

Perceptions of the U.S. Food System:

What and How Americans Think about their Food



W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
75 YEARS OF PHILANTHROPY



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Introduction

The following pages contain four reports* that FrameWorks Institute prepared for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. These reports explore how people think about food and our food system and continue the process of informing our communication work.

This research is the first phase of a larger strategic frame analysis of the food system, initiated at our 2005 Food and Society Conference. Strategic frame analysis is a communications research process that helps us understand how the public thinks about an issue and then tests ways that we might prompt different ways of thinking. While framing research uses traditional research methods, like in-depth interviews, focus groups, and telephone surveys, that is where the similarity ends. This method, combining theory and practice from the cognitive and social sciences, allows advocates to “preflight” their arguments by providing empirical evidence of the effects of various messages on public understanding and support. The result is not a bumper sticker, or a new “spin,” but rather a more profound understanding of why the public thinks the way it does and what it would require to engage them in a broader view of the food system, one more in keeping with experts’ views.

These initial reports are intended to help the Food and Society community begin to identify some of the barriers we now all face in our communications, starting with understanding how people reason about food system issues. From this understanding we will move to the next level of research which is testing ways to shift understanding.

Please share these reports with your colleagues, but keep in mind that they represent an unfinished picture and should not be thought to hold the answers to framing the food system. Strategic frame analysis is an iterative process; final recommendations evolve over time across a body of research. The recommendations in these reports are preliminary, and will be tested in three more phases of research. The next phase includes multiple focus groups. A parallel project will look at simple metaphors that can make the food system less abstract and more concrete. Finally, these two aspects of message development will be further tested in a large national survey. From every round of testing will emerge findings that will figure in the final recommendations. Please note that these reports are thought pieces leading to a larger set of suggestions. At the very least, concrete evidence of what is not working found in this report can help winnow out unproductive elements in our current messaging.

That said, we will not have the complete picture of how we might influence ways of thinking about food until the quantitative and qualitative research is finished in 2006. At that point, we will have much clearer ideas for message creation to share with you. We’ll be conducting training sessions around strategic framing and its applications for your own message development. These reports mark the beginning of our understanding about how people think about food, not the end. The real creative work will need to be done by advocates who can take the outline of the message that emerges from this research and apply it to specific issues and opportunities.

* Standard rules governing citation and intellectual property usage apply.

We hope these reports stimulate ideas and discussion. There is a framing listserv to foster dialogue about these reports and the subsequent phases of framing research. If you are not yet subscribed and would like to join, visit: <http://ola.wkkf.org/FAS/instructions.htm>.

A helpful refresher course on strategic frame analysis is available on the FrameWorks Institute web site: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue8framing.shtml>. A more comprehensive introduction to framing is posted in the form of the “Framing Public Issues Toolkit,” at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/stragicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf>.

About the Reports

Cognitive Elicitations

Cultural Logic was charged to describe what the population at-large thinks of food and food systems. The characterizations included in the cognitive elicitation are intended to reveal how these issues are understood by the general public.

“Not While I’m Eating: how and why Americans don’t think about food systems,”
Cultural Logic, June 2005.

The purpose of this report is to help us understand why and how Americans remain blind to the real processes of food production and distribution—despite the central role of food in American life. Cultural Logic identified several key patterns of reasoning that make it hard for Americans to think about where their food comes from. These include the dominance of “little-picture” understandings of food, emotional associations that discourage critical thinking about the sources of food, and understandings of food systems in terms of generic ideas about modernization.

“All Trees and No Forest: How advocacy paradigms obscure public understanding of the food system,” Cultural Logic, July 2005.

This report is based on interviews with food advocates to discern how they think about the food system. Cultural Logic’s assessment is that while it would be very helpful if members of the public had a conceptual picture of the food supply system as a whole – including its environmental, economic and ethical dimensions – advocates’ communications are not likely to help them acquire one. Advocates tend to focus on self-contained “paradigms” that can obscure the larger picture, and may not even relate closely to food. Cultural Logic concludes that without a conceptual grasp of food systems, members of the public are likely to misinterpret or ignore many communications from advocates.

Opinion Research

Public Knowledge reviewed existing public opinion data to determine what is already known about public opinion in relevant issue areas before exploring new avenues for communications. To do this, Public Knowledge synthesized more than 250 documents into a strategic overview.

“Digesting Public Opinion: A meta-analysis of attitudes toward food, health, and farms,”
Public Knowledge, July 2005.

This is a review and analysis of relevant, publicly available opinion research conducted in the United States within the past five years. The review is organized into three sections: perceptions of the relationship between food and health; understandings of food processing and quality issues; and views of farm-specific topics.

Media Content Analysis

As the summaries above suggest, most Americans do not think much or at all about their food being part of, or coming from, a system. Often, people get their information from the news media. To identify how food systems are presented to the public by the news media, Cultural Logic reviewed more than a hundred newspaper articles printed between January 1, 2004 and the present. Articles were selected based on keyword searches that focused on aspects of the food system other than eating. This analysis asked the questions: in what ways would consumers of these articles come away better educated about the food system, and in what ways might the coverage actually reinforce some of their erroneous understandings?

“Harmful and Productive Patterns in Newspaper Representations of Food Systems,”
Cultural Logic, August 2005.

This is a content analysis of coverage of the food system in a range of national newspapers. Emerging from this analysis were several findings, including: many news stories play on traditional images of farming and rural America that work against advocates’ goals, and news stories often reinforce scary or dehumanized aspects of the food system that we associate with an inevitable modernization.

We encourage you to read these reports and to let each other (and us) know what you think. It will help to keep the entire process moving forward. Please use the framing list serve for this discussion. Thank you.

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Digesting Public Opinion:

A Meta-Analysis of Attitudes Toward Food, Health and Farms

By Meg Bostrom, *Public Knowledge*

Introduction

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation developed the Food and Society Initiative to “support the creation and expansion of community-based food systems that are locally owned and controlled, environmentally sound and health-promoting.” To build public support for this effort, the Kellogg Foundation asked the FrameWorks Institute to analyze existing public perceptions and develop a communications frame that will engage the public in a dialogue about relevant policy options, such as support for small locally-owned farms, support for locally-grown organic food, and information leading to wise consumer choices, among other options.

The objective for this phase of research is to review existing public opinion data to determine what is already known about public opinion in relevant issue areas before exploring new avenues for communications. To that end, this researcher synthesized more than 250 documents into the following strategic overview. The overview is organized into three primary sections: Food and Health, which discusses public perceptions of health and the role that food plays in human health; Food Processing, which reviews public understanding of the dangers, benefits, and innovations in processing that affect food quality; and Farming, which discusses public perceptions of a range of farm-specific issues.

Americans are generally satisfied with various actors in the nation’s food system. The positive consequence of strong satisfaction with grocers, farmers, and so on, is that the public trusts these actors and is likely to listen to their views. However, the high level of public satisfaction also means that there is no groundswell of public support for government intervention in the nation’s food system. In fact, this research indicates that the public finds it difficult to think systemically about food.

The connection between food and health promotion or disease prevention is a consistent theme in the news media. This frame has some benefits since Americans are concerned about physical health and have come to understand the components of a nutritious diet. In fact, a majority of people reports that they are consuming at least one specific food for functional health benefits.

In recent years, health-related news coverage of food has increasingly emphasized obesity. In many ways, the obesity conversation is not about a healthy diet, because people are willing to engage in unhealthy eating patterns to lose weight. More importantly, a public conversation about obesity is not conducive to building support for public policies. While people understand that obesity is a serious health problem, they also view it as a matter of individual consumer choice. An individual is responsible for his or her diet, not the food system. The main policy result of communications about obesity is public support to provide more information for individuals to make wiser choices, not an improved food system.

A second approach, and one that begins to move the public toward a systemic conversation, is to connect human health with the qualities of food that are influenced by food production

and processing. Surveys indicate that the public is aware of some dangers in food production, such as mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) and pesticides, but people have little understanding of other dangers, such as antibiotic use, hormones, and genetic modification. Opinion on all these topics is largely unformed and malleable. Few view any of these as serious concerns and even fewer are taking any action to address these threats.

At the same time, majorities hold positive views of food processing that avoids dangers in food production and promotes healthy products. The public believes that organic products and locally grown foods are healthier, supportive of small farmers and their communities, and more environmentally friendly. While positive perceptions are widespread, loyal, consistent use of organic and locally grown foods continues to be rare. There may be an opportunity to build support for public policies by linking food production (both the dangers and the benefits) with its impact on human health.

Finally, a third approach to a public conversation about the food system is to focus on farms, particularly smaller farms and farms that employ environmental practices. Americans value farms and are concerned that the number of farms in the United States is in decline. People believe small family farms produce safer, more nutritious food and are more likely to protect the environment. Therefore, while they support farm subsidies across the board, the public, when allowed to distinguish between small and large farms, strongly supports subsidies for small family farms and opposes them for large industrial farms. Importantly, most members of the public do not understand how farming practices can harm the environment. Therefore, farming is not currently an “environmental problem,” though farmers can be enlisted in environmental solutions.

The interpretation offered in this review is the author’s alone. Other analysts may provide a different interpretation of the data.

Method

A framing meta-analysis entails a review and interpretation of existing public opinion research. The analysis that follows is a synthesis of available data, not a catalog. The objective of this analysis is to illuminate patterns in public opinion that lead to strategic insights, not to list every question asked.

Approximately 250 documents comprising thousands of survey questions were reviewed in the course of this research, of which more than 40 research studies are specifically cited in this report. Frequently, separate research efforts ask similar questions and obtain similar results. Therefore, the author attempted to cite the most recent results available. Furthermore, the author attempted to include only research that was conducted by credible sources using sound research methods. In most instances, survey results are cited only when the entire survey was available for analysis. In a few instances, however, results were only available through a written analysis or news article. These instances are noted in the research references.

The research was constrained by the need to reference only publicly-available sources of information. Proprietary research, including research that can be obtained for a fee, is not included in this review, due to restrictions on disseminating such information. Any findings from proprietary research that are included in this report are available to the public through news articles, websites, and so on.

Finally, this is a review of opinions held by the general public in the United States. Surveys from other countries and surveys of elite audiences, such as food producers, elected officials, and so on, are not included in this analysis. Of course, these views are important, but they are outside the scope of this report.

Summary of Findings

Industry Perceptions

Americans have strongly positive perceptions of various actors in the food system. Supermarkets and packaged food companies rank first and third in doing a good job serving consumers, and the restaurant industry, grocery industry, and farming and agriculture rank in the top five industries in positive public perceptions. Unlike other major infrastructures in the country, such as energy and healthcare, there is no groundswell of public dissatisfaction calling for government intervention in the food system.

In rating several industries, the public gives supermarkets and packaged food companies exceptionally high ratings. In fact, supermarkets receive the highest rating of 21 industries reviewed. Fully 92 percent say that supermarkets “generally do a good job of serving their consumers” (an increase of five percentage points over the prior year’s ratings),² and 42 percent believe that supermarkets are generally honest and trustworthy – the highest rating among 15 industries. In addition, only 8% believe supermarkets should be more regulated by government, while 17 percent believe supermarkets should be less regulated.³

Packaged food companies are also rated highly, with 83 percent reporting that packaged food companies generally do a good job of serving their consumers (third highest of 21 industries and an increase of five percentage points over the prior year),⁴ and 23 percent saying that packaged food companies are generally honest and trustworthy (ranked sixth of 15 industries). Only 24 percent would like to see more government regulation of packaged food companies, and 8 percent would like less government regulation.⁵ (Table 1)

Table 1:

Do a Good Job of Serving Consumers¹	
In Percent	
Supermarkets	92
Computer hardware companies	84
Packaged food companies	83
Computer software companies	81
Airlines	80
Hospitals	79
Online search engines	79
Banks	78
Electric and gas utilities	75
Internet service providers	72
Life insurance companies	70
Online retailers	70
Telephone companies	70
Car manufacturers	66
Investment and brokerage firms	65
Cable companies	63
Pharmaceutical and drug companies	56
Managed care companies, such as HMOs	41
Health insurance companies	40
Tobacco companies	35
Oil companies	31

¹ Harris Interactive, The Harris Poll® 1,010 adults 18+ nationally, April 5-10, 2005.

² Harris Interactive, April 5-10, 2005.

³ Harris Interactive, The Harris Poll® 2,204 adults 18+ nationally, February 16-20, 2004.

⁴ Harris Interactive, April 5-10, 2005.

⁵ Harris Interactive, February 16-20, 2004.

In a 2004 review of industry attitudes conducted by the Gallup Organization, all actors in the food system placed in the top five of 25 industries tested. The restaurant industry received

Table 2:

Positive View⁶	
% “Very” or “Somewhat Positive”	
Computer industry	60
Restaurant industry	58
Retail industry	54
Grocery industry	52
Farming and agriculture	50
Travel industry	50
Real estate industry	47
Banking	46
Internet industry	45
Education	45
Automobile industry	44
Publishing industry	41
Sports industry	39
Telephone industry	38
Airline industry	38
Television and radio industry	37
Movie industry	37
Accounting	35
The federal government	34
Healthcare industry	33
Advertising and public relations industry	33
Electric and gas utilities	32
Pharmaceutical industry	31
The legal field	27
Oil and gas industry	21

positive ratings from the greatest number of survey respondents (58 percent positive), followed by the grocery industry (52 percent), and farming and agriculture (50 percent).⁷ (Table 2)

Food and Health

One of the most common associations with food is its connection to human health. In fact, the connection between food and disease prevention or health promotion is a consistent theme for the news media.

According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, which has conducted several years of analysis of food-related news coverage: “The most enduring aspect of coverage has been the attention to disease prevention or, more accurately, risk reduction or health promotion, as a goal of sound nutrition. In each *Food for Thought* study, disease prevention or risk reduction has placed among the top three topics.”⁸

Compared to other personal considerations, physical health is a moderate-to-strong concern. Many people think about physical health fairly often, are not as satisfied with their health as other areas of their life, and believe they can do better. This suggests that people pay attention to and are interested in improving health. At the same time, health also competes for attention with other daily concerns, particularly work and finances.

A significant percentage (44 percent) thinks “a great deal” about physical health, but only 35 percent are “very satisfied” with their health. On a scale of 1-10, survey respondents rate their health a moderately high 7.14 on average, but believe they can do better in the next five years (8.11 on a 1-10 scale). Most (54 percent) believe they are very likely to achieve this goal of improved health in five years. This pattern of response is similar to survey participants’ ratings on their career and financial situation. In each instance, it is an area about which many people think a great deal, are less satisfied than with other areas of life, and believe they can improve.

⁶ The Gallup Organization, 1,017 adults nationally, August 9-11, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

⁷ The Gallup Organization, August 9-11, 2004.

⁸ Center for Media and Public Affairs, *Food for Thought V*, sponsored by the International Food Information Council Foundation, written report by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, media content analysis of 40 local and national news outlets, May – July 2003.

In contrast, majorities are satisfied with their personal relationships (66 percent very satisfied, 8.28 average rating on a one to 10 scale), spiritual life (51 percent very satisfied, but only a 6.82 average rating on a one to 10 scale), and mental health (63 percent very satisfied, 8.37 average rating on a one to 10 scale). Fewer are satisfied with their leisure activities (37 percent very satisfied, 6.17 on a one to 10 scale), but it is also an area few spend a lot of time considering (27 percent a great deal). (Table 3)

Table 3:

Ratings of Personal Concerns⁹					
	Thought a Great Deal %	Very Satisfied %	1-10 Rating Avg.	Best in Avg. 5 Years	Very Likely Achieve
Your personal relationships with family and friends	57	66	8.28	8.79	71
Your work or career	52	40	7.25	8.6	65
Your religious or spiritual life	47	51	6.82	8.15	61
Your personal financial situation	47	24	6.21	7.96	59
Your physical health	44	35	7.14	8.11	54
Your leisure activities	27	37	6.17	7.7	52
Your mental health	24	63	8.37	8.76	69

Most report that they are in good health and very high percentages of the public exercise each week. However, most say they do not exercise often enough.

A majority (52 percent) describes their own health as “excellent” (18 percent) or “very good” (34 percent). An additional 29 percent describe their own health as “good”, while only 14 percent say “fair” and 4 percent “poor.”¹⁰ More than three-quarters (77 percent) report that they get physical exercise within the average week, but nearly as many (7 percent) say they should be getting more physical exercise.¹¹

Table 4:

Food Choices¹²		
	% Actively Include in Diet – % Actively Try to Avoid	
	Include	Avoid
Vegetables	90	2
Fruits	89	2
Chicken and other poultry	85	3
Fish and other seafood	71	11
Grains such as bread, cereal, pasta and rice	70	14
Dairy products	67	14
Beef and other red meat	59	20
Carbohydrates	33	27
Soda or pop	25	51
Salt	23	47
Sugar	21	51
Fat	14	64

⁹ Princeton Survey Research Associates International, Boomers at Midlife: The AARP Life Stage Survey, by AARP, 3,850 adults nationally, April 5-May 31, 2004. Interviews were conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Data provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

¹⁰ Princeton Survey Research Associates International, April 5-May 31, 2004.

¹¹ TNS Intersearch, The ABC News/Time Magazine Poll, interviews conducted by TNS Intersearch, 1,202 adults nationally, May 10-16, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

¹² The Gallup Organization, 1,005 adults nationally, July 8-11, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Americans know that a healthy diet consists of vegetables, fruits and chicken. However, food choices are not based on health considerations alone. Nearly half the public eats at fast food restaurants at least once per week, even though three-quarters believe fast food is not healthy.

Survey respondents report that they actively try to include healthful foods in their diet, including vegetables, fruit, and chicken, among others. Majorities try to avoid fat, sugar and soda. (Table 4)

Seventy percent of Americans eat at a restaurant at least once in the average week, and 45 percent eat at a fast food restaurant at least once in the average week.¹³ They frequent fast food restaurants even though they know that most of the food served is “not too good for you” or “not good at all for you” (53 percent and 23 percent respectively).¹⁴

In recent years, health-related food coverage has increasingly centered upon weight management as a health issue. However, some consumer research suggests that people do not necessarily see eating for weight loss as eating for health. Dieters are willing to employ unhealthy eating behaviors to lose weight.

Media coverage of food increasingly revolves around obesity. According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs: “Concerns about weight management and obesity accounted for 15 percent of all the health discussions tracked in the *Food for Thought V* research in 2003. That is up from 5 percent in 2001 and shows how the topic has come to dominate food news.”¹⁵

However, eating for health and eating for weight loss are not necessarily the same. A report on qualitative research for the International Food Information Council Foundation finds that, “Consumers talk about a distinction between eating for health and eating for weight loss. Most believe that restricting foods or food groups is not the answer for better health. This is noted among all audiences, including those who have tried, or continue to be on, restrictive diets. Interestingly, dieters claim they are willing to employ “unhealthy” eating behaviors for as long as it takes to put weight ‘balance’ back into their lives.”¹⁶

Weight loss is a common objective. One in four is currently trying to lose weight and a majority would like to. A majority of the public has seriously tried to lose weight at some point, and a significant percentage feels they are currently overweight. Americans say they are willing to diet to live longer.

While most Americans (54 percent) describe their weight as “about right,” fully 40 percent say that they are “very” or “somewhat overweight.” More than one in four (27 percent) reports that they are currently trying to lose weight and 58 percent say they would like to lose weight.¹⁷

¹³ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

¹⁴ The Gallup Organization, 1,006 adults nationally, July 7-9, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

¹⁵ Center for Media and Public Affairs, May – July 2003.

