Because, you know, once Oatly comes into a market, they spend a year or two creating interest and buzz. And then all of a sudden Quaker Oat comes out with Quaker Oat beverage. Well, 85% of Americans are fine with it. And they're familiar with it. Right. And so, but instead what they did is they came out with a product at the same time as Oatly. They tried to go head to head and they were never going to win. They just couldn't win. And so as if they just bided their time and spent $0 on marketing, they could have owned the market. And so, you know, and that's part of the challenge that even a company like Oatly has today is that it's edgy marketing is very much focused on innovators and early adopters, but 100% of the growth is among the early majority. And that's where other companies like Chobani and others are finding inroads, because their products are already in those people's homes.

SPEAKER_00:
Amazing. I've never quite seen it like that, so that's really interesting. You've opened my eyes. Just kind of thinking about the future then, you suggest that I'm going to quote this, if we get the story right, agriculture won't just feed the world, it might just save it. What do you mean by that? And what does that future therefore look like to you?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, so I think most of us have the same vision for what the future of food is. So 2050, we want a sustainable, nutritious and equitable food future. And the question really is, how do we get there? But sort of before I answer your question, I think what's really important is that we recognize that most people stop thinking about the future in 2050. But if we look beyond 2050, population growth slows dramatically because we're not having more kids. We have already reached peak child. The number of children born next year will be less than this year and less the year after that year after that forever. And so 100% of population growth is because of people living longer, which is about better health and nutrition, but they will not live forever. At least Elon Musk has something to do with it. And so the point is that every day between now and 2050, it gets harder to feed the world. But every day after 2050, it will get easier to feed the world if we haven't screwed things up. In other words, if we haven't cut down our forest and drained our rivers, lakes, and aquifers by 2050, we will never need to because every year it's getting easier, not harder. And so all the productivity gains after 2050 just go to reducing the footprint of agriculture. So that doesn't mean we're guaranteed to solve it. It just means that the only window that matters is the next 25 years. So one of the thoughts I would like to leave the listeners with is that the next 25 years, they're not just the most important 25 years in the 10,000 year history of agriculture, and they are. They're the most important 25 years there will ever be in the history of agriculture. And that's why we have to get it right. And that's why conversations like this are so important and why the innovation at an event like this isn't so important. But what we can't forget is that science tells us what we can't do, but the public tells us what we should do. And we won't be allowed to use those innovations if we don't bring the public along and have them demanding it and demanding regulations that are fit for purpose and demanding that investments from government are there. But if we do those things and the public is demanding it, well, we already know we can do big things. So I have no doubt that we could do it. The only question is, will we do it?

SPEAKER_00:
I've never actually heard anybody, and I've interviewed a lot of people, never think about that kind of 2050 target. I'm not going to say in a positive way, because obviously, like you say, I mean, it's shocking that the next 25 years are that important. But I've never heard anyone think about it beyond that. And actually, if you get it

right, you're winning, effectively. Yeah.

SPEAKER_01:
This moment is so important because for 10,000 years, farmers were asked to do one thing, produce more food. We live at that one unique moment in all of human history where going forward, they're going to be asked to produce better food. Food that's better for people and the planet. And that's why this transition's hard. And it just happens that that transition is coming at this critical climate point. The two things are happening at the same time, and that makes it that much more difficult.

SPEAKER_00:
And can I ask, as we're coming to the end, Jack, what's next for you and your work at Futurity? What are you really focusing on?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, futurity is sort of the consulting arm I have. I mean, my day job is as executive director of the Rothman Family Institute for Food Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. And in my day job, my top priority is an initiative we call Nudge the Planet, which is all about the science and psychology of science communication. How do we communicate in ways that bring people together to solve problems and reduce polarization in society? And how do we work with organizations to share those skills?

SPEAKER_00:
Amazing. And if somebody listening really wants to understand more about what you're doing, but also take action or change something, what would you advise them to do?

SPEAKER_01:
Well, for me, it's very much about, you know, we need to stop asking people to sacrifice for the planet, and we need to invite them to embrace it. We need to look at this as a positive opportunity to work with farmers, to work with food companies, to work with each other in order to make big things happen. And today we're not doing that. But tomorrow we could be doing that.

SPEAKER_00:
And if somebody listening wants to tell a better story, what would you say to where do you start to tell a better story?

SPEAKER_01:
Historical context every single time. Yes, you can talk about the problems. Yes, you can talk about your solutions. But if people do not believe that change is possible, they will not believe your

solution.

SPEAKER_00:
All right. Jack, you've blown my mind. Really, this has been totally, yeah, just so interesting. And I'd love to talk to you for hours and hours and hours about all this. Maybe we can do. But so for those listening, where can they go to find more about who you are and what you do?

SPEAKER_01:
LinkedIn is a great place. You can find the Rothman Family Institute at UCLA. You can connect with us there. and you can reach out to me directly if there's something I can do to help.

SPEAKER_00:
Well, okay, there's an ask. Okay, thank you very much, Jack. And yes, can't wait to wait to hear more about when you talk. So everybody, that's all for today's episode of the Food Fight. If you'd like to find out more, head over to the EIT Food website at eitfood.eu, or follow the hashtag EIT Food Fight on LinkedIn, or connect with us on our channel at EIT Food. And of course, if you haven't already, please hit the follow button on the podcast and we'll see you in the next episode. Thanks, everybody.