¹⁶ Strategy One, *Fitting Dietary Fats Into A Healthful Diet*, a Report to: IFIC Foundation, written by Strategy One, based on four focus groups, September 16, 2004.

¹⁷ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

A majority of Americans (56 percent) say that at some point in their life they have made a serious effort to lose weight, with 17 percent reporting that they have tried to lose weight six or more times. People undertake a variety of actions when they attempt to lose weight. While exercise tops the list (44 percent), dieting is broken into several distinct categories (counting calories, counting carbohydrates, etc.) that would pass exercise in frequency if combined.¹⁹ (Table 5)

Most say they are willing to change their eating habits to promote long life. Three quarters (73 percent) would “rather live longer, even if it means having to watch your diet,” while 23 percent would rather “eat what you feel like, even if it means you would not live as long as you might otherwise.”²⁰

The connection between child health and food has also gotten significant attention in recent years. Most parents see nutrition and physical fitness as essential. They believe child obesity is a serious problem, even though very few have had a health professional voice concerns about their own child’s weight. Most believe their child gets enough physical activity, but fewer are confident that their child has a very nutritious diet.

Table 5:

Made a Serious Effort¹⁸ (Adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses)	
Maintained an exercise routine	44
Weighed yourself frequently	38
Had strong peer or family support	36
Counted calories	24
Followed a diet where you counted carbs	19
Used nutritional supplements	18
Kept a food journal	14
Participated in a weight loss program you paid for	12
Participated in a program where you purchased their food	4
Used a personal nutritionist	4
Used a personal trainer	3

Table 6:

Important to Teach Children % Absolutely Essential²¹	
To be honest and truthful	91
To be courteous and polite	84
To have self-control and self-discipline	83
To always do their very best in school	82
To be independent and to do for themselves	74
To save money and spend it carefully	70
To have good nutrition and eating habits	68
To help those who are less fortunate	62
To have strong religious faith	61
To exercise and to be physically fit	51
To enjoy art and literature	33

When people consider all the things that children need to be taught, a majority states that nutrition and physical fitness is absolutely essential (68 percent and 51 percent respectively). This is an impressive rating, but it ranks lower than other areas, such as honesty, discipline, independence, and money management. (Table 6)

News coverage of child obesity has gotten public attention. Fully 87 percent believe that children and teenagers are more overweight today than when they were young, and 68 percent

¹⁸ Harris Interactive, 1,012 adults nationally, February 8-13, 2005. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

¹⁹ Harris Interactive, February 8-13, 2005.

²⁰ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, Health Pulse of America Survey, 814 adults nationally, November 5-November 25, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

²¹ Public Agenda, “A Lot Easier Said Than Done,” 1607 parents or guardians of children age 5 to 17, July 31 – August 15, 2002.

believe that child obesity is a “major health problem.”²² Nearly all Americans (93 percent) say overweight children and teens is a serious problem (61 percent very serious), even though only 19 percent of parents are very concerned about their own child’s weight, and just 9 percent of parents say that a health professional has stated that their child is overweight.²³ One in ten (10 percent) parents states that their child is underweight.²⁴

Most children participate in physical education at school and a majority is regularly involved in after-school sports. Fully 83 percent of parents report that their school-age child has a physical education class at school and 58 percent say their child participates regularly in after-school sports activities. While most parents are satisfied with their child’s level of activity, a significant percentage believes their child needs more physical activity. A slight majority (57 percent) of parents with schoolchildren believe their child gets as much physical exercise as he or she should, while 42 percent believe their child should be getting more exercise.²⁵

While most parents believe their child is getting enough physical activity, fewer are confident that their child has a nutritious diet. Only 26 percent of mothers describe their child’s overall diet as “very balanced and nutritious,” while an additional 68 percent say it is “somewhat balanced and nutritious.”²⁶ Another survey found that, while 61 percent say their child’s diet is healthy, only 18 percent described it as “very healthy.”²⁷ Finally, a majority (51 percent) reports that “my children eat some nutritious, healthy foods, but not nearly enough,” while nearly as many (47 percent) say “my children eat mostly nutritious, healthy foods.”²⁸

Table 7:

Causes of Obesity²⁹	
% Most or Very Important	
Not getting enough physical exercise	86
Poor eating habits	85
The marketing of sweets and other high-calorie foods to children	65
Watching too much television	59
Genetics, or a family history	50
Lack of information on good eating habits	45
The cost of buying healthy food	45
Restaurant portions that are too large	44
Lack of information about food content	37

The public is convinced that obesity is a serious public health issue. However, the obesity frame is not conducive to building support for public policies, because people view food as a matter of consumer choice. Individuals are responsible for their diet, not the food system.

People believe that obesity is a serious problem. Fully 93 percent say obesity among adults is a serious health problem (58 percent very serious) and just as many (93 percent) say overweight children and teens is a serious problem (61 percent very serious).²⁹

²² CBS News/New York Times Poll, 642 adults nationally, May 9-11, 2003.

²³ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, November 5-25, 2003.

²⁴ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

²⁵ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

²⁶ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, sponsored by Club Mom, 1,207 women nationally with children under 19, March 8-March 11, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

²⁷ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, November 5-25, 2003.

²⁸ The Polling Company, sponsored by KidsPeace, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 1,000 national adult parents of children under 18, June 2-June 8, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

²⁹ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

³⁰ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, November 5-25, 2003.

However, it is very difficult to build support for public policies when the frame is obesity because the public sees obesity as caused by individual habits. In rating a series of causes of obesity, lack of exercise and poor eating habits top the list (86 percent and 85 percent respectively). A majority points to just one systemic problem, which undoubtedly rates highly because adults are reluctant to hold children responsible. Two thirds (65 percent) believe marketing sweets to children is an important cause of obesity. (Table 7)

Food is a matter of consumer choice, according to survey participants. Presented with two statements, only 29 percent say snack food “is junk food, is costing Americans billions of dollars in health-care costs due to child obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure, and should be discouraged by the government through labeling laws, warnings and taxes,” while 67 percent “say that snack food is a matter of consumer choice and that a small group of Americans should not impose their eating habits on the rest of the country.”³² Furthermore, fully 83 percent say that obese individuals are responsible (51 percent very responsible), while far fewer hold food manufacturers responsible, even when given a reason – “because of the serving size and fat and sugar content of their products” (52 percent responsible, 14 percent very responsible). When forced to choose whether food manufacturers or consumers are responsible, the public overwhelmingly sides with consumer choice. Only 14 percent think “food manufacturers should be required by law to reduce serving sizes and fat and sugar content to make their products healthier,” while 83 percent say “it is up to individual consumers to choose healthy food products.”³³

Table 8:

Responsibility for Obesity Problem³¹	
% Great Deal	
Individual Americans in their choice of diet and lack of exercise	67
Fast-food restaurants	43
Schools that allow high-calorie snacks and sweets	40
Manufacturers of high-calorie packaged and processed foods	36
Marketers and advertisers of high-calorie and processed foods	35
Government policies and laws on food content and marketing	20

Finally, in rating a variety of actors, a majority of the public finds just one as having a great deal of responsibility for the obesity problem — individual Americans’ choices (67 percent). Importantly, the fewest find government policies responsible (20 percent a great deal of responsibility). This suggests that, at least as far as obesity is concerned, it is difficult to make a case for government policy addressing the food system. However, 43 percent and 40 percent, respectively, attribute responsibility to fast food restaurants and schools that allow high calorie snacks, suggesting some possible openings for a systemic conversation. (Table 8)

People demonstrate support for two categories of policies: policies to provide more information to individuals and policies directed at child health.

Because they see addressing obesity as the responsibility of individuals, the public is most enthusiastic about policies that allow individuals to make better choices. They support warning labels on food, nutritional content at restaurants, and public service advertising campaigns on nutrition and exercise. In addition, the public is willing to act to protect children

³¹ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

³² Fabrizio, McLaughlin & Associates, 1,200 adults nationally, June 11-June 14, 2002. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

³³ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, November 5-November 25, 2003.

by regulating advertising directed at children. Fewer support taxes on junk food or limiting portion sizes in restaurants. (Table 9 and Table 10)

Table 9:

Support for Government Policies³⁴		
	% Support	% Strongly Support
Warning labels on high-fat and high-sugar foods about the health risks of being overweight	75	49
A law requiring restaurants to list the calorie count and fat content of all items on their menus	61	38
A ban on advertising high-fat and high-sugar food on children's television shows and in children's magazines	56	36
A tax on high-fat and high-sugar foods, with the money used for advertising and programs to fight obesity	41	21
A law setting a legal limit on portion sizes in restaurants	23	11

Table 10:

Support for Government Policies³⁵		
	% Support	% Strongly Support
Government-funded advertising campaigns that promote eating right and exercising	74	44
Making a law requiring fast food restaurants to list nutrition information – such as calorie count – for all items on their menus	70	44
Warning labels on packaged food about the health risks of being overweight, just like there are warning labels on cigarettes about the health risks of smoking	67	40
The federal government regulating television ads for junk food and fast food that are aimed at children and teens the way they do for cigarettes and alcohol	53	29
Putting a special tax on junk food – that is, things like soda, chips, and candy – and using the money for programs to fight obesity	40	18

One policy that most Americans stand behind is protecting individuals from losing health insurance. Fully 92 percent say that “health insurance companies should not be permitted to drop people from coverage because they’re overweight” and 72 percent say “health insurance companies should not be permitted to charge higher premiums for people who are overweight.”³⁶

³⁴ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

³⁵ ICR International Communications Research, Childhood Obesity Survey, sponsored by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and San Jose Mercury News, 1,017 adults nationally, February 4-8, 2004.

³⁶ TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

Importantly, support for policies to protect child health can be easily undermined by triggering other powerful frames, such as freedom of speech and parental responsibility.

While majorities support regulating junk food ads when they are thinking in the context of health, support for this measure drops when placed in a different context. In a survey about communications policy, a majority of the public stated opposition for restricting ads for junk food on children's television. After hearing that "some people say it is time to restrict ads for junk food on children's television shows; others oppose such restrictions, saying companies should be free to advertise whatever they want," 56 percent oppose and 37 percent favor restricting ads for junk food on children's television shows.³⁷

In addition, the public overwhelmingly opposes allowing parents to sue for their child's obesity. Only 6 percent think "parents should be able to sue major soft-drink and snack food companies if they believe their child became obese from eating junk food and drinking soft drinks," while 84 percent think "the government should pass laws to prevent these kinds of lawsuits."³⁸

While the public says schools should teach children about nutrition, most would not sacrifice other educational priorities to put more emphasis on nutrition or physical education.

The public does not believe that schools should be responsible for monitoring children's weight, but does believe that schools have a responsibility to teach children about healthy foods. Nearly eight in ten (79 percent) believe that it is "not a school's responsibility to monitor children and teens' weight," but three-quarters (74 percent) say that it is "a school's responsibility to teach children and teens about healthy foods to eat."³⁹

However, even in the context of a survey about health, most Americans would not place more emphasis on physical education and nutrition in the schools if it meant sacrificing other priorities. Only 29 percent would "increase the number of physical education classes even if it means cutting back on electives such as foreign languages and social studies," while a majority (57 percent) would keep things as they are now, and 5 percent would cut back on physical education to expand electives. Only 31 percent would "increase the number of nutrition and food science classes even if it means cutting back on electives such as foreign languages and social studies," while a majority (55 percent) would keep things as they are now and 4 percent would cut back on nutrition classes.⁴⁰

Most believe that the food provided by schools is healthy, so there is little public support for reforming school nutrition. A slight majority opposes soda machines in schools until they learn the financial reason for installing machines, which causes many more to oppose their use.

³⁷ Conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International, sponsored by Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 1,001 parents of children ages 2-17, July 12-August 13, 2004. Interviews were conducted by Braun Research. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

³⁸ Conducted by Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, 865 adults nationally, July 22 – August 12, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

³⁹ ICR International Communications Research, February 4-8, 2004.

⁴⁰ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, November 5-November 25, 2003.

When only considering child health and obesity, members of the public divide concerning whether or not soda and vending machines should be allowed in schools. A slight majority (55 percent) says that soda machines should not be allowed in schools, while 41 percent would allow them. Concerning vending machines, just as many would allow them as would not (48 percent each).⁴¹ However, when the financial reasons for the use of vending machines in schools become apparent, the public strongly opposes allowing these machines in schools: 69 percent say that schools “should not be allowed to raise money for their budgets by allowing soda and candy vending machines in school,” while 30 percent say they should be allowed to do this.⁴²

The lack of concern about vending machines may be due to parents’ belief that schools provide healthy food. Most parents believe that the lunch provided by their child’s school is healthy (67 percent healthy, 13 percent very healthy), while only 18 percent think it is unhealthy (6 percent very unhealthy). A majority (58 percent) thinks there is no difference in their child’s diet during the calendar year, while 25 percent believe their child has a healthier diet during the summer and 15 percent say it is healthier during the school year.⁴³

Since there is little concern about the nutrition in school food, the public shows little enthusiasm for efforts to correct lunch programs. By a narrow 49 percent to 47 percent margin, people say they are willing to pay higher federal taxes to cover the cost of more nutritious school lunch programs in the public schools.⁴⁴

Food Processing: Dangers, Benefits, and Innovations

Many Americans are aware of dangers in the nation’s food system, such as mad cow disease, pesticides, antibiotic overuse, and so on, but few see these as serious concerns and few are taking any action to address these threats. They strongly support labeling to provide consumers with information about product qualities.

Many are aware of mad cow disease, but few are concerned. Roughly two-thirds of the public (67 percent) have been following news reports about mad cow disease either very closely (22 percent) or somewhat closely (45 percent). While they are aware of mad cow disease, few believe it likely that they or someone in their family will become infected (9 percent likely, 4 percent very likely)⁴⁵ and most believe it is not a significant problem: 6 percent say it is a crisis, 28 percent a major problem, 53 percent a minor problem, and 12 percent not a problem.⁴⁶

Furthermore, fewer than one in five has taken any action to avoid getting mad cow disease, including: stopped ordering beef at fast food restaurants (16 percent have taken this action),

⁴¹ ICR International Communications Research, February 4-8, 2004.

⁴² TNS Intersearch, May 10-16, 2004.

⁴³ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, November 5-November 25, 2003. Question asked of those with schoolchildren (28% of sample).

⁴⁴ Stony Brook University Center for Survey Research, July 22 – August 12, 2003.

⁴⁵ ICR International Communications Research, Mad Cow Survey sponsored by the Harvard School of Public Health Project on the Public & Biological Security, 1,015 adults nationally, January 7-11, 2004. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

⁴⁶ CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll, 1,029 adults nationally, Jan. 2-5, 2004.

stopped ordering beef at other restaurants besides fast food restaurants (13 percent), stopped eating hamburger or ground beef (13 percent), stopped buying beef at the grocery store (14 percent), stopped eating beef completely (7 percent), or started buying and eating only organic or grass fed beef (4 percent).⁴⁷

Even though they think it is not a significant problem and few have taken action to avoid getting mad cow disease, few have a lot of confidence in the protective ability of the nation's meat inspection system. Only 19 percent have a great deal of confidence in the US meat inspection system to protect Americans from mad cow disease, while an additional 37 percent have "a good amount" of confidence, and 41 percent have "only some" or "very little" confidence.⁴⁸

Only about one in four knows of the debate concerning antibiotic overuse. Many say they are willing to spend more to avoid food produced with antibiotics, pesticides, and hormones.

Only 45 percent of Americans are aware that fresh meat and poultry can be raised with antibiotics in animal feed and only 28 percent have heard about the debate concerning the overuse of antibiotics in animals raised for food. However, once they hear of the consequences of antibiotic use, a majority (57 percent) wants to avoid these products.⁴⁹

While few see pesticides, hormones and antibiotics as a high risk, many are willing to pay more to avoid these chemicals. One-quarter (28 percent) note that food produced with pesticides, hormones, or antibiotics, pose a "high risk" to human health, 42 percent say "moderate risk" and only 20 percent say "minor risk." At the same time, two-thirds report that they are willing to spend more for food produced without the use of pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics, and nearly half are willing to pay 10 percent or more in higher food prices. One in five (19 percent) is willing to pay 5 percent more, one-third (33 percent) are willing to pay 10 percent more, and 15 percent of survey respondents are willing to spend 20 percent more for food produced without pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics.⁵⁰

Finally, the public is less likely to buy food with a label saying it is from animals fed with antibiotics or hormones (47 percent less, 4 percent more, and 45 percent no difference), and slightly more likely to buy food with a label saying it is from animals that have not been fed antibiotics or hormones (46 percent more likely, 7 percent less, and 43 percent no difference). About one-third (32 percent) currently try to avoid food from farm animals that have been fed antibiotics or hormones, while 60 percent say it is not that important to them.⁵¹

No matter their level of concern about a specific product danger, high percentages of survey respondents support more food information. They believe that labels should identify chemical use, organic properties, country of origin, and so on. (Table 11)

⁴⁷ ICR International Communications Research, January 7-11, 2004.

⁴⁸ ICR International Communications Research, January 7-11, 2004.

⁴⁹ Synovate, The E-Nation Online Survey commissioned by Whole Foods Market, 1,000 Americans 18+ selected from the online segment of Synovate's Consumer Opinion Panel and balanced to be representative of the general population, May 2003. Findings are from company press release.

⁵⁰ Roper Public Affairs & Media, Food and Farming 2004, 1,000 adults 18+ nationally, March 26 to April 10, 2004.

⁵¹ TNS Intersearch, sponsored by ABC News, 1,024 adults nationally, July 9-13, 2003.

Table 11:

Fresh Produce Items Should be Labeled to Identify.⁵²	
(In Percent)	
Chemicals used in	90.7
Organically grown	86.0
Country of origin	85.9
Use of waxes	84.5
Use of biotechnology	78.4
Irradiated	77.8
Nutritional value	77.1

Organic products have a very positive image. A majority has tried organic products, particularly produce, and many see a variety of benefits to these products, including health, environment, and support for small farmers. Loyal use continues to be rare, however. The only downside of organics is cost, according to survey respondents.

A majority (54 percent) has tried organic foods and beverages, but just one in 10 uses organic products regularly.⁵³ Few organic produce purchasers are loyal to organic produce. Among those who have purchased organic fresh produce, just 2 percent only buy organic fresh produce and an additional 5 percent buy it if it is available. One-quarter (26 percent) prefer it but also consider other factors, while 35 percent sometimes purchase it but don't necessarily prefer it. Finally, 24 percent of those who have purchased organic produce don't usually purchase organic.⁵⁴

Those who have purchased organic mostly choose fruits and vegetables (68 percent), followed by bread or baked goods (26 percent), non-dairy beverages (26 percent), eggs (26 percent), dairy products (24 percent), packaged goods, such as soup or pasta (19 percent), meat (22 percent), frozen foods (18 percent), prepared foods or ready-to-go meals (14 percent) and baby food (7 percent). The most frequent complaint about organic products is that they are too expensive (73 percent).⁵⁵

The public sees a variety of benefits in organic products: organic foods are better for the environment (58 percent), support small and local farmers (57 percent), are better for health (54 percent), are better quality (42 percent) and taste better (32 percent).⁵⁶ In addition, a certain set of considerations come to mind when people think about an appropriate definition for "natural meat," including: no antibiotics in the feed (79 percent), no growth hormones (79 percent), no animal byproducts in the feed (68 percent), humane treatment of animals (48 percent), and humane slaughtering methods (44 percent).⁵⁷ When forced to choose between health and environment, most say health concerns are the driving reason to purchase organics.

⁵² Dr. Roberta Cook, Fresh Trends 2002, as reported in "Consumer Attitudes about Organic Foods," by Dr. Roberta Cook, University of California Davis, January 2004.

⁵³ Synovate, The 2004 Whole Foods Market Organic Foods Trend Tracker* survey, commissioned by Whole Foods Market, 1,000 adults, August 2004. Findings are from company press release.

⁵⁴ Dr. Roberta Cook, Fresh Trends 2003, as reported in "Consumer Attitudes about Organic Foods," by Dr. Roberta Cook, University of California Davis, January 2004.

⁵⁵ Synovate, August 2004.

⁵⁶ Synovate, August 2004.

⁵⁷ Synovate, May 2003.

Two-thirds (66 percent) of those who purchase organics do so out of concern for their health, while 26 percent do so for environmental reasons.⁵⁸

According to research by the National Marketing Institute, the U.S. population can be divided into five segments based on attitudes toward organic and natural foods and nutritional supplements. One-quarter (23 percent) of the population consistently uses organic food and an additional 26 percent include organic food in their diet.

As noted in an article in the Santa Cruz Sentinel, the National Marketing Institute has developed the following five segments of organic consumers:

“WELL BEINGS, 23 PERCENT: Consistently use organic and natural food, vitamin/mineral, herbal and homeopathic formulas to support, treat, and enhance personal and planetary health. Strong preference for environmental [*sic*] friendly products, such as toxic-free household cleaners, energy efficient appliances, and recyclable materials.

FOOD ACTIVES, 26 PERCENT: Attain health primarily through food, including both natural and organic food and beverages, along with fortified packaged goods. Believe supplements support health but are overwhelmed by choices. Prefer alternative healthcare to traditional medicine.

MAGIC BULLETS, 12 PERCENT: Focus on vitamins, minerals, herbs and ‘miracle foods’ to support health, less concerned with nutritional value of food. Preoccupied with weight loss and discounts. Preference for self-treating, using over-the-counter remedies.

FENCE SITTERS, 18 PERCENT: Neutral about the nutritional content of the food they eat. Little faith in the value of supplements. Price-sensitive when grocery shopping; splurge when they eat out. Seek RX prescriptions to fix health problems.

EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRYS, 21 PERCENT: Choose taste over nutritional or health value. Know they should eat healthier and take supplements but don’t. Highly price sensitive. Preference for over-the-counter remedies followed by RX prescriptions to treat health conditions.”⁵⁹

As noted earlier, news coverage has emphasized risk reduction or health promotion as a goal of sound nutrition. Research indicates that, while the public is aware of some functional benefits of food and actively includes certain foods for a specific function, most have, at best, just a shallow understanding of many nutrients.

The terms “functional foods” and “nutraceuticals” are sometimes used to describe foods that have a particular health function or a perceived pharmaceutical benefit based on the nutritional properties of certain foods, such as the functional benefit of oatmeal in reducing cholesterol.

⁵⁸ Dr. Roberta Cook, Food and the Environment Update 2001, by the Hartman Group, as reported in “Consumer Attitudes about Organic Foods,” by Dr. Roberta Cook, University of California Davis, January 2004.

⁵⁹ Sally Blodgett, “New Research Shows U.S. Health Habits Changing,” written by reporter Sally Blodgett, Santa Cruz Sentinel. The article reports on proprietary research by the National Marketing Institute based on research conducted with a panel of 64,000 consumers.

Consumers prefer the term “functional foods” (62 percent) over “nutraceuticals” (31 percent), but Cogent Research makes the point that neither term improves understanding since all foods have some function.⁶⁰

Many act to improve their health by incorporating certain foods into their diet. A strong majority (62 percent) says they are consuming 1-3 specific foods for functional health benefits, which is 10 percentage points higher than reported in 1998.⁶¹

There is some indication that the level of public awareness of specific food-health relationships is determined by the length of time the public has been hearing about a particular association. According to Cogent Research, one of the more recent associations, between soy protein and heart disease, has a lower level of awareness (23 percent), than the association between antioxidants and cancer (34 percent), and the most people are familiar with the relationship between calcium and osteoporosis (64 percent “have heard a lot”).⁶²

However, some researchers caution that public awareness does not necessarily indicate public understanding. In an analysis of qualitative research, Strategy One writes, “Although respondents could list many nutrients by name, this does not mean they understand what they are or why they should be consumed.”⁶³ Strategy One lists several quotes that demonstrate this consumer confusion:

Lycopene. I don't know what it is, but I think I'm supposed to have more of it.
I don't know what Omega-3s are, but I know they are good for you.
There are too many fats. We don't know them. It's too confusing.
I feel like I'll die from ignorance.
What's good and what's bad for you keeps changing.

Few have heard much about genetically modified food, and awareness has declined in recent years.

Few Americans report that they have heard very much about genetically modified foods. Whether phrased as “the use of biotechnology in the production of food” or “genetically modified food” only about one-third of Americans have heard “a great deal” or “some” about those topics (35 percent biotechnology, 32 percent genetically modified food).⁶⁴

There is some indication that awareness of this topic has declined slightly in recent years. According to a trend question by the International Food Information Council, the percentage of Americans that have heard or read about biotechnology has dropped from a high of

⁶⁰ Cogent Research, sponsored by the International Food Information Council, 1,004 adults nationally 18+, March 2002. Written analysis on company website.

⁶¹ Cogent Research, March 2002.

⁶² Cogent Research, March 2002.

⁶³ Strategy One, September 16, 2004.

⁶⁴ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, sponsored by the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, 1000 adults nationally, September 22-26, 2004.

47 percent in January 2001 (15 percent heard or read “a lot,” 32 percent “some”), to 36 percent by March 2005 (12 percent “a lot,” 23 percent “some”).⁶⁵

Public opinion about genetically modified food is largely unformed and malleable. Generally, the public is cautious and uncomfortable with genetically modified food. When given the chance, significant percentages express no opinion about this topic, and opinion moves back and forth between support and opposition, depending upon language choices.

Impressions of biotechnology and genetically modified foods lean negative, with more having an unfavorable than favorable view of biotechnology (30 percent unfavorable, 25 percent favorable) and genetically modified foods (44 percent unfavorable, 21 percent favorable).

This compares with strongly positive views of organic foods (64 percent favorable, 15 percent unfavorable). (Table 12)

Table 12:

Impression of:⁶⁶		
(In Percent)	Favorable	Unfavorable
Organic foods	64	15
Biotechnology used in food production	25	30
Genetically modified foods	21	44
Irradiated foods	17	25

Furthermore, the public moderately opposes the introduction of genetically modified foods. A plurality (43 percent) say the “risks outweigh the benefits” of genetically modified foods, while 38 percent say the benefits outweigh the risks, and 19 percent are unsure.⁶⁷ In addition, 47 percent “oppose the introduction of genetically modified foods into the US food supply,” while 27 percent support it and 26 percent have no opinion. While close to half the public opposes the introduction of genetically modified foods, this represents an 11 percentage point decline (from 58 percent opposition) in 2001.⁶⁸

The public is unfamiliar with the extent to which genetically modified foods exist in supermarkets, and knowledge has not increased since 2001. Most believe they have not eaten genetically modified goods, but an increasing percentage report that they have. Finally, while a majority is unlikely to eat genetically modified foods, willingness to eat genetically modified foods has increased slightly since 2001.

The public does not know whether or not foods produced by biotechnology are currently available in the supermarket. One third believes they are available (34 percent), one-third thinks they are not (37 percent) and one-third is unsure (30 percent). This response has been fairly consistent since 2001.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Cogent Research, US Consumer Attitudes Toward Biotechnology, sponsored by the International Food Information Council, trend questions conducted by the Wirthlin Group (March 1997, February 1999, October 1999, May 2000, and January 2001), and Cogent Research (September 2001, August 2002, April 2003, January 2004, and March 2005), each approximately 1,000 adults 18+ nationally.

⁶⁶ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, Sponsored by Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, 1,001 adults nationally, January 22-26, 2001. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

⁶⁷ Harris Interactive, The Harris Poll, 991 adults age 18+ nationally, June 8-15, 2004.

⁶⁸ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁶⁹ Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

People are increasingly likely to report that they have eaten genetically modified foods, even though a majority continues to believe they have not. A slight majority (54 percent) thinks they have not eaten genetically modified foods, while 30 percent reports that they have. This represents a change from 2001, when 62 percent said they had not eaten genetically modified foods and 19 percent said they had.⁷⁰ Roughly four in ten say they are likely to eat genetically modified foods (42 percent likely, 13 percent “very likely”), while a slim majority says they are unlikely (52 percent unlikely, 30 percent “not at all likely”). The percentage reporting they are likely to eat genetically modified foods has increased from 38 percent in 2001.⁷¹

The public is unsure about the safety of genetically modified foods, but when people hear how common genetically modified foods are, many quickly shift to assuming these products must be safe.

Initially, 30 percent believe genetically modified foods are safe, 27 percent believe they are unsafe, and 42 percent have no opinion. Once they hear that “more than half of products at the grocery store are produced using some form of biotechnology or genetic modification,” opinion shifts toward believing these products are safe (48 percent safe, 25 percent unsafe, and 27 percent no opinion). This response has been fairly constant since 2001.⁷²

Very few people admit to knowing much of anything concerning government regulation of genetically modified foods. They tend to believe that there is too little regulation, but many have no opinion on this. However, when asked to evaluate a series of goals for regulating these products, the public overwhelmingly supports a cautious approach, emphasizing consumer awareness and safety. The labeling that the public supports is likely to lead to reduced consumer acceptance, as most say that they would be less likely to buy products labeled as genetically modified.

Very small percentages of the public say they know something about government regulation of genetically modified food. Only 12 percent say they know something (1 percent “a great deal,” 11 percent “some”) while 28 percent say they know “not too much,” and a majority (55 percent) know “nothing at all.” Among the 40 percent who say they have at least some minimal knowledge of government regulation of genetically modified food, 40 percent believe there is too little government regulation, 8 percent believe there is too much, 19 percent say it is about right, and 33 percent have no opinion. The percentage believing there is too little government regulation increased 5 percentage points from 2003 to 2004.⁷³

In evaluating a series of goals for the regulation of genetically modified foods, survey respondents clearly indicate that they want to be cautious and prioritize consumer awareness and safety. Very high percentages strongly favor labeling products and removing from the market products deemed to be unsafe. Fully 71 percent strongly favor ensuring that these foods are safe before they are allowed to come to market, and 65 percent strongly favor requiring FDA approval even if it means substantial delay. Only 17 percent strongly favor streamlining to

⁷⁰ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁷¹ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁷² The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁷³ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

Table 13:

Goals for Regulating Genetically Modified Foods	
% Strongly Favor⁷⁴	
Labeling all food that is genetically modified	80
Labeling all processed food that contains genetically modified ingredients	78
Removing any genetically modified food deemed to be unsafe after it has come to market	75
Genetically modified foods should be subject to the same rules as new conventional foods	71
Ensuring that all genetically modified foods are safe before they come to market	71
Balancing the interests of consumers and food producers to provide the best and safest food	69
Requiring the FDA to approve any genetically modified food as safe before it goes to market, even if it causes substantial delays	65
Genetically modified foods should be regulated more stringently than new conventional foods	54
Prohibiting any genetically modified food from being sold in the United States, even if the FDA believes it is safe	19
Streamlining the process so that new advances in genetically modified food are brought to market as soon as possible	17

allow genetically modified food to come to market faster. At the same time, only 19 percent strongly favor prohibiting genetically modified food from being sold in the US.⁷⁵ (Table 13)

Labeling is likely to influence consumer behavior, as people say they are less likely to buy foods with a label saying it had been genetically modified (55 percent less likely, 6 percent more, 37 percent no difference), and more likely to buy food with a label saying it had not been genetically modified (51 percent more likely, 9 percent less, 39 percent no difference). At the same time, only 34 percent say they try to avoid genetically modified food now, and 61 percent say it is not that important to them.⁷⁶

While the public wants a cautious approach to genetically modified foods, it is not opposed to them. In fact, when some of the benefits of genetic modification are explained to survey participants, they can see a variety of good reasons for genetic modification.

Americans are open to the idea of genetically modified food. Half (50 percent) say they are likely (50 percent likely, 15 percent very likely) to buy “produce, like tomatoes or potatoes, if it had been modified by biotechnology to taste better or fresher,” while 45 percent are not likely to buy such produce (25 percent not at all likely). Response to this question has been fairly consistent; however, purchase resistance is increasing. Likelihood to purchase is at its lowest point since the question was first asked in 1997 (response is usually in the mid-50s, though it has been as high as 62 percent), and unwillingness to purchase is at its highest point (with 37 percent the lowest measure in 1999 and 2003).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁷⁵ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁷⁶ TNS Intersearch, July 9-13, 2003.

⁷⁷ Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

Higher percentages are willing to buy produce that has been modified, so as to not need pesticide. Nearly two-thirds say they are likely (64 percent likely, 28 percent very likely) to buy “produce, like tomatoes or potatoes, if it had been modified by biotechnology to be protected from insect damage and required fewer pesticide applications,” while 32 percent are not likely to buy such produce (19 percent not at all likely). Again, likeliness to purchase such a product is at its lowest point and unwillingness to purchase is at its highest point since February 1999 when survey respondents indicated they would be likely to purchase this type of product by a 77 percent to 21 percent margin.⁷⁸

When exposed to a variety of reasons for genetic modification, the public sees good reasons to support modification, especially for human health, world hunger, and science. (Table 14)

Table 14:

Reasons to Genetically Modify Plants or Animals				
Percent Good or Bad Reason⁷⁹	Very Good	Somewhat Good	Somewhat Bad	Very Bad
To produce more affordable pharmaceutical drugs by using plants to produce pharmaceutical compounds	54	23	6	8
To produce less expensive food to reduce hunger around the world	52	24	8	12
To expand our understanding of science and nature	46	30	8	10
To reduce the need to use pesticides on crops	43	30	10	12
To create peanuts that won't cause allergic reactions	42	29	11	15
To develop vegetable oil with heart healthy fats	41	29	8	18
To produce less expensive food	40	26	12	19
To create new types of grass that don't need to be mowed as often	39	22	11	22
To provide organs for transplant to humans	36	20	9	24
To develop better tasting fruits and vegetables	33	25	14	24
To produce more affordable industrial compounds in plants, including the material used to make plastic	32	32	11	17
To increase the variety of available foods	32	29	14	19
To create fruits and vegetables that last longer on the store shelves	27	23	14	30
To produce beef with less fat	27	23	13	32
To produce more affordable pharmaceutical drugs by using animals to produce pharmaceutical compounds	23	22	17	29
To reduce the cost of fish, like salmon	21	25	19	27
To make it possible to transplant animal organs to humans	19	22	14	38

Discomfort with genetic modification is particularly pronounced when survey respondents consider modifying animals.

As indicated in Table 14, each time animals were included in the reason for genetic modification, public support dropped. For example, 77 percent say a good reason for genetic modification is “to produce more affordable pharmaceutical drugs by using plants to produce pharmaceutical compounds” (77 percent good reason, 54 percent very good reason). Support drops

⁷⁸ Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

⁷⁹ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

dramatically when people consider the reason “to produce more affordable pharmaceutical drugs by using animals to produce pharmaceutical compounds” (45 percent good reason, 23 percent very good reason). Similarly, the public gives higher ratings for providing “organs for transplant to humans” (56 percent good reason, 36 percent very good reason) than for transplanting “animal organs to humans” (41 percent good reason, 19 percent very good reason). In fact, the four reasons with the highest opposition are the only four reasons that mention something specific about animals.⁸⁰

In addition, when rating their comfort level with genetic modification, people are least comfortable with any kind of animal use. On average, survey respondents are neutral about genetic modification of plants (5.94 average on a 10 point comfort scale), and they become increasingly uncomfortable as they consider other life forms: microbes, such as bacteria or algae (4.14), animals used for food sources, including cattle, fish and shrimp (3.73), insects (3.56), animals used for other purposes, including cats, dogs and race horses (2.29), and humans (1.35).⁸¹

However, there is some indication that the public reacts differently to animal biotechnology done for different purposes. A majority has a favorable view of genetics to improve animal care and nutrition (53 percent favorable, 17 percent very favorable), but tends to have an unfavorable view of genetic engineering that adjusts animal traits (47 percent unfavorable, 30 percent not at all favorable). The public clearly has an unfavorable view of cloning animals (depending on question wording, 64 percent un-favorable, 51 percent not at all favorable; or, 74 percent unfavorable, 58 percent not at all favorable).⁸² (Table 15)

Table 15:

Overall Impression of Three Areas of Animal Biotechnology⁸³		
In Percent	Favorable	Unfavorable
Genomics is a form of animal biotechnology that uses knowledge about genetics to improve overall animal care and nutrition.	53	27
Genetic engineering is a form of animal biotechnology that allows us to move beneficial traits from one animal to another in a precise way.	39	47
SPLIT SAMPLE Cloning is a form of animal biotechnology that retains desirable traits by producing animals that are biologically identical to the parent.	15	74
SPLIT SAMPLE Cloning is a form of animal biotechnology that retains desirable traits by producing animals that are identical to the parent.	24	64

Even the public’s strong opposition to genetic modification of animals may be open to influence, though attitudes toward cloning are more solidly negative.

The public may be open to influence on genetic modification of animals as well. When given different scenarios, people say that some scenarios would have a positive effect on their impression: “animal biotechnology can improve the quality and safety of food, for example,

⁸⁰ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁸¹ The Mellman Group and Public Opinion Strategies, September 22-26, 2004.

⁸² Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

⁸³ Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

through improved animal health or improved nutritional quality of the food produced” (60 percent positive effect), and “animal biotechnology can reduce the environmental impact of animal waste” (52 percent positive effect). Far fewer find compelling the idea that “animal biotechnology can increase farm efficiency by increasing the amount of food produced or decreasing the amount of feed needed by the animals” (37 percent positive effect).⁸⁴

Opinion of genetic engineering appears to be more open to influence than opinion of cloning. A majority (53 percent) says they would be likely to buy meat, milk and eggs from animals enhanced through genetic engineering if the FDA determined it was safe (21 percent very likely), but 63 percent would be *unlikely* to buy products from cloned animals even if the FDA said they were safe (43 percent “not at all likely”).⁸⁵

Table 16:

Importance in View of Genetic Modification⁸⁶	
% Very Important	
The impact it might have on you and your family	71
The trust you have in the people providing information	66
Your ethical beliefs	49
The science involved	40
Your religious beliefs	37

Since public opinion on genetic modification continues to be largely unformed, there is an opportunity to shape how the public understands this issue. Trusted spokespeople will be central to effective communications, and most say that farmers, the FDA, friends/family and scientists will matter most.

Most members of the public say that their view of genetic modification is determined by their understanding of the impact genetic modification will have on their family (71 percent) and the trust they have in communications messengers (66 percent). Religious beliefs are the least important consideration (37 percent). (Table 16)

Table 17:

Trust About Genetically Modified Foods⁸⁷		
In Percent	Great Deal	Trust
Farmers	38	81
The Food and Drug Administration, or FDA	37	83
Friends and family	36	81
Scientists and academics	31	81
Environmental groups	21	67
Consumer groups	17	68
Government regulators	17	63
Religious leaders	16	50
Food manufacturers	12	54
Biotechnology companies	12	51
The news media	8	41

Of a series of spokespeople, the most trusted on this topic are farmers (81 percent trust, 38 percent trust a great deal), the FDA (83 percent, 37 percent), friends and family (81 percent, 36 percent), and scientists and academics (81 percent, 31 percent). The news media (41 percent, 8 percent), biotechnology companies (51 percent, 12 percent), and food manufacturers (54 percent, 12 percent) are the least trusted. (Table 17)

⁸⁴ Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

⁸⁵ Cogent Research/Wirthlin Group, trend questions for IFIC.

⁸⁶ The Mellman Group, sponsored by the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, 1000 adults nationally, August 5-10, 2003.

⁸⁷ The Mellman Group, August 5-10, 2003.

Farming

National issue priority lists rarely include detailed listings of farm concerns. In one such list from June 2001, just as many registered voters rated farm issues as a concern as worker lay-offs, and more rated farm issues as a concern than did worries about nuclear attack. In the post-911 world, these ratings would undoubtedly be much different. However, this list serves as an indication that people have concerns about a variety of farm issues, when they are given the chance to express them. All of the tested farm concerns were rated at similar levels by the public. (Table 18)

Table 18:

Issue Concern ⁸⁸		
June 2001	Very Concerned	Somewhat Concerned
Public schools may not be educating children in your community adequately	60	24
Gasoline prices being too high for your family's budget	57	26
Too much farmland in your state may be converted to houses, stores, and other nonagricultural developments	40	29
Meat or poultry sold in your community's stores might be unsafe to eat	39	28
Agricultural pesticides or livestock manure may contaminate drinking water in your community	38	25
Members of your family or friends being laid off from work	38	20
Unhealthy levels of residues from agricultural pesticides may remain on fruit or vegetables sold in your community's grocery stores	37	33
Eating genetically modified food sold at stores may harm members of your family	37	27
Nuclear missiles may attack United States cities	24	21

Americans value farms and are concerned that the number of farms in the United States is in decline. They hold far more favorable impressions of small scale family farms than large industrial farms and believe small family farms are better than large farms at producing safe, nutritious food and protecting the environment.

Survey respondents are concerned about the decline in the number of US farms (82 percent concerned, 46 percent very concerned) when they hear that “the number of U.S. farms have dropped from seven million in the 1930s to about two million today, and 330 farmers leave the land every week.”⁸⁹ It may be relatively easy to make the case that government policy is doing little to address family farm loss, since Americans believe that the US government farm policy currently favors large farming businesses (80 percent), not small farmers (6 percent).⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Tarrance Group, sponsored by American Farmland Trust and the Joyce Foundation, 1,024 registered voters nationally, June 2-June 21, 2001. The Public Opinion Research Laboratory of Northern Illinois University conducted the poll under the direction of Dr. Dixon Essex. The Tarrance Group provided consulting and analytical services. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

⁸⁹ Roper Public Affairs & Media, March 26 to April 10, 2004.

⁹⁰ PIPA and Knowledge Networks, Americans on Farm Subsidies, 1,896 adults nationally, drawn from Knowledge Networks' “large-scale nationwide research panel which is randomly selected from the national population of households having telephones and is subsequently provided internet access for the completion of surveys (and thus is not limited to those who already have internet access).” Interviews were completed December 19, 2003 – January 5, 2004.

The public holds far more favorable perceptions of small family farms than large industrial farms. When asked to consider the production of safe, nutritious food, a higher percentage of the public trusts smaller-scale family farming practices (85 percent trust, 45 percent “place a lot of trust” in this type of farm) than trusts large-scale industrial farming practices (69 percent trust, 24 percent place “a lot of trust” in this type of farm). Forced to choose between the two, 71 percent think smaller-scale family farms care more about the safety of food than large-scale industrial farms (15 percent). Similarly, more than two-thirds (69 percent) believe that smaller-scale family farms are more likely to use techniques that will not harm the environment, while 22 percent choose large-scale industrial farms.⁹¹

Americans strongly and consistently voice support for a strong agriculture system in the United States. They do not want to rely on food from other countries, even if it would be less expensive.

Even before the terrorist attacks on the United States, fully 81 percent stated that it is important that the food they eat “comes from farms and ranches in the United States rather than from foreign countries” (81 percent important, 52 percent very important).⁹² Three-quarters (74 percent) disagree with the statement, “if the US could buy all its food from other countries cheaper than it can be produced and sold here, we should.”⁹³ In fact, more than two-thirds (68 percent) would pay more for food grown in the U.S. rather than abroad and 71 percent agree with the statement “I would be willing to pay more for food that is grown locally, near where I live, rather than far away.”⁹⁴

One reason they support agriculture in the United States is that most believe that food grown in the U.S. is fresher and safer (80 percent and 79 percent respectively) than imported food, and half (51 percent) perceive that food grown in the U.S. actually costs less.⁹⁵

Furthermore, the public prioritizes locally grown food. They believe locally grown food is fresher and that, by purchasing it, they are supporting their community and local farmers.

Three-quarters say that it is important (73 percent important, 38 percent very important) to know whether their food is produced or grown locally or regionally,⁹⁶ and half (52 percent) say it is important that the food they eat “comes from farms and ranches in your own state rather than outside your state” (52 percent important, 23 percent very important).⁹⁷

In a survey of four regions with buy local campaigns, more than half (58 percent) of people in the regions said it was very or somewhat important to them that food come from farms and ranches in their area. The researchers noted that those who considered it important to buy local prioritized certain criteria at higher levels than those who did not think it was important

⁹¹ Roper Public Affairs & Media, March 26 to April 10, 2004.

⁹² Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

⁹³ Ronald C. Wimberley, “Food from our Changing World: The Globalization of Food and How Americans Feel about it,” a report based on research conducted by Ronald C. Wimberley and North Carolina State University, 819 mailed survey responses, weighted to be representative of the US population, 2001-2002.

⁹⁴ Ronald C. Wimberley 2001-2002.

⁹⁵ Ronald C. Wimberley 2001-2002.

⁹⁶ Roper Public Affairs & Media, March 26 to April 10, 2004.

⁹⁷ Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

to buy local. As noted in the table below, those who consider it important to buy local place more importance on nutrition, chemicals, and organic properties.⁹⁸ (Table 19)

Most indicate that they have acted to buy locally produced food. More than two-thirds (70 percent) have purchased something directly from a farmer in the prior year. A majority (54 percent) report that they have purchased from a farmers' market and 40 percent have bought from a farm stand.¹⁰⁰

In response to an open-ended question about the benefits of locally grown food, survey respondents in regions with buy local campaigns report that they buy locally produced food because it is fresher (44 percent), to support their community and local farmers (40 percent) and because it tastes better (12 percent). Most often, people report that they prefer to buy locally grown vegetables (70 percent) and fruit (59 percent), while fewer prefer locally grown meat (18 percent), dairy (13 percent), and poultry (10 percent). Only 13 percent say that it is not important to buy local.¹⁰¹

The challenge for buy local efforts is to offer people easy opportunities to purchase locally grown food on a regular basis.

The public needs little convincing that locally grown food has benefits, however, exposing the public to locally grown food may be a challenge. Most weekly shopping occurs in locations that are unlikely to have a large amount of locally grown food, such as large grocery stores (73 percent shop on a weekly basis), small independent stores (37 percent), convenience stores (36 percent), and warehouse stores (9 percent). Fewer frequently shop at locations that specialize in locally grown foods: farmers' markets (11 percent), roadside stands (5 percent), and community supported farms (4 percent).¹⁰²

Furthermore, even if a grocery store carries locally grown food, noticeable signage would be needed to draw shoppers' attention, because few frequently look at labels to determine place of origin (39 percent frequently, 21 percent sometimes).¹⁰³

Table 19:

% Very Important	Reasons to Buy Locally Produced Food ⁹⁹	
	Consider Buying Local Important	Not Important
Freshness	89	84
Nutritious or healthy	73	58
Chemicals/pesticides	64	46
Cost	62	55
Convenience	40	40
Organic	27	11

⁹⁸ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, sponsored by Foodroutes Network, from a report by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 4 surveys of 400 each, conducted in areas with buy local campaigns (Santa Cruz County, California; Blackhawk County, Iowa; the Greater Philadelphia Metro region; and Baton Rouge, Louisiana), March 12-21, 2002. Due to the continuity of response the research combined survey results from all four regions.

⁹⁹ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, March 12-21, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

¹⁰¹ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, March 12-21, 2002.

¹⁰² Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, March 12-21, 2002.

¹⁰³ Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

Americans support farm subsidies by wide margins. They are particularly likely to support subsidies for small farms, for those farms that have been damaged by weather, and for farmers who are willing to incorporate environmental practices.

There is near universal support for providing federal payments to help farmers stay in business when drought or floods damage farmer's crops (88 percent approve) and three-quarters approve of providing federal payments to help farmers stay in business when they face low market prices for their farm products (77 percent).¹⁰⁴ Members of the public are divided in their understanding of the existing subsidy process. Half of Americans (50 percent) believe that farmers receive subsidies on a regular annual basis, while nearly as many (46 percent) believe they only receive subsidies in bad years.¹⁰⁵

When they take farm size into account, survey respondents support subsidies to small scale farms and oppose subsidies to large-scale farms. By a 77 percent to 19 percent margin, Americans favor providing subsidies to farms of less than 500 acres. Forced to choose between conditions, 44 percent favor giving subsidies to small farmers only in bad years while 34 percent favor giving subsidies on a regular, annual basis. The public is less enthusiastic about subsidies for large farming businesses. In fact, only 31 percent favor and 65 percent oppose giving subsidies to large farming businesses. Those who favor subsidies would provide them in bad years (24 percent) while few (9%) would give subsidies on a regular, annual basis. Similarly, a majority (57 percent) opposes providing subsidies to businesses that provide farmers with equipment and services, while only 36 percent favor providing them subsidies.¹⁰⁶

Americans believe that the US government farm policy currently favors large farming businesses (80 percent), not small farmers (6 percent).¹⁰⁷ In fact, the public assumes that more than half of subsidies (58 percent of subsidies on average) go to large agricultural businesses, while 42 percent of subsidies go to small farmers. However, they *want* subsidies to favor small businesses (63 percent of subsidies should go to small farmers, 36 percent to large agricultural businesses).¹⁰⁸

The public consistently lands on the side of subsidizing farmers.

In a series of two-sided debates, a majority of the public always chose the pro-subsidy stance. The most compelling reasons to support subsidies include controlling food cost, protecting family farms from economic competition, the benefits of locally grown foods, food safety and food supply. (Table 20)

People also value farms and ranches for a number of environmental reasons. They believe land owners have a responsibility to be good stewards of the land and support subsidies to encourage environmental practices on farms.

People value farms and ranches for a variety of environmental reasons including: as habitats for wildlife, like pheasants, wild ducks, and other animals (58 percent value highly), scenic qualities (46 percent), and recreational opportunities (32 percent).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

¹⁰⁵ PIPA and Knowledge Networks, December 19, 2003 – January 5, 2004.

¹⁰⁶ PIPA and Knowledge Networks, December 19, 2003 – January 5, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ PIPA and Knowledge Networks, December 19, 2003 – January 5, 2004.

¹⁰⁸ PIPA and Knowledge Networks, December 19, 2003 – January 5, 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

Table 20:

Choosing Between Two Sides of a Farm Subsidy Argument¹¹⁰

In Percent

Preferred Statement	%	Rejected Statement	%
It is up to individuals to decide how much food they eat. Removing subsidies and driving up the cost of food is not the way to address the problem of obesity and would be hard on the pocketbooks of low-income Americans.	79	Subsidies have prompted US agribusiness to produce far more food than the US people can eat, driving down the cost of food. This has led retailers to serve larger portions of food and played a major role in the epidemic of obesity, which is threatening the health of many Americans and driving up healthcare costs.	16
Family farming is an American way of life that should be maintained. Subsidies are the only way that small family farms can compete with large agribusiness and imports from low-wage countries.	70	There are many ways of making a living that are part of the American way of life. It is unfair to subsidize farmers and not subsidize other equally American ways of making a living.	25
People should have food available to them that was locally grown. Locally grown foods taste better and lead people to have a larger share of fresh foods in their diet. Without subsidies, most of our food would be grown far away, even in foreign countries.	70	Having locally grown food is nice, but the people who want it should be willing to pay the extra cost of producing it, rather than expecting the government to subsidize their preferences for certain kinds of food.	26
Farming is a risky business. Depending on the weather, farmers have good years and bad years. The government needs to help farmers have a minimum income so that they can be sure they will get through the bad years.	62	Farmers should not be given preferential treatment. Just like any business, they should have capital reserves and insurance protection, so they can take care of themselves if they have a bad year. They should not expect the government to bail them out.	34
When food is grown in the USA we can be more confident that it meets the proper food safety standards. Subsidies ensure that American farmers can keep producing safe food for the American people.	61	The US government monitors the safety of all food sold in the US, so there is no reason to believe that imported food is less safe. Subsidizing American agribusiness based on such unfounded fears is a waste of taxpayers' money.	36
There is nothing more important than food. The government needs to subsidize farming to make sure there will always be a good supply of food and that the price does not go up and down, according to the whims of the market.	58	It is not consistent with the American way to have a whole sector of the economy dependent on government handouts at taxpayers' expense. We should trust the market, not the government, to find the right balance between supply and demand.	37
It is not our responsibility to take care of farmers in other countries. We need to do what is best for America and let other countries take care of themselves.	56	It is unfair for US farmers to get government subsidies so that they can sell their products below the price of production, making it impossible for poor farmers to compete. We don't like it when other countries do the same kind of thing to us.	37
It is good for the US to subsidize its farmers because then they are able to provide food to people around the world at very low prices, enabling poor countries to feed their populations and reducing hunger.	54	It is not good for the US to flood the world market with subsidized food. This has been shown to undercut farmers in poor countries that rely on agriculture. In many cases this has wiped out their agriculture, made these countries dependent on the US and increased hunger.	37
If we do not give subsidies to US farmers, other developed countries will keep giving subsidies to their farmers and the US will not be able to compete in the global market.	54	If we give subsidies it is just as likely that other developed countries will just match them, creating an endless cycle. We should do what makes sense—reduce our subsidies—and press others to do the same.	38
Farmers in poor countries work for much lower returns than American farmers. Without government subsidies, American farmers won't be able to compete and a lot of people working on farms will end up unemployed.	53	Rather than giving poor countries foreign aid, it is better to let them export what they can produce. For many poor countries, agricultural products are one of the few things they can export. We should not undercut them by flooding the world market with cheap subsidized farm products.	38
Subsidizing farmers gives America an important export product. If subsidies were ended it would lead the US to import more food, worsening the already-bad trade balance we have with other countries.	50	If the US uses taxpayers' money to prop up exports, it only creates an illusory gain, because ultimately these subsidies have to be paid for by raising taxes or increasing deficits.	40

¹⁰⁹ PIPA and Knowledge Networks, December 19, 2003 – January 5, 2004.

A land owner has a responsibility to be a good steward, assert survey participants. Nearly all (94 percent) agree with the statement “Land owners have responsibilities to protect soil resources for future generations,” and a majority (56 percent) believes “Farmers who fail to adopt needed soil conservation practices should be financially penalized.”¹¹¹

The public would like more commitment from farmers concerning environmental practices in exchange for federal subsidies. A majority (58 percent) states that farmers willing to use practices to protect water and air from pollution should receive more federal payments than farmers who refuse to do so, while 31 percent believe the limited money should be based on financial need alone.¹¹² Furthermore, three-quarters and higher approve of several environmental conditions on federal payments:

- Adopt university tested practices to prevent pollution of streams or other bodies of water 88 percent approve
- Protect wetlands on their farm or ranch 83 percent
- Apply some conservation practices, such as protecting waterways, wetlands, and wildlife 75 percent
- Adopt university tested practices for providing wildlife habitat on their land 73 percent¹¹³

Importantly, the public supports subsidies to encourage environmental practices, but does not see that farms harm the environment. Therefore, farming is not currently an “environmental problem,” though farmers can be enlisted in environmental solutions.

A majority (54 percent) disagrees that “farming is a major source of pollution in our nation today” and only 20 percent agree. Furthermore, survey participants select “undecided” at high levels when confronted with statements about environmental damage by farming. A plurality (45 percent) is undecided whether, “Present farming methods are polluting our water supplies,” while just 34 percent agree and 21 percent disagree. Similarly, 43 percent are undecided whether, “American farmers use more chemicals than are necessary to produce food,” though just as many (43 percent) agree that farmers use more chemicals than necessary.¹¹⁴

Americans are more likely to worry about the environmental impact by farming in other countries than in the United States. Three quarters worry (74 percent worry, 42 percent worry a great deal) about farming’s impact on the environments of other countries, while fewer (61 percent worry, 27 percent worry a great deal) worry about the environmental problems that are caused by U.S. farming methods.¹¹⁵

Once again, the public assumes that small family farms are more responsible than large scale farms. More than two-thirds (69 percent) believe that smaller-scale family farms are more likely to use techniques that will not harm the environment, while 22 percent choose large-scale industrial farms.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Ronald C. Wimberley, 2001-2002.

¹¹² Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

¹¹³ Tarrance Group, June 2-June 21, 2001.

¹¹⁴ Ronald C. Wimberley, 2001-2002.

¹¹⁵ Ronald C. Wimberley, 2001-2002.

¹¹⁶ Roper Public Affairs & Media, March 26 to April 10, 2004.

While they want animals to be treated humanely, most Americans do not support significant reforms to protect animal rights.

Nearly three-quarters (71 percent) believe that “animals deserve some protection from harm and exploitation,” while 25 percent believe that “animals deserve the exact same rights as people to be free from harm and exploitation.” Furthermore, a majority favors passing strict laws concerning the treatment of farm animals (62 percent support, 35 percent oppose). At the same time, the public opposes several proposals concerning the treatment of non-farm animals, such as: banning all types of hunting (22 percent support, 76 percent oppose), banning all medical research on laboratory animals (35 percent support, 64 percent oppose), and banning all product testing on laboratory animals (38 percent support, 61 percent oppose).¹¹⁷

However, concern about the humane treatment of animals may be on the rise. One survey showed increases in support for humane treatment standards (48 percent in 2004, up from 37 percent in 2003) and humane slaughter (44 percent in 2004 compared to 30 percent in 2003).¹¹⁸

Majorities are willing to pay for environmentally-friendly farming, but fewer are willing to pay for food production practices that treat animals humanely.

Finally, strong majorities report that they are willing to pay more for farming practices that are environmentally friendly:

- 81 percent agree “I would be willing to pay more for food grown on farms using good environmental practices.”
- 71 percent agree “I would be willing to pay more for food if it meant that it could be produced in ways that protect the environment.”
- 60 percent agree “I would be willing to pay more for food produced without using chemicals.”¹¹⁹

Fewer are willing to pay more for the humane treatment of animals. A slim majority (51 percent) reports that they are willing to spend more for humanely-produced food. One in seven (14 percent) is willing to pay 5 percent more, one in five (21 percent) is willing to pay 10 percent more, and 16 percent of survey respondents are willing to spend 20 percent more for food produced with the humane treatment of animals.¹²⁰

Summary Points

Americans are generally satisfied with various actors in the nation’s food system and see them as trusted spokespeople. At the same time, this high level of public satisfaction indicates there is little support for government intervention in the nation’s food system.

¹¹⁷ The Gallup Organization, 1,005 adults nationally, May 5-May 7, 2003. Data provided by The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

¹¹⁸ Synovate, May 2003.

¹¹⁹ Ronald C. Wimberley, 2001-2002.

¹²⁰ Roper Public Affairs & Media, March 26 to April 10, 2004.

People are concerned about physical health and have some understanding of the link between food and health. However, they are frequently confused about conflicting health information.

Most importantly, the current food-health conversation emphasizes food choices and individual responsibility. The food system is invisible in this conversation.

The public is more open to shared responsibility for children's health and nutrition. Even here, however, support for policies can be easily undermined with more powerful frames, such as parental responsibility. School-based nutrition provides an opening for a conversation about child health, but since most believe school lunches are nutritious, this may be a challenging approach.

Currently, people do not think very much about food processing and production. While they are aware of some dangers and benefits that occur due to food production practices, opinion in this area is largely unformed and malleable. There may be an opportunity to shape opinion by linking human health with food production in ways that make the food system more visible.

The public holds very positive perceptions of farms, particularly small family farms. People believe small family farms produce safer, more nutritious food and are more likely to protect the environment. There may be an opportunity build on these understandings to lead to support for policy. The challenge will be in moving people from *just* positive feelings toward a more sophisticated understanding that will promote long-term change.

Not While I'm Eating:

How and Why Americans Don't Think about Food Systems

Findings from Cognitive Elicitations

By Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., Andrew Brown, Ph.D., and Joseph Grady, Ph.D.

Background

Experts and advocates have had considerable success in educating certain groups of Americans about the nature of, and problems with, our food system. Various producers, retailers, and consumers are working hard to re-think and re-make food systems into something healthier, more satisfying and more sustainable. Yet most of the U.S. population remains persistently indifferent to the whole question of where their food-stuffs actually come from and whether and how systems might be improved. Without a change in the public's thinking on issues related to food systems, real progress is likely to be very slow.

This research is part of a broader effort, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, to understand why and how Americans manage to remain blind to the real processes of food production and distribution – despite the central role of food in American life. Cultural Logic's cognitive elicitation with Americans were designed to explore the public's default patterns of thought related to food systems because, for better or worse, it is by means of these understandings (cognitive and cultural “models”) that people think, learn and communicate. Even if they are offered information that is critical from an expert perspective, people's thinking on the issue can be derailed by the faulty assumptions, misguided inferences, conflicting values, and gaps in knowledge that characterize their current dominant frames. Communications that are meant to be comprehensible and persuasive to the broader population must be crafted with these default understandings in mind – otherwise, messages are likely to be disregarded, disbelieved or misunderstood. In effect, they cannot make their way into the public consciousness.

Summary of Findings

It will not surprise readers of this report that Americans think very little about where their food comes from. There are a variety of straightforward reasons why this should be the case; for the majority of living Americans, food has always been available and acceptably healthy. Furthermore, fewer and fewer Americans participate in food production, or even witness it. It is partly due to American exceptionalism in such matters that the U.S. stands in such historical contrast with most other cultures in the world, when it comes to interest in how food is produced.

Besides these most obvious reasons, though, there are other powerful factors that prevent Americans from thinking about and engaging with the topic of food systems. The importance of these factors is that *they have the power to derail productive thinking even when experts try to focus the public's attention on this usually-ignored issue area.* This report focuses on two default

modes of thinking about food, both of which obscure and distort the “Big Picture.” The first and more dominant of these modes is based on people’s own Lived Experience – providing “little picture” perspectives, along with emotional incentives *not* to think about food systems. The other is a mode that allows for a “big picture” of a sort, but is too generic (and misleading) to be very helpful.

The dominance of lived experience

Most of the time, for most Americans, thinking about food is dominated by default understandings and emotional stances that are based on the lived experience of eating, shopping, cooking, being served, and so forth. Various aspects of people’s thinking about *food* make it much harder for them to think about *food systems*.

- *The big picture is essentially “crowded out.”*

The more familiar and natural patterns of thinking associated with the experiential domain of food are so rich, complete and cognitively satisfying that people typically have no sense that there is something more to know, and they are not asking the questions experts want to answer for them. It is difficult for new information to find its way into the established, little-picture ways of thinking.

- *New information is translated into new (and less productive) terms by the dominant models.*

The default patterns of thinking are so powerful that new information (presented by advocates, for example) can become *confirmation of existing understandings*, rather than helping people achieve new understandings. Warnings about food risks, for instance, are interpreted as confirmation that *individuals* need to make smarter choices, and that *individual foods* should be avoided, since “healthy food” and “healthy eating” are understood in these comfortable, little-picture terms – as opposed to having anything to do with systems of production, marketing or cultural patterns.

- *There is emotional pressure to ignore problems in the food system.*

The lived experience of food creates close ties in people’s thinking between food and nurturance, and various aspects of contemporary culture reinforce people’s sense of being passive “receivers” of this food/nurturance. Along with a default Consumer Stance, which prompts people to trust the places where they shop, for example, the Food Receiver stance discourages people from taking responsibility or thinking critically, and encourages a trusting complacency – people are motivated to block out troubling information, and in fact, *any* information about the ultimate sources of food. Importantly, this pattern of denial goes well beyond people’s conscious sense that they’d “just as soon not know,” and shapes their thinking at a more unconscious level.

Food systems as just another example of “Modernization”

When Americans *are* induced to move outside their comfortable patterns of reasoning about food, and to think about food production in broader terms, their thinking reflects a generic sense of how the “modern” world works – incorporating fragmentary information about food systems, but not adding up to a fuller picture that could help people understand the importance of the changes advocated by experts.

Members of the public can, when pressed, offer simple sketches of some of the basic elements of the American food system, including large, corporate farms (which may be relatively high-tech); distribution to restaurants and stores (especially including supermarkets); extensive processing of basic foodstuffs into ready-made products; and government guarantees of food quality. At first glance, this sketch seems to correspond well (if very incompletely) to expert models. Upon closer examination, though, it is clear that rather than a simplified food system model, people are operating from a generic model of Modernization, and plugging in their smattering of factual knowledge about food and food production. While this public model overlaps with expert understandings, it also entails significant distortions, unfortunate assumptions and cognitive “blind spots” such as the following:

- *The degree of modernization is exaggerated.*

Applying the generic narrative of modernization to food, people may believe that family farms are extinct, or else entirely irrelevant to the actual food supply; that all food production is in the hands of multifaceted conglomerates; and that farms are almost indistinguishable from factories.

- *Modernization is seen as unstoppable.*

Since modernization as a general trend is seen as an inevitable, impersonal progression, Americans often believe the same about food systems. There is nothing people do to “cause” modernization, and nothing they can do to stop it or substantially guide its progress.

- *Problems are the “price of progress.”*

The most natural way of understanding problems within a “Modernization” frame are as costs of the benefits we all want. Attempted “solutions” to the problems may be seen as misguided interference which threatens the benefits.

- *Certain kinds of information have no place and are filtered out.*

If people’s thinking about food is shaped by a “modernization” schema – rather than by a (missing) food system model – then information that doesn’t fit that schema is harder to focus on and remember. This helps explain why people don’t understand sustainability (preserving things as they are sounds like a contradiction of modernization), diversity (of crops or of farmers – modernization is largely “about” standardization), agricultural subsidies (which can seem like Quixotic bulwarks against modernization), or organic farming (which can seem like an irrelevant side current, or another attempt to resist modernization).

More generally, the lack of a specific model of food systems means that certain kinds of information has no place to “stick” in people’s minds. (It is a well-established principle in the cognitive sciences that facts are not stored like isolated objects in the mind, but as parts of broader organizing “schemas,” “models,” or “frames.”)

The limited educational value of food scares

Food scares have some power to raise awareness about larger issues related to food production, but their effects are severely limited by the powerful default patterns of thinking described above.

- *Food scares may serve simply to confirm the generic Modernization narrative.*

Rather than adding new understandings to people's repertoire, food scares are just as likely to simply confirm familiar ideas about the inevitable costs and risks of progress. Since people are generally passive and complacent about progress, a particular food scare is not likely to lead them in productive directions.

- *Familiar little-picture models reassert themselves quickly in people's thinking.*

Even if people catch a brief glimpse of a systems perspective on food, they are likely to return to a more natural mode of reasoning focused on lived experience and the "little picture." Food safety issues become questions about smart *individual choices* at the store, or disappear altogether as people's Consumer and Food Receiver models take over, allowing them to forget the uncomfortable information and resume their enjoyment of the products of the food system. The news media's brief, episodic discussion of food safety "incidents" makes it especially easy for people to take in information without learning anything of substance.

Research Method

The analysis presented here is based on interviews conducted by Cultural Logic in 2005 with a diverse group of thirty individuals in Indiana, North Carolina, California and Rhode Island.

Subjects

Subjects were recruited by various means, including postings on Web sites and through a process of ethnographic networking – researchers began with "seed contacts" in each of the target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing.¹ The sample included 15 women and 15 men. Subjects' ages ranged widely – 10 subjects were in their teens or 20s, 9 in their 30s, 5 in their 40s, and 6 were 60 or older. 20 of the subjects were European-American, 4 were African-American, 3 were Asian-American and 3 were Hispanic-American. The sample also included a mix of political orientations (11 conservatives, 1 independent, and 18 liberals), and of people who live and grew up in urban, suburban and rural areas. Educational backgrounds also ranged widely (high-school only to graduate degree) as did occupations.²

Elicitations

Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured, recorded interviews ("cognitive elicitations"), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging.

Cognitive Analysis

This type of data-gathering – and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive

¹ See discussion of "snowball sampling" as a key technique of ethnographic research in H. Russell Bernard's *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches, 2nd Edition*. 1995. (pp.97ff).

² Note that, rather than looking for differences between groups as some research methods do, cognitive elicitations are designed to identify common patterns across groups of Americans.

anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more established and long-standing, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.

Cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural *models*) can guide people's understanding of an issue in ways they do not even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. For example, average Americans recognize on an intellectual level that their food comes from a complex process of production and distribution that is very important to their quality of life, yet habitual ways of thinking about food create cognitive "blind spots." People who *know better on some level*, still are easily derailed from thinking about food systems because of well-established, default understandings of the world. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.

Finding 1: Interference from Dominant Models

One of the chief obstacles to engaging the public on issues related to food systems is people's powerful tendency to think in modes that exclude the knowledge that expert messages are based on: *People rarely think about food systems, because their thinking is dominated and guided by "Little Picture" understandings of food, based on their own lived experience.*

The experience of food

The natural and default understandings that guide people's thinking about food most of the time are rooted in their direct experiences of shopping, cooking, serving, being served and eating. When asked what was important to them about food, people inevitably answered with models rooted in their direct, everyday experience of food.

I think good food is enjoyable, something that tastes good. I like to cook, so for me, good food is something that I know I cooked . . . I like trying new things. You know you're getting pleasure out of eating something that you haven't had before.

Suburban female, age 29

If you've ever taken your time and you had no obligations, just chilling, eating food with your family and just hanging out, it's like the greatest thing. Yeah. At family get-togethers. Definitely food. Food's awesome. . . . No, to tell you honestly, I really don't care where the food comes from. I'd rather like to think that it came from somewhere and somebody got paid for it and everybody's happy but I'm sure it's not the case all the time.

Rural male, age 25

People's thinking about each of these experiential domains is dominated by rich sets of familiar, cognitively satisfying models. Food is variously construed as:

- nutrients for a body;
- a matter of individual pleasure and aesthetics;
- a source of comfort or opportunity for exploration;
- a way through which people construct and live a particular "style" of life (individual, regional, ethnic, and so on);
- a matter of personal health and self-discipline;
- a daily chore;
- a significant expense.

Unfortunately, and to a striking degree, these understandings do not require any "Big Picture" grasp at all of where food comes from.

The significance of the dominance of these lived-experience models is that they can actively interfere with and derail attempts to communicate about broader issues.

Crowding out other models

To some extent, little-picture models of food simply "occupy the space" in people's minds where experts would like to introduce new information and patterns of understanding. Because their current understandings feel so complete, people typically don't seek out information about food systems – *they are not asking the questions that experts would like to answer*. More insidiously, these default models guide people's thinking in ways that distort the kinds of information provided by advocates and experts.

Example: A model for production and distribution: the store and the cook

Cognitive models already exist that explain where food comes from, but these are decidedly not the models that experts would like people to think in terms of. Models based on lived experience only follow the chain of production and distribution back one or two steps – to the cook and to the store. This little picture reflects people's familiar patterns of giving and receiving food, and so, from a cognitive perspective, it "explains" food production, distribution and consumption, blinding people to broader understanding. When people are questioned about the food they eat, they find it hard to think beyond the retail outlet.

Q: *When you think about the food that you eat, what are the steps that get it to your table, whether it's bread or produce or whatever?*

A: *Oh, you mean like the steps — in other words shopping, or microwave?*

Q: *More like, How was it produced? How did it end up in the grocery store?*

A: *That, I'm not as familiar with.*

Urban female, age 33

A: *Fish? Where does it come from? Well, it comes from the ocean.*

Q: *Sure. But so how does it get here?*

A: *Oh um, I never really thought of that. I guess they fish for it.*

Q: OK. Who do you picture fishing?

A: I don't know, kind of I guess just fishermen. I don't know exactly.

Q: What's the picture in your head if there is one?

A: Well when I do buy fish, I normally buy it at a Chinese market. It's like an indoor market. It's a supermarket or like a grocery store. But it's just for Chinese food... and if I'm going to buy shrimp or fish or anything I'll buy it there. Because it's fresh.

Urban female, age 37

Information “translated” by dominant models

When experts offer information about some aspect of food systems, this information often ends up reinforcing people's current understandings rather than introducing new ones. This is because the public's dominant, pre-existing models already seem to “explain” the facts experts want to talk about, so that “new information” in fact confirms and strengthens the established understandings that are based on the lived-experience, little-picture perspective.

Example: Personal health as good individual food choices

From an expert perspective, there are important health effects that emerge from properties of food systems. From the perspective of the public's little-picture models, though, health effects arise from *individual food choices* and the characteristics of *individual foods*.

The average person makes food choices first and foremost based upon availability, aesthetics, price, and convenience. But healthfulness is one area where many Americans do a considerable amount of cognitive work. Their cognitive models of healthy eating give them ways of thinking about the repercussions of food choices, taking in complex and changing information, making calculations, and making partly moral judgments about success (i.e. being “good” and disciplined) and failure (i.e. being “bad” or undisciplined). However, people remain relatively blind to the health effects of Food Systems. Instead their thinking takes place entirely within a little picture.

- “Individuals can and should choose healthy options.”

This stance is fundamentally about individuals and not about food systems, and it incorporates ideas of morality, maturity and self-discipline. It is a person's bad choices that lead to ill-health.

Look around you. Everybody who weighs 300 pounds has made an unwise choice. Health stuff is in the media. Nobody doesn't know that a stick of butter is too much for one day. And a lot of people probably use a stick of butter in a day.

Rural female, age 65

It takes a certain amount of discipline to [eat healthy], and I don't think the general public has that. Not to eat unhealthy. To incorporate more vegetables into a diet. And why would I think that? Because I see it on the news about obesity running rampant.

Suburban male, age 30

This little picture model that focuses upon individuals, their knowledge, their personal discipline, and their “moral fiber” pre-empts any explanation that tries to take the effects of food systems into account. It is a powerful item of “common sense” that is very difficult to contradict.

And viewed through this powerful cognitive lens, a systems view (e.g. “corporations are irresponsibly marketing unhealthy food”) sounds like an “excuse” for people who lack the wisdom or strength of character to choose wisely.

- “Healthfulness is in the ingredients, not the system.”

In the cultural models that link food with health, food is assembled from ingredients (like fat, or preservatives, or whole grains), each of which has some impact on an individual body’s health. This limited view offers no help in understanding systems-related health issues, which can include epidemiological effects across populations, environmental impacts, and the effects of corporate ownership on food quality.

Ultimately, the models imply that the response to most problems with food is not to intervene in the systems that create the food, but rather to use different ingredients, and for individuals to make better choices. If people are to learn to associate human health with healthy food systems, they will need a great deal of help in seeing these connections and adopting a broader perspective than the ones they are comfortable with.

Emotional resistance created by dominant models

Not only do the public’s default models “occupy the cognitive space” and “answer the questions” people have about food, they also involve emotionally important stances toward food, many of which are counterproductive from the perspective of experts and advocates. These stances can act powerfully against people’s ability to think critically (or at all) about food systems.

Case 1: Food is about “being nurtured”

Importantly, many of our most intimate associations with the lived experience of food (and our sense of where it comes from) involve nurturance of one kind or another. Eating, sharing food, taking part in meals and gatherings, being treated to a night out are all examples of this lived experience. There is also a basic and universal set of associations that relate parenting to giving food, and childhood to receiving food. These comfortable and well-entrenched ways of thinking about food actually *discourage* thinking about the bigger picture, and food systems in the expert sense.

- Passive gratitude

Part of the pleasure and appreciation of food is accepting the role of receiver, of being nurtured. Being fed, looked after, cared for, tended to, treated, and so on, involves a passive stance of acceptance that calls for gratitude, not analysis. This also clearly places the source of food at the nurturer, especially the parent and the cook. This little picture is self-contained, familiar and powerful and the big picture has no role to play here.

Good food reminds me of something. Whether it be a holiday, or something my mom cooks. Often to me good food is comforting. It’s satisfies a desire or craving a lot of times. For me food is a memory thing.

Suburban Female, age 24

If people associate eating with being nurtured, they are motivated *not* to think hard about where the food is actually coming from, beyond the immediate offerer. And given

the current American system of food production and distribution, average Americans find themselves more and more often in the passive role of receiver/child:

- With the growing reliance upon processed foods and convenience foods, people cook less and rely upon professionalized food systems more for preparation and presentation.
- Because of an individualistic social system, we are eager for nurturance in our lives, and food is a common resource. The desire for “comfort foods,” regardless of who actually prepared them, is a case in point.
- The consumer industry caters to this need. Advertising focuses on the nurturing dimension of food, commonly portraying food as love, and often supplying iconic nurturant figures as spokespeople. People speak about commercial food providers in much the same way as they would family members.

I love McDonalds. I've had it ever since I was a little girl. I used to call it “Donald’s.” That was practically my first word.

Urban female, age 19

If I was still married, my wife would be cooking the food and whatever she decided, whether we're going to be watching our weight or eating a lot of protein . . . Now, for breakfast I go up to McDonalds and I get a McGriddle, which keeps me going through the morning. And then I'll get a wrap or a salad or something for lunchtime. I'm mostly in the hands of what, whoever prepares food.

Urban male, age 62

For all these reasons, food regularly appears in front of us without our needing to understand much about it, as we rely upon others to think about it for us. The passive stance toward food – which discourages critical engagement with food systems – is perpetually reinforced from all sides.

At some level, no one wants to think ill of their nurturers. The experience of feeling nurtured depends on trusting the “nurturer” – whether a parent, a small farmer, or Archer Daniels Midland. The nurturing role is morally good by default, and not compatible with the troubling truths about food systems. The appropriate response to being nurtured is gratitude, deference and acceptance. To respond otherwise is ingratitude, an attitude most people try to avoid.

Efforts to get people to dwell on problems of the (nurturing) food system can violate people's deep desire to be secure, to be nurtured and to successfully nurture others. Ultimately, the Food Receiver stance promotes denial about the problematic nature of food and food systems. When people are asked to start with their familiar, lived experience of food and “think outwards” about the larger food system, they will often be only reluctantly critical.

Case 2: The Consumer Stance

Like “being nurtured,” the “consumer stance” is an extremely powerful default model that interferes with people's ability to understand and critique the big picture of food systems. The Consumer Stance is a general, little-picture orientation for Americans that limits and distorts thinking on many different issues (including health insurance and energy, to name two others), and in a variety of different ways:

- It implies a hierarchical relationship between provider and buyer, and a child-like passivity on the part of the consumer.

- It makes the idea of a “system” (which is broken, dysfunctional, or in need of improvement) hard to focus on.
- It narrows an individual’s scope of action to merely choosing from pre-existing alternatives. (A consumer does not typically imagine or create alternative products, but merely chooses to buy, not buy, or search further.)

Like the model of healthy eating, for instance, the Consumer Stance – toward food or anything else – is a little-picture perspective that is perfectly self-contained and “good to think.” It seems to explain how the world works, and limits the kinds of questions people ask.

People’s thinking about food fits very naturally within the Consumer Stance perspective. Understandings that focus upon the table and the point of sale are perfectly coherent, and feel complete, without any reference to the broader picture of where food comes from.

Following this model, even if people do notice problems with food, they act only through consumer choice. For instance, if they want to reject factory farming, they opt out by purchasing free-range meats or organic produce – they do not seek to reform the food system. In the Consumer Stance appeals to reform the food system seem at best superfluous and at worst an infringement on people’s freedom of choice.

Even when challenged to think abstractly about the implications of food systems, people tend to fall back to understandings based on consumer choice.

For the most part I think the food [at the farmer’s market] is more expensive because it’s grown more carefully and it’s cared for. I guess I see myself as being able to make some choices. I do not make a lot of money but I can make some choices. I think so many people don’t have choices. And I think that’s too bad . . . Or they don’t have the knowledge, or they see the coupons at the supermarket and go for the frozen food that’s half-off that week.

Rural female, age 53

If you know it’s local, then you might know who’s growing it. And what they’re doing to it. Then you have an easier time picking and choosing the kinds of things you’re willing to ingest. Whether it’s chemicals or genetically altered foods or whatever.

Rural female, age 19

- The myth of “consumer demand”

The Consumer Stance includes a specific view of how products “come to be.” There is a well-established and widespread presumption that consumer choice creates “demand,” which is then met by suppliers – things are there on the shelves because consumers want them there. While this is partly true, the model exaggerates the degree to which consumer choice shapes the system. It almost completely obscures the ways in which consumer behavior is *created, shaped and constrained by* the food system.

To the extent that people stay within the little picture of the Consumer Stance, they find it difficult to understand the power that systems of production and distribution have over their daily lives.

A: *They've engineered the tougher skin so the apple can travel.*

Q: *So what do you think about that?*

A: *I guess it's ok. I don't see any harm in the apple. It just doesn't taste as good. It's not as comforting as an apple that you can bite into easily. But as long as people put up with it and go on buying it, I don't think a tougher skin hurts the apple.*

Rural female, age 65

Following this model, the only appropriate way that people shape the system is to “vote with their pocketbooks.”

- The “decent merchant”

It is difficult for people to think of products that enter their homes as having morally problematic origins. The fact that the clothes we wear are often produced in sweatshops (and even by slave labor) has proved shocking to consumers; yet it is easy for most of us to quickly return to our usual way of thinking. Food is particularly intimate – it enters not just our homes but our bodies – and thus is hard to associate with bad origins.

- The “fantasy food system”

In many ways, direct and indirect, American food marketing creates a parallel, imaginary food system that encourages people not to think about the real system. This system is partly based on nostalgic, traditional images and partly on pure fantasy. Marketers display images of sunny kitchens instead of factories; happy, flower-eating cows donate their milk for the children; and the magic of cartoon elves stands in for the work of cookie-making chemists. The bucolic farm scene that is still central in American stereotyped understandings of rural life is often pictured. These images are more attractive and in many ways a better fit with default thinking than are the real systems.

Q: *Would you have any sense of where the milk that you would buy would come from?*

A: *Local dairy, local cows I would guess.*

Q: *If you picture where those cows are what comes to mind?*

A: *They're in a nice green pasture somewhere.*

Q: *Do you figure that's probably the truth or is that how you would like to picture it?*

A: *That's the way I'd like to picture it. They probably eat out of a trough and don't wander around very much.*

Urban male, age 62

Ads or campaigns that address the bigger picture (health, environmentalism, social justice, etc.) face a tough uphill battle against the fantasies reinforced by marketers.

A cumulative “gravitational effect”

While members of the public are capable of critiquing aspects of the American food system, the unconscious patterns we have described in this section exert a powerful pull that bring people's thinking back again and again into line with comfortable models. It is hard to “keep people on track” in a critical discussion about food systems, and even though people can sometimes *talk* critically about the topic, they may *act* with the trust and complacency consistent with the models described here.

In the next section we consider more carefully what happens as people are able to maintain attention on (relatively) realistic understandings of the American food system.

Finding 2: Food Systems and Modernization

When pressed, average Americans are able to provide a reasonably coherent, if very impoverished, description of a larger food production and distribution system. The account they offer includes some of the basic elements of what experts would like Americans to consider as they think about food and where it comes from. It is clear, however, that people are essentially *making this account up as they go along* – they have no established understanding that they can easily call to mind, and instead they must scratch their heads and imagine what the “real story” is, or must be. Their method for doing this appears to involve taking fragmentary pieces of knowledge about food production that they have absorbed and “plugging them in” to a very familiar, pre-existing cultural model – their understanding of Modernization. The resulting account includes many gaps and distortions, and can be thought of as a simplified caricature of actual U.S. food systems – one that is probably as counterproductive as it is helpful, from the perspective of advocates.

An educated guess: modernized food systems

Because modernization is related to changing food systems in the understandings of experts as well, the average person's systems view, such as it is, does overlap with an expert model.

Agricultural system

People surmise that food is produced primarily by large-scale agricultural operations, relying upon machine technology and scientifically-developed inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They don't assume that the food system is dominated by owner-operated family farmers who sell directly to retailers. Instead, people often sketch a system more characterized by corporate-client, manager-employee, and buyer-seller relationships.

Economic system

People have a sense that farming success is not just dependent upon weather, soil and pests, but also upon market forces, competition and government policies. They see “economic forces” as a primary cause of changes in the food system.

Distribution, retail & marketing system

They can more or less visualize a complex and modern distribution system, where large companies buy up, process and truck products to supermarkets, food “factories,” and restaurants.

As far as the US goes I'm sure they probably raise [cows] on large cattle farms and, you know, slaughter them and probably pack them up, put them on trucks. Maybe they send them to factories to package them, but I'm not sure about that. Then they probably send their trucks from there and go to each individual place.

Rural female, age 23

Regulatory system

They are aware of regulatory agencies like the FDA and USDA, which are entrusted with inspecting and ensuring the safety of the food supply.

Dynamic systems

They believe that all of these systems have been evolving in tandem with other changes in society as a whole.

Yet despite these apparent parallels between expert and lay thinking, there are very significant problems in the public's understanding, as it is shaped by the modernization narrative.

Distorting Effect 1: Exaggerating the degree of Modernization

While it does bear seeds of truth, the public's model of modernization is much more rigid and extreme than the experts'.

Pretty soon I don't think they'll even have to have land. I mean I guess they're probably going to be able to just do something in a laboratory or something.

Urban female, age 37

The modernization story “takes over” in Americans' minds, and the resulting caricature of modernized agriculture, food processing and distribution actually interferes with people's ability to become more knowledgeable and sophisticated about existing food systems. One important problem is that because people tend to hold such an extreme view of how agriculture has changed, alarming facts presented by advocates might actually strike people as good news (!) by comparison with what they already believed.

Small, owner-operated, family farms gone or irrelevant

While in some modes of thinking, Americans picture a rural landscape filled with bucolic family farms, Americans also “toggle”³ to a view in which family farms are basically a thing of the past. In this understanding, most of the food found in the supermarket comes from a system almost entirely dominated by corporations and large-scale operations.

I think we probably tend to think of the classic farm, like a small family-owned farm, but I think in reality they're all pretty large factories nowadays, sprawling complexes with warehouses, and lines and rows and rows of chickens and livestock and all that. . . I would imagine it's run by some corporate interest, I just don't think it's Ma and Pa Kettle anymore.

Suburban male, age 35

They're gone. The small farmer's gone.

Rural female, age 65

A variant of the understanding that family farms are (nearly) extinct is the idea that they are on the landscape – and help form part of the idyllic rural utopia people hope still exists – but have little or nothing to do with the “real” food system. In other words, people may hold a model of the bucolic family farm that is unconnected to their understandings of the food they buy and eat, or with the whole of the modern food system. In effect, words like *farm*, *farmer*, *crops*, *cows*, and so on can actually divert people from thinking about the food system altogether.

I live by a bunch of farms but they aren't really that full scale, ship to ten different supermarkets

³ We use the term “toggling” to refer to switching between simultaneously held yet contradictory beliefs about the world. People toggle in response to different situations or contextual cues.

type farms, just your little stands. I actually go to the farm and buy stuff from the farm itself. . . It's not like they really give it anywhere else.

Rural male, age 25

The small family farms are almost nonexistent anymore. You have a lot of large corporation farms. . . Those constitute the majority of the volume of food that's produced . . . I've seen a lot of people with small tracts of land, who I don't think farm so much for production or profit. I think they farm for their own consumption.

Urban male, age 34

I think [family farming] is just fading. It's like the blacksmith. It's going to get to the point where it's not a career so much as almost a calling.

Suburban male, age 40

In this common way of thinking, family farms – along with farm stands, farmers markets, and “subsistence farming” – represent a sort of parallel universe to the modern food system. The farmer’s market is an old fashioned, inefficient (inconvenient), quaint place populated by idealists or poor entrepreneurs. It is not really integral either to an individual’s shopping needs or to the “real” economy as a whole.

Smaller food processors and distributors gone

People visualize a complex and modern distribution system, where large companies buy up, process and truck products to supermarkets, food “factories,” and restaurants. Again, this image mirrors what people believe has happened to business sectors across the spectrum.

A: *Wheat's grown, it's harvested...*

Q: *What's the place where it's grown?*

A: *A field, I don't know. On a large corporate wheat farm owned probably by Beatrice or one of those companies. It's harvested, brought to a mill, ground. [The mill] is probably owned by the same people. Kind of like the McDonald's model – from coming up out of the ground 'til it gets on the shelf. The bread's baked in one of their bakeries and shipped by their trucking company.*

Suburban male, age 40

“Farmers” replaced by “managers and laborers”

The concept of “farmer” doesn’t fit well with the modernized food system that people are trying to describe. Experts should note that the term means different things to different people. When questioned about food systems, people often translate the farmer into a kind of manager, or they drop the term altogether and describe a system of corporate owners, managers and worker-laborers.

[The farmer's typical day is] probably not getting out and milking the cows at four in the morning and driving a plow through the fields all day long. It's much more like being a factory worker, or foreman of the factory, going around, making sure things are working as they need to be working.

Suburban male, age 35

Industrialized agriculture

Low-tech, old-fashioned agrarian practices give way to high-tech, industrialized technologies. People believe that modern agriculture relies upon machine technology and automation. The images they call to mind are drawn from factories rather than traditional farms.

My family, my grandfathers and my dad: they were all steel workers. Farming is done like that. It's mass production.

Urban male, age 62

When I drive by they're running the tractors and stuff. But then you don't see a huge amount of that. So I'm assuming there's a factory somewhere where they do their thing and they're running machines. I'm assuming there's a lot of automation to it these days.

Suburban female, age 37

Corporate farms are almost run like the Department of Public Works of any city. All the combines, all the equipment is kept in a central location and they have thousands and thousands of acres to tend and crop dust and water and irrigation and all that.

Suburban male, age 40

In sum, people's sense that agriculture has been transformed is somewhat accurate but also exaggerated in ways that are destructive. For instance, the fact that there are still about 2 million family farmers in the U.S. sounds like surprising (good) news to average people.

Distorting Effect 2: Modernization as an unstoppable force

The Modernization Model comes pre-assembled with rather rigid understandings about change – including the ideas that it is irreversible, inevitable and to a great extent outside of direct human control. It also entails a mix of benefits and costs. But, according to the model, like it or not, progress happens.

These in-built prejudices about the general nature of change present particular challenges to advocates wishing to make changes specific to food systems – especially changes that seems to violate the model. People's default assumption is that altering the nature of Food Systems is akin to diverting the course of modernization, a project most people would regard as foolish or hopeless.

I look at corporate farming as sort of a necessary ... evil? Not even evil. It's, uh, neutral. It just is what it is. It's the way food is grown. It's not good or bad.

Suburban male, age 40

According to the logic of the Modernization Model, it is essentially impossible to go “backward” – things go from old and pre-modern to new and modern. This creates a strong prejudice that modern things (e.g. chemicals, corporations) are of the future, while more traditional things (e.g. family farms or herbicide-free tilling) are of the past and outmoded. Given the model, some expert messages “make sense” while others don't. For instance, it makes sense that big corporations replace small grocers, but the idea that butchers can out-compete meat-packing multi-nationals violates the “common sense” supplied by the model.

Darwinian change

In the public model of Modernization, there is no active agent – modernization is a process beyond the control of people. In the American understanding, it is driven by a kind of Darwinian competition between old and new ways. For instance, people explain the decline of the family farm and the spread of new technologies as a result of finding “more efficient” or “more competitive” ways of doing things. It requires a very pressing reason to “go against” the natural logic of this process.

Q: *It doesn't sound like you see it as an important goal, to try to get more farmers farming.*

A: *I'm for the small farmer, but I can't see them being real successful against the big corporations.*

Q: *It's a little bit like they're dinosaurs?*

A: *Yeah unfortunately. They can't compete with the big corporations.*

Suburban female, age 37

We have become a more modern society. I think that fewer people have been able to make a living farming and so they turn to other things. Obviously inventions and technology have changed farming a lot and made it easier to do some things and more difficult to do others. A hundred years ago, most people farmed. And now today most people don't farm.

Urban female, age 24

Passivity in the face of Modernization

The Modernization model frames change as something that happens to you. You can adapt or resist it, but as an individual you are not the one who makes the system change. It is a model of transformation that inspires a passive, or at best a “reactive” stance that stresses accommodation or resistance.

A: *You don't have the little farms. They have all been bought up because they haven't been as efficient.*

Q: *Would you see any cons to that?*

A: *I suppose the social aspects of not having a lot of people engaged in agriculture, but they can get jobs doing something else. They've had to. There's been that social change that's been forced upon people but that's OK. Farming is a tough way to make a living I think.*

Urban male, age 62

Modernization is all-encompassing

Institutions across the spectrum in the US have been growing in scale and complexity, and according to the Modernization view, food production, distribution and processing have been changing more or less in lock-step with everything else. Since many traditional characteristics of life seem to be disappearing, like the intimacy and power of local communities, the scope of action and influence for individuals, and so on, the same should go for food systems. In short, people do not assume that food systems are a separate case, and this magnifies the sense of inertia that accompanies all of these trends described above.

Distorting Effect 3: Problems as “the price of progress” or “need for more progress”

Just as the modernization model entails rigid and unhelpful understandings of change, it also entails characteristic ways of understanding problems. When people are reasoning (unconsciously) in terms of the model, any given problem related to food is understood in terms of a problem related to modernization.

There are two key types of problem encompassed within the American model of modernization. The first and more dominant is the idea that progress inevitably means the loss of certain positive features of life. Even though Americans tend to view themselves as people who embrace innovation and progress, their model of modernization also includes drawbacks such as increasingly intrusive technologies, bureaucracies, corporations etc. Another unpleasant entailment of progress is people's increasing powerlessness in the face of larger and more indifferent systems in various spheres of life. Critiques of food systems are swept up into this general model of "what is wrong in the world."

My sisters all work jobs and they don't sit down and eat locally grown. They get microwaves and they stick something in there and that's their dinner and that's just the way it has to be . . . When I was growing up, it was just simpler. But now there's more people here. There's more people living in big cities. In the more suburban areas it's just a more complex life. You don't have time to prepare and cook. And so you eat crap basically. [My sisters] try to do the best they can but none of that stuff that you put in the microwave was grown by farmers. Or if it was, it was grown far away and shipped over and frozen somewhere.

Suburban male, age 44

These and other kinds of change are understood as the "price of progress" in a cost-benefit sense. When it comes to the details of change, there is a good deal of uncertainty about what problems ought to be solved and which ought to be accepted as drawbacks that are necessary to allow the good change people want.

Q: How do you feel about [trying to preserve family farms]?

A: If you get to the supermarket you're always guaranteed that your food's going to be there. Whereas if you go to a little farm, there's a limited amount there. People are busy already. So unless they plan on doing all their food shopping on a farm on a weekend, and just taking their time, I don't think they'll go for the little farm thing.

Rural male, age 25

We can either have the set up that we have today where there are farmers making food and there are lawyers doing law and there are writers writing books or we can go back 200 years ago where everyone lives on a farm and everyone makes their own clothes and their own furniture.

Rural female, age 53

According to the cost-benefit logic of modernization, trying to "solve" a problem could prove disastrous if it means interfering with the benefits of progress. Clearly, this kind of thinking is incompatible with a simple problems and solutions presentation of downsides of the American food system. People are likely to resist some solutions even when they understand them.

A second way of understanding problems, within the Modernization model, is that progress simply hasn't made enough headway in certain areas, yet. This is the case, for example, with some people's understanding of food safety.

I'm entirely for the genetically altered food, because to me genetically altering it just reduces the need for any chemical, pesticide, fertilizer. That will be the wave of the future. And once people get over the bugaboo of fearing it, then I think that what you're going to find is that organic is going to take on a whole different meaning.

Suburban male, age 40

[Food] is safer than it used to be, but I don't think it's as safe as it could be. One of the things I read up on a few years ago was irradiation of food. How that would really dramatically increase the safety of food and yet the FDA wouldn't let them do it.

Urban male, age 50

The Modernization model leads people to expect that the advancing frontiers of progress will eventually catch up with a problem like this and solve it. The best approach for an individual or a community may just be to “stay out of the way.”

Distorting Effect 4: Information filtered out by the Modernization model

Of course average Americans are not, and will never be, experts on food systems. There are relatively basic facts that they tend not to know – for instance, virtually no-one in the thirty elicitation showed any awareness of herbicide use as an issue.

The relevance of an organizing model like Modernization is that it means that certain pieces of information are more likely to stick and be absorbed than others, because they fit the model and make perfect sense. Other concepts or pieces of information don't fit the frame, and are therefore “hard to think.” The Modernization story itself has no role for herbicides, for example, so unless people have had a very specific and vivid exposure to the topic (as they have with the toxic effects of some pesticides) they are likely to remain oblivious to it.

The following are several other areas where people do not understand an issue in the way experts would like – at least partly because the issue does not fit neatly with thinking about modernization:

Sustainability

There is virtually no familiarity with the term, except among a small percentage of active, environmentally-oriented individuals. People do not know what “sustainability” means in regard to agriculture, and cannot guess why our food systems might be unsustainable, except in two senses: Some are aware that soil “wears out” over time, and many guess that the term “sustainability” refers to economic viability – i.e. the idea that it is harder and harder for farmers to pass their farms along to their children.

The very concept of sustainability (preserving things as they are) is a *direct contradiction* of normal attitudes toward progress. Clearly, the Sustainability argument is one that has yet to be made in an effective way with the public – and just as clearly, this argument will be fighting uphill against understandings of modernization.

Diversity

People do not understand the continuing diversity of farm-types and farmers, nor why such diversity might be practical and desirable. They aren't at all aware of the issue of monoculture, or of any problems this might create.

These issues also seem to contradict the modernization model in which one of the familiar “costs” is standardization and bland efficiency.

Subsidies

Average Americans have only a very limited sense of what agricultural subsidies are, and no

real sense of the way that they shape food systems. They are usually understood as assistance to family farmers, to allow them to stay in business one more year, for instance.

Q: What do you think the purpose of the subsidies is?

A: Well, it's this idea that farmers can't possibly exist on their own as a business entity, that they need the government to prop them up

Suburban male, age 35

This type of approach certainly seems out of step with the passive, hands-off approach that modernization models call for, and if anything, can be understood as a direct attempt (possibly well-justified, possibly Quixotic) to *combat* modernization.

Organic

While there is a shared understanding that organic food is grown without pesticides, there is a striking lack of consensus about the details of organic farming and whether it makes sense.

Unfortunately, organic farming is often seen mainly as a form of resistance to modernization – one that some people indulge in for idiosyncratic reasons.

I don't really understand organic food. I know that it's food that's grown where they don't use any pesticides or anything to kill of the bugs, so there's not really any artificial chemicals or anything on it. I don't mind if they kill the bugs! It matters not to me.

Suburban female, age 29

This clash makes it difficult for people to recognize organic food as a move towards a superior, “next generation” way of farming, for example. Even people who seem to have all of the information can fall into the idea that organic agriculture is a step back toward the past.

There is no way that you could make a go of it, raising turkeys, feeding them naturally, doing it the way you did it before. Because you could not make a profit and stay in business. There's one farm in Illinois that does it. And they do well just because there are enough people in the Chicago area who want to remember what it was like to eat a turkey thirty years ago when it just [had] so much more flavor.

Suburban male, age 44

A Case in Point: Crisis Mode and the Food Scare

Recurrent stories in the media or advocacy outreach bring people face to face with problems in the food system. The stories can be intensely troubling to people, even if only temporarily, and food scares have been factors in causing people to notice and conceptualize systems that are outside their own experience. Everyone interviewed for this project was familiar with one or more stories about contaminated Mexican strawberries, *e coli* in the beef supply, Mad Cow disease, dolphin by-catch in tuna fishing, or other such crises. In short, food scares seem like “teachable moments” of a sort, where people learn about the existence of food systems – and how such systems actually do intersect with lived experience.

Unfortunately, because of the interfering models described in the earlier sections, food scares do disappointingly little to help people form more helpful understandings of food systems.

Confirmation of the Modernization narrative

One reason for the limited educational value of “food scare” stories is that the problem of the moment can almost always be understood in terms of generic modernization. Either modernization has gone too far (e.g. the increasing over-reliance on pesticides) or not far enough (e.g. the fact that “safe” pesticides apparently still haven’t been developed). Since the problems do not fall outside the general scheme, they do not lead people to question it. As with other problems, like the standardization and consolidation of supermarket chains, the Modernization model may seem to offer an explanation of food scares, while not offering any real reasons or any rationale for alternatives.

And for all of the reasons discussed in the previous section, the Modernization model does not engage people to act for systemic change.:

- Modernization is a process that “just happens.”
- It is too big and the inertia too great to allow dramatically different alternatives.
- “More progress” is often the solution to problems.
- Cost-benefit thinking implies that many problems are probably just the price we pay for our modern way of life (i.e. better than the alternatives).

Unfortunately, most food scares fit neatly within this general story.

Resurfacing of lived-experience models

Because a systems perspective is an unnatural state of mind for most people, people tend to return to their little picture defaults as quickly as their context allows, and to lapse into their customary “cognitive blindness” toward vis-à-vis food systems.

Issues that fade away

So, although for some people the food scare can be a transformative experience, for most people the effects only last as long as the media attention. When an incident disappears from the headlines, people forget about it or assume that the problem has been solved.

Q: So do you feel that they resolved that issue pretty much? Or do you just stop thinking about it?

A: I just stopped thinking about it. Once I didn't hear anything else going on about it anymore. I just normally went to the store and went and got it. When you hear the publicity about it, obviously you're reminded of it, so you stop. And when you don't hear anything else about it you forget and then you just go out and get it.

Urban female, age 37

When something seems to disappear from the news, it's usually because it's gotten better.

Urban male, age 37

Naturally, media coverage contributes to this tendency, since it only casts a brief, narrow spotlight on particular cases, and on isolated corners of the food system. And given the cognitive tendency to reduce larger issues (e.g., social justice or chemical pollution) to single, prototype cases, people tend to infer that the larger problem has been dealt with when a particular case is “cleaned up.”

Issues that get translated into little-picture problems

Furthermore, even when people's thinking is impacted in long-term ways by a food scare, their reasoning is likely to be shaped by the much more natural little-picture understandings that generally guide their thought. So, for instance, a food scare may turn an individual into a more careful, health-conscious consumer – as opposed to a citizen interested in more responsible oversight of food handling and production.

Consumers hoping for the best

When people are operating from the (passive) consumer stance, their only apparent course of action is to stop buying and wait for reassurance that things are back to normal. Their limited options as consumers help ensure that they stay primarily within the little picture, while the store, the government, and the business community deal with the problems of the Big Picture. This stance also gives them a very powerful motivation to hope and believe that the food system is OK.

Q: Do you generally trust the food supply? The food that comes in to your home?

A: I do. I do trust it. Because obviously I don't have anywhere else to buy it. Where else am I going to get it from? We know to go to the grocery store to get whatever we need. So you sort of have to trust it. You don't have a choice.

Urban female, age 37

When a food system critique or food scare threatens to detract from people's lived experience, they are capable of "forgetting" about the troubling information. Some people can even describe this experience.

Lately I've been kind of disgusted, because PETA sent me some disgusting flyers, just gross. A whole package of stuff that I wish I hadn't looked at. But I still eat steak. They showed how the animals are killed and all that stuff, and I don't want to think about that when I'm eating meat. So now I actually think about how it got there, you know, when I'm looking at it in the grocery store before I buy it, I'm thinking what happened to it before it came ... It's been about a month since I got that, so it's fading, the memory of the pictures is fading. It was disgusting. I had to throw it away so my family wouldn't look at it.

Suburban female, age 23

Truthfully I never thought about [chemicals in food] until I went to Europe. And I think Europeans are much more conscious of it than Americans are. With beef in particular, with the advent of all of the mad cow disease and that sort of thing. They're very conscious of what gets injected into their animals. And it never occurred to me until it was pointed out so blatantly. But I'll think about it rarely. It's the kind of thing I don't want to think about while I'm eating.

Urban female, age 22

Except specifically during intense media coverage of a scare, people are reassured by a combination of factors.

- government regulations and oversight (the reach of which they generally exaggerate)
- good business practices (e.g. "Businesses won't kill off their customers!")
- fellow consumers (e.g. "No one is dropping dead from pesticides.")
- media quiet (e.g. "Since we aren't hearing anything, everything must be OK.")
- personal experience (e.g. "I've never gotten sick.")

Thanks to these understandings, plus a strong *desire* to be reassured, Americans may consider the idea that the food system is dangerous, but ultimately most people reject it.

As far as I know, nothing has happened. I mean Mad Cow disease I don't think has come over here so far. As far as chemicals, I don't think that there's any problem with anything out there. I'm sure the Food and Drug probably looks into preservatives and chemicals that go into food.

Rural female, age 23

I don't want to buy a head of lettuce and have a bug fall out of it, nor do I want to buy a head of lettuce and have no bugs fall out because it's so full of pesticides that if I eat it, it makes me sick. So it's nice that there's somebody overlooking [sic] things.

Suburban male, age 60

I know some people might have problems with gene manipulation of fruits and vegetables – I personally don't, but again, I don't know the scientific background . . . You want to be aware of it. I mean I don't want just any pesticide on my food. I don't want to find myself with cancer down the road, but on the other hand, I think it's pretty well – naively, of course, and the laziness kicking in – I think it's pretty well regulated.

Urban female, age 33

Q: Do you feel like the food sources are safe?

A: For the most part. You hear reports of people getting sick from South American strawberries and whatnot. I buy all those foods, and I've never really gotten sick from any foods. So for the most part, by my personal experience, I feel the food supply is pretty safe.

Urban male, age 34

In short, despite the apparent promise of food scares as teachable moments, the results are disappointing. The best evidence for this is that Americans have been exposed to countless food scares, and yet show all the signs of misunderstanding and ignorance discussed earlier in this report.

Recommendations

Earlier in the report, we discussed average Americans' difficulty in taking in new information about food systems – largely because they have no established model of a food system to “plug” this information into – and the disappointing limitations of food safety scares as teaching moments. In this section, we consider several ways advocates might consider improving their communications about food systems in order to avoid the pitfalls awaiting them. (Note that these recommendations will serve as hypotheses for later rounds of research and testing by the FrameWorks Institute and partners.)

Positive bridges from systems to lived experience – Slow Food and Local Food

While we did not find evidence that these movements have had impacts at the public level – nor that these are exactly the right terms in which to talk about the issues – cognitive analysis suggests that both the Slow Food and the Local Food concepts have a number of advantages on which advocates might successfully build.

- Each addresses people's lived experience of food – shopping, cooking and eating – while being conceptually organized around big-picture, systems perspectives.

- Both concepts are very concrete, in a way that is pedagogically promising (again, not necessarily as expressed in the current language).
- Both allow people to understand how they can play a role in a larger system.
- Both can be explained in commonsense ways – e.g., Local means not shipping long distances (therefore cheaper and consumes less fuel). Local means that money stays in the community and contributes to a solid, diverse economic base. Local means good things for your locality. Local means fresher, and healthier (and should not mean dirtier and less regulated). Local means, “you know where it came from.” Both take a positive outlook towards food and food systems, rather than relying on uncomfortable messages about danger that people are motivated to dismiss. Both rely upon implicit critiques of the mainstream food system, but focus attention on positive visions.
- Each includes a place for enjoyment of food.
- Each allows for an overarching nurturance model rooted in reciprocity and caring.

We offer two cautions related to these approaches:

Farmer's markets: For reasons discussed earlier in the report, it is easy to evoke the wrong understandings when talking about food systems – one of these would be to give farmer's markets a central role in discussions of food system changes. These are so strongly associated with quaintness, and so far removed from the “real” food economy, that mentioning them can probably derail a serious discussion.

“*Movements*”: While movements by definition involve large groups of people, they are also easily seen as special interests. Advocates working with the slow and local food concepts can easily run up against average Americans' distaste for and discomfort with extreme positions or “isms.” In order to reach a group larger than a hardcore few, communicators should be careful to frame the issues in practical, commonsense terms and to avoid distancing labels.

Organic as the “next generation” of food/farming

Most people regard organic food as “better” than other food (even if it is not “better enough” to justify the extra expense). And from an expert perspective, organic farming seems to offer an opportunity to bring many different threads together, including consumer health, worker health, small farm viability and environmental sustainability. These factors make the organic concept a potentially important communications tool for advocates.

Modernization: One of the most important potential pitfalls in communicating about organics is the risk of seeming to go up against modernization. Because modernization is a powerful cultural model which views progress through time as inevitable and one-directional, a message that seems to fall on the wrong side of progress is unlikely to succeed. There may be value in pointing out that organic farming is “traditional” farming in many ways – but advocates must also make it clear that the real motivations for going organic have to do with new science (e.g. of health and environment), innovations in method, and economic realism. If organic farming is “merely” about preserving a “dying way of life” (i.e. the family farm), it can only ever appeal to a small percentage of the population.

Commonsense: In order to make the most of this concept – as with local and slow food – advocates must take care to frame organic farming as a smart, economically viable approach, rather than a fringe movement that appeals to the tastes of “single-issue consumers.”

Definition: Organic farming is defined in terms of chemical inputs and technical farming practices, and most people do not have a clear sense what it refers to. It is important for communicators to find ways of defining the term in user-friendly ways that do refer to particular materials and practices – one of the communications advantages of the concept is that it is scientific, concrete and objective.

Broader context: Because of the understandings people bring to the topic of food, it is also important for advocates to tie organic food/farming to broader ideas like community, local economic good, and the experience of shopping/eating.

A new cultural model of food systems

The biggest “win” for advocates on this issue (and for everyone else), and the greatest challenge, would be to introduce a new, full-fledged cultural model of food systems into Americans’ shared understanding of the world. Such a model would not only enable people to notice the systems that produce their food, but would also encourage them to take an interest in and engage constructively with those systems. Ideally, such a model would:

- Make people conscious of and curious about the fact that food comes out of a food system;
- Make it easier to connect people’s lived experience to the broader system, ideally in multiple and overlapping ways, and in ways that feel important;
- Create the sense of a food system that people can feel positively about as opposed to one they fear or are angered by;
- Make it easier to absorb central concepts like “sustainability,” and “environmental health,” as coherent parts of a larger picture.

Achieving this new level of public reasoning and discourse represents one of the core challenges facing food system advocates, and would require a sustained effort aimed at educating the public, in addition to effective explanatory language around which to build this strategy.

Conclusion

There are a wide variety of ways in which people’s default understandings of a topic can impede progress on an issue:

- People may feel they have a rich understanding of a topic, while actually lacking some very basic knowledge. This is the case with childhood development, for example, where people fail to appreciate the fact that a young child’s interactions shape the development of brain architecture.
- Or they may lack even a rudimentary understanding of an issue – as is the case with global warming, where only a tiny percentage of Americans understand that the problem is caused by a heat-trapping layer of gases.
- Or they may use an inappropriate frame to process new information, as when people understand rising obesity rates in terms of the country’s “moral decline.”

In the case of food systems, Cultural Logic's elicitation research points to a combination of all of these problems. Americans have rich sets of understandings and associations related to food, which reduce their interest in and ability to grasp new information. They also lack a fundamental concept – the idea of a food system. For lack of such a conceptual model, they make certain reasonable guesses and a number of false assumptions about the American food system, by drawing on some fragmentary knowledge about food and where it comes from, plus their rich but generic understanding of modernization. Finally, their stance toward food – primarily the Consumer Stance and the passive Food Receiver stance – actually motivates them *not* to want to understand. Given this combination of factors, it is not surprising that advocates have had a difficult time making headway on some crucial issues. Nonetheless, as communicators continue to develop conceptual approaches that offer the public concrete new ways of understanding the food system and our relationship to it, there is an opportunity for real and important progress.

All Trees and No Forest:

How Advocacy Paradigms Obscure Public Understanding of the Food System

By Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., Andrew Brown, Ph.D., and Joseph Grady, Ph.D.

Introduction

As part of its ongoing effort to bring about meaningful improvements in the United States food system, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has commissioned a variety of types of research into how Americans think and talk about the topic. Earlier research by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute investigated the patterns of reasoning that the general public brings to the subject of food and food systems, and how these can prevent learning, diminish engagement and derail productive thinking (“Not While I’m Eating: How and Why Americans Don’t Think About Food Systems,” 2005).

In this supplementary memo, we consider the understandings that expert advocates bring to the subject, how those understandings shape their communications, and the likely impacts of these communications among the public. In principle, advocates are well positioned to move public opinion forward on the topic. They disseminate ideas through campaigns, public appearances and discussions with policymakers. In other issue areas, however, we have found that patterns in expert reasoning and discourse can create obstacles to public understanding and engagement, and that it is worth looking closely at those patterns and their possible effects.

The memo is based largely on ten formal interviews with expert advocates involved in a wide variety of issues related to food systems. Each interview was a one-on-one conversation lasting roughly twenty minutes, recorded for later analysis. (All participants were assured that their commentary would be anonymous, so no identifying information or direct quotations are offered in the report.) The conversations took place during the Food and Society Conference in Landsdowne, Virginia in April, 2005. During the course of the conference, a Cultural Logic researcher also had numerous informal conversations with additional attendees, as well as leading a discussion session focused on advocates’ experiences with communicating about issues related to food and food systems. All of these conversations – in addition to a review of materials produced by advocates – have provided input to this memo.

The Forest and the Trees

Advocates on food-related issues recognize that they face a serious challenge: Problems with the American food system, and that system itself, are hardly on the radar screen of average Americans. Yet if there is to be meaningful progress on various important issues related to the food supply chain, it is critically important that this topic become part of the public conversation between average Americans, the media and policymakers. One of the natural goals for advocacy on issues related to the food supply system, then, is simply to put the subject itself “on the table.”

For very natural reasons, food advocates focus on a wide variety of particular issues as they go about the work of raising public awareness. After all, food systems are connected to virtually all aspects of human life, and of the biosphere itself. Ideally, though, the collective product of all these efforts would be that Americans become more conscious of where their food comes from, and of food systems as a problematic area deserving individual and national attention.

But the research presented in “Not While I’m Eating” (along with the experience of any number of advocates and other researchers) demonstrates clearly that food systems have not emerged as a topic in the public mind – or that that emergence is happening at a frustratingly slow pace. In this memo, we consider one of the key reasons this is so: *Americans have no working conceptual model of the food system as a whole, and advocates are not helping them acquire one.*

Of course, advocates consistently offer explanations of various important problems related to food – the harmful effects of pesticides, the low wages paid to agricultural workers here and abroad, the disregard of large food distribution companies for dietary health, and for the needs of people in particular neighborhoods, and so forth. But the key ideas around which advocates’ thinking and communications are organized often work against, rather than for, the crystallization of food system as a coherent concept.

Self-contained paradigms

Advocates’ work is often anchored by a set of ideas that amount, from a cognitive perspective, to self-contained *paradigms* that are largely insulated from other issues, and therefore do not effectively contribute to a bigger picture of the food system and its meaning. For example, advocates’ work may focus on a particular *issue*, such as a living wage for farm workers – along with a motivating *value*, such as fairness. This combination of issue and value is sufficiently rich to guide reasoning and feel like a world unto itself, in a way that connects little if at all to a paradigm focusing on environmentally sustainable agriculture, for example. (Even if the topics *can* in principle be connected, this is not a cognitively natural move.)

Minimal reference to the food system

In fact, these individual paradigms may make only minimal or indirect reference to the food system itself, at least as they are likely to be understood by the public. The issue of the living wage for farm workers, for example, is one that is probably easy for average people to think about, *in a way that has little or nothing to do with food* – as a matter of greedy companies paying their workers too little (a story that might as well take place in the garment industry). The public’s thinking can quite naturally move between the *issue* and the *value*, leaving the larger food *system* out of the picture.

Promoting little-picture thinking

Some of the paradigms used by advocates may actually have the effect of leading people towards “little-picture” thinking, in which they focus on aspects of individual experience (shopping, cooking, eating, working a farm, etc.), rather than any bigger picture, including a grasp of food systems.¹ This is often because the story that advocates are telling is easily co-opted by the very powerful consumer paradigm (see, e.g., our discussion of organics later in the memo).

¹ For more on the important distinction between big-picture and little-picture thinking, please see “Not While I’m Eating.”

Ironically, from a cognitive and cultural perspective, the paradigms that are central to the work of advocates are currently at risk of making the food system *harder* to see, rather than easier.

Yet the advantages of Americans sharing a working conceptual model of the food supply system as a whole would be tremendous, and are worth exploring in some detail.

Why a Unified Conceptual Model for Food Systems?

1. Engagement and salience

Advocates often feel intuitively, and are often advised by communications consultants, that emotionally charged appeals are critical to engaging people on an issue. And, to an extent, such appeals can obviously be effective. But one of the key elements that is often omitted from communications as a result is an effective *explanation* that allows people to grasp a problem in a concrete way, including the cause-and-effect relationships that are central to an issue. Experience on a variety of issues, as well as robust findings from the cognitive sciences, make clear that when people are able to focus on a problem in a concrete and practical way, they become more engaged than when they only have access to troubling information and images related to “symptoms.” This has been true in the area of child abuse, for example – where advocates now realize that tragic images and statistics have “plateau-ed” in their ability to arouse public support, and must be complemented by additional explanations of risk factors and the mechanisms by which community intervention can help. It is also true in the case of global warming, where the public is well aware of potentially catastrophic impacts but remains relatively disengaged due to a lack of understanding of how the phenomenon works². In short, one of the more effective tools for raising the salience of an issue is to crystallize it as a clear conceptual model in people’s minds, so that people can reason about it in a practical way. Currently, there is no such shared model for the food system as a whole, and providing one has not been high on the priority list of (many) advocates.

2. Making sense of advocates’ communications

Many of the arguments advocates make, and the facts they present, would make more sense to people if they had a broader sense of the food supply chain. In some cases, such a model is probably even an *indispensable precursor to understanding*. Without such a model, people are unlikely to be able to see the answers to basic questions:

- What’s the link between food and social justice?
- What’s the connection between food and the environment?
- What’s the connection between food (production) and community?
- What does “sustainability” refer to? – Sustain what or who?
- What is “food security” about? Who or what is insecure, and why?
- What exactly is organic food?
- What is the relevance of family farm viability, beyond protecting the livelihood of individuals?

² Research conducted by Cultural Logic and others has determined that when people have an understanding that global warming is caused by a heat-trapping layer of gases, they become more engaged on the issue, partly because they can better understand appropriate solutions.

(See the next section for further discussion of some representative paradigms and how their impact would be strengthened by an underlying conceptual model.)

3. Unification and diversity of the field

It is clear that the food and food systems “field” (if such a disparate collection of perspectives and goals can be called a field) would benefit from some degree of unity – if for no other reason than that communications could, in principle, reinforce each other rather than competing for society’s attention and energy. Yet this unity is and will continue to be difficult to achieve. The ends that advocates are interested in pursuing will continue to remain very heterogeneous – activists in the area of environmental sustainability are not likely to abandon their mission in favor of pursuing better wages for farm workers, or vice versa, and neither group is likely to switch to a focus on revitalization of urban neighborhoods, or on the traditional pleasures of the table.

More subtly, experience in communications on a wide variety of issues establishes clearly that a field cannot be united around a large and mixed set of *values*. Even when they are complementary in principle, different values take thinking in different directions. A given communications piece – including the mission statement for an organization, for example – needs an organizing idea, and a single underlying value is often the best way to give a piece coherence and strength. (E.g. an environmental organization might organize the presentation of all its disparate activities around the idea that we *owe it to our children and grandchildren* to be good *stewards* of their natural *legacy*.)

The diverse values that motivate the various advocates around the food systems table – from *community* (e.g. revitalizing Native American groups), to *health* (e.g. improving the American diet), to *social justice* (e.g. for minority farm workers), and so forth – are each important, and none of them is going to go away. In short, the field is not likely to choose a single value message that unifies the perspectives of all the active participants.

Instead, if there is an opportunity for unity among food and food system advocates, it is on the conceptual level. If there were such an agreed-upon model, then advocates in a variety of areas could refer to it as a touchstone in all their communications, if only in passing – *thereby reinforcing each other’s communications*.

Importantly, this conceptual platform would also allow advocates to pursue their own independent agendas, while contributing to the overall effort of raising the salience of the food system as a whole. (Even if a particular group is only interested in Part X of the overall system, their references to Part X could do more than they currently do to make it clear that it is part of an overall system that matters.)

4. Creating broader constituencies

The food supply system as whole is clearly something that everyone in the public should be concerned with, as opposed to any particular issue such as herbicide use or neighborhood redlining, which will always engage some members of the public more than others.

5. Making advocates’ jobs easier

Currently, a great deal of advocates’ effort goes into trying to open people’s eyes to some particular corner of American food systems. Communicators in each issue area must construct their own explanations “from scratch.” If there were a shared understanding of the food system that advocates could refer to and tap into, their work would clearly be easier and more efficient.

6. Inoculating the paradigms against “consumer thinking”

One of the dangers that faces many of the individual paradigms discussed below is that they are susceptible to being “co-opted” by powerful advertising lobbies that tend to reduce the issue to a matter of “consumer choice” – a cognitive move that discourages people from seeing the big picture. Providing a clear and direct sense of the food system itself, makes people more resistant to falling into “consumer thinking.”

In the next section we consider a number of representative paradigms that currently organize advocates’ thinking and communications, and how these are made less effective by the lack of a shared conceptual model – and/or how they would be strengthened and made more effective if such a model were part of the culture.

Example Paradigms

The paradigms discussed in this section are not only used internally among colleagues at the Food and Society conference. They also appear on web sites, in interviews, and in other public forums. These ideas act as de facto, and sometimes deliberate and explicit, anchors of communications about food systems. It is therefore important to think through their likely impact in the current cognitive/cultural context – and how they might be made more effective.

Food security

Like most of the paradigms considered here, this one is not understood by average people. Based on our conversations with a diverse group of thirty Americans from different regions and backgrounds, we are confident not only that the phrase is unfamiliar, but that it would strike people as puzzling, since they tend to feel little or no insecurity related to food. Moreover, as the example of global warming makes clear, even if a major food security-related crisis were to emerge, this would not necessarily promote a deeper understanding of the larger system.

In order to understand the idea of food security, in something like the way it is understood by experts, people would need to have more of a sense of the ownership of food production, who decides where and how to distribute food for sale, and how prices are set, for example. These are not areas they are currently able to think about.

For lack of a conceptual understanding of food systems, members of the public are also unlikely to appreciate the different values messages offered by advocates which relate the food supply to *democracy*, *community empowerment* and *social justice* (related to redlining, for instance).

Instead, given their current dominant patterns of thinking, people are likely to associate this term with safety against terrorism, food tampering or shortages – i.e. vivid, concrete and *immediate* types of danger that can easily be associated with food. The term is likely to be associated with little-picture rather than big-picture thinking, and a Consumer stance rather than a Citizen stance. Likely “solutions” would include heightened law enforcement, food surpluses stored in warehouses, and stacks of canned goods in the basement.

The level one values that the term is likely to evoke include safety and protection – which are just as likely to lead to “hunkering down” as to increased cooperation and management.

Sustainability

We have direct evidence from the elicitations that this term/concept is not understood by the public. This is not because people do not understand the word, but because they have trouble thinking about aspects of our food system that might be hard to sustain. The (vivid and little-picture) guesses that some relatively knowledgeable lay people are able to take usually focus on soil depletion over time, or the possibility of keeping a farm in the family from one generation to the next.

In order to understand this concept, Americans would need to understand more about the environmental impacts of farming, the idea that farm products contain hidden costs that need to be paid later, and on the highest level, the idea that no-one is currently managing the food system with a long-term view.

Since these ideas are not part of average people's conceptual repertoire, the values that are important to advocates –including stewardship and responsible management of resources, for example – are also not evoked by the idea of sustainability.

In principle, this concept certainly pulls people towards big-picture thinking, since it focuses by definition on broad systems. Unfortunately, as people currently speculate about its meaning, it is (not surprisingly) associated with little-picture images of individual farmers tilling their soil or trying to pass along their property to their children.

Social justice for farm workers

This is certainly an idea people can understand, but as mentioned earlier, not necessarily in a way that is connected with food systems or even food. There is very little difference in cognitive terms between this case and the plight of Nike workers or hotel workers. That is to say, this paradigm can very easily elide the whole business of food systems.

Farmland preservation and family farm viability

Average people do understand that farmland and family farms are disappearing, but they understand this in terms of suburban sprawl – i.e. in terms of the beauty and freedom of open spaces, and in terms of the passing away of traditional ways of life. For experts, these topics are pieces of a larger picture such as food security, where farmland is preserved in every region so that communities can grow their own local food and maintain control over their food supply. But for lay people, once again, the issues are associated with different (little-picture) understandings and values, none of them self-evidently practical in nature, having little to do with food, much less food systems.

Slow Food

While this is a growing movement, it is not one with which many average Americans are familiar at this point. Certain aspects of the concept – including the rejection of fast food in favor of more carefully prepared meals – are easily grasped, without any reference to food systems. Others, such as the idea of preserving the diversity of crops (and other ingredients), are certainly less graspable, given people's current lack of awareness of various aspects of the food supply system.

It is worth noting that this concept certainly exerts a cognitive pull towards a little-picture focus on the individual, to the extent it focuses on pleasure (an inherently individual concept).

On the other hand, it can be connected with a bigger picture if it is framed in terms of either (A) a generally accepted “right” to delicious, diverse food, or (B) an understanding that in order to really have good, healthy food you need diverse crops, diverse ways of growing them, close attention to them, more craft and less commodification. The first approach, though (along with the movement’s central value of “protecting the pleasures of the table”), is not one that resonates well with mainstream American culture.³

Local Food

While this is a concept that is currently unfamiliar to many Americans, it is easily understood and has the conceptual advantage of concreteness. The benefits of local food are easily grasped once the concept is presented (including reduced fossil fuel consumption, fresher food, and satisfying connections with local community and traditions), and can appeal to a diverse group with different priorities. And while the paradigm is defined, in a sense, by a focus on a “smaller picture,” it also provides a conceptual “scale model” of the larger systems that it would be helpful for Americans to understand.

The broader public may most naturally perceive local food as a form of “resistance” to the “real,” mainstream, modernized system of food production and supply in the country⁴ – i.e. a minority movement by definition, associated with niche supermarket sections, special menu items and scattered farm stands. But even so, this positioning can serve as a tool for opening people’s eyes to that broader system and its flaws.

Interestingly, this concept seems to be highly resistant to being co-opted by conventional producers.

Organic Food

The strength and weakness of the organic paradigm is that it is rooted in a critique of the contemporary food supply system. Because it is defined in terms of the materials and practices used in farming, organic food makes the most sense in the context of an understanding that a food system exists, and that there may be something wrong with it. The presence of organic food at the supermarket (despite its higher price tag) is a reminder that the food system is being contested.

On the other hand, because the vast majority of people do not have a picture of the food system, their cognitive models regularly lead them to other, less helpful understandings of what organic food is all about. Some of the positive interpretations focus on better taste, benefits to individual health, and individual environmental consciousness. (Organic marketers typically focus on these aspects, for obvious reasons.) Worse, all of these concepts are subject to “dilution” in the marketplace, so that the term organic itself is perpetually threatened with being so vague as to become meaningless.

Moreover, competitors and many consumers discount organics as evidence of health extremism, environmental idealism, class elitism or fraud; or simply as a clever marketing ploy. All

³ The movement is always likely to have a very selective appeal – partly because it is likely to be broadly perceived as a minority effort against the inevitable forces of modernization. Nonetheless, the Americans who do share this value may, in principle, be an influential enough subgroup to bring about change of certain kinds.

⁴ See “Not While I’m Eating” for a discussion of the role of the modernization concept in Americans’ thinking about food and food systems.

these interpretations focus on the relationships between individuals and food, rather than on the broader systems that produce that food.

Elicitations with the public clearly show that, although organic food is one most well-known of contemporary food movements and the most visible of food system critiques, the absence of a model of food supply has encouraged understandings to fragment in unproductive ways.

Diversity

Diversity is a paradigm with several distinct types of relevance in the world of food systems advocacy. For experts, minority participation in the food system, the effects of monoculture on sustainability, food security, supermarket consolidation and so on are all areas where a lack of diversity weakens the capacity of the food supply system to truly meet the needs of the general population. These understandings of the meaning and importance of diversity all depend on a grasp of the big picture of food systems.

From the perspective of laypeople who do not see the larger systems, though, the broad benefits of diversity don't make sense – if anything, the idea of diversity runs counter to the public's sense of a prevailing current of modernization and standardization. As it stands, each type of diversity being advocated for has to be justified as important in and of itself. Rather than arguing that diverse systems are stronger, more flexible, and better designed for a changing world, advocates disperse into isolated issue areas, each with their own constellation of values. Family farms are important for tradition or local community. Minority participation is important for social justice. Monoculture is bad for the soil (therefore, irresponsible farming, and bad for the environment).

Once again, despite a paradigm with considerable potential to unify the field, the discourse falls apart because the conceptual models that make sense of the paradigm are missing.

Traditional foodways

Though they may not use exactly this language, many advocates work within a paradigm that focuses on restoring the traditions that sustained people and communities in the past, both nutritionally and culturally. Unless people have a broad conceptual understanding of what a food system encompasses, though, messages along these lines are likely to sound like other appeals to reject the modern world and return to a nostalgic past (i.e. attractive, impractical, and subject to “solutions” based on *images* of that past). Specifically, arguments based on tradition and community are not likely to compete successfully with Americans' powerful cultural model of modernization, which entails the inevitability of change and “progress.” A shared conceptual model of food supply systems would allow them to grasp the practical value of the kinds of foodways that have been lost.

Conclusion

Current communications strategies for bringing the general idea of a food system into the public discourse can be described as indirect, with advocates focusing on a broad variety of self-contained paradigms that each focus on one piece of the food system. The cognitive analysis of expert concepts discussed in this memo suggests that this indirect approach is unlikely to be effective both because the individual paradigms pull thinking in different

directions, and because for many of them the food system concept is not central. Rather than radically changing the current “modular” approach, we suggest complementing it with an effort to provide the public with a clear conceptual model of the larger food system. Introducing such a model into the public discourse would provide an alternative, and more direct, approach to solving the problem of the “missing big picture” of where food comes from. It would also strengthen each paradigm, while increasing the collective efficacy of advocates’ efforts to bring the food system into public awareness.

Of course, introducing such a model into public consciousness and discourse is no easy matter. In the short run it will entail investing significant energy into developing and testing effective ways of explaining food systems, identifying ways that fit naturally into advocates’ communications on a variety of particular issues. Ultimately, it will also involve exploring other conduits for introducing those explanations to a broad audience, from ads to changes in school curricula. But while the challenge is great, the rewards for a successful effort will be even greater.

Harmful and Productive Patterns in Newspaper Presentations of Food Systems

By Axel Aubrun, Ph.D., Andrew Brown, Ph.D., and Joseph Grady, Ph.D.

Introduction

This analysis, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and building on previous research on how Americans think about food systems, examines the ways in which the topic is presented to readers, directly and indirectly, in the nation's newspapers. The effects of the news media on people's understanding of issues has been well documented, and goes beyond the question of whether people are "informed" about particular facts. Instead, the collective effect of the media is to create a set of default understandings and expectations that act as a kind of lens through which Americans see the world. Viewed through this lens, some facts about the world make more sense and are easier to see, while others are a poorer fit with people's default understandings, and become harder to see. As advocates struggle with the difficult job of raising Americans' consciousness regarding food systems and related issues, they will do well to bear in mind the ways in which current news coverage is helping and hurting their cause – both because this coverage partially defines what they are up against in American public discourse, and because an understanding of current journalism can help advocates plan ways of *improving* the coverage, by introducing ideas of their own through interviews, press releases, news events, and other opportunities.

Previous research by Cultural Logic, FrameWorks and others has established that Americans don't naturally think much about the systems that supply their food, or easily grasp that there are such systems at work. (See "Research Background" below for further discussion of current patterns in Americans' thinking.) One of the places where people do run across references to the food system is in news reports – in stories about food scares, about changing trends in consumption, about farmers who are finding new markets for their goods, and so forth. The central question guiding this analysis concerns the likely impacts these articles have on readers: In what ways would consumers of these articles come away better educated about the food system, and in what ways might the coverage actually reinforce some of their erroneous (and counterproductive) default understandings?

Summary of Findings

In this section we summarize some of the important implications that emerge from the media review.

Many pieces play (destructively) on traditional images of farming and rural America.

Among the most destructive patterns in the material is the tendency for writers to (intentionally or unintentionally) evoke stereotypes that work against advocates' goals.

The materials tend to reinforce a cognitive disconnect between food and food supply systems.

In Americans' prevailing patterns of thinking, food and food production have separate lives, as distinct and unconnected cognitive and experiential domains. The materials tend to reinforce this disconnect by addressing either the domain of food (including eating, dining, shopping, etc.) or the domain of agriculture and agricultural economics – but not both.

There is a strong tendency to reinforce little-picture thinking by focusing images of the Individual Farmer.

The image of the lone farmer struggling to eke a living from the soil is laden with many layers of meaning and symbolism in American culture. Therefore it is no surprise that many writers choose to open many of their stories with this evocative icon. But, as in other issue areas, a focus on individuals tends to obscure broader issues that are critical to an understanding of advocates' perspectives. (Occasional stories manage to weave the image of the individual farmer into a piece that promotes big-picture thinking about food systems, but these are the exceptions.)

The materials suggest that farming is removed from the “real economy.”

Many of the depictions of farmers suggest that farming is a calling that people pursue for personal, idiosyncratic reasons. This image removes agriculture from the real world of economics, and from the realm of public, as opposed to private concerns.

Farming is depicted as anachronistic occupation.

Many stories reinforce the idea that farmers belong to another century – thereby further removing them from understandings of modern problems, approaches and solutions related to food systems.

References to “the fall” of traditional rural America make problems seem inevitable.

There is a strong background narrative underlying many of the pieces – the story of the “fall” of the rural utopia that defines America's past (and its “best years”). While it is appropriate for journalists to describe problems in rural areas, this evocative framing makes it less likely readers can take a “Responsible Manager” stance towards current problems in the food system.

A strong focus on consumers and a consumer-perspective obscures the real dynamics of food systems.

When pieces are not focusing on farmers, they are often focusing on food from a consumer perspective that is unhelpful in a number of ways – in particular, the pieces support the illusion that consumer choice is the driving force that shapes the food system, and obscure all other causal forces. Articles on food trends, on particular agricultural sectors, and so forth exaggerate the extent to which consumer preferences determine what food gets produced (and how, where, etc.). This model obviously obscures the role of the many other actors who actually wield much more direct and deliberate control over the systems – including the decision-makers at firms that produce, market and distribute food.

Many pieces tend to reinforce the negative implications of the “generic modernization” understanding of food systems.

Lacking a clear conceptual model of food production and food systems, Americans often think about the topic in terms of their generic understandings of the overall processes of

modernization. Pieces that emphasize scary or dehumanized aspects of current food production tend to reinforce these associations, with the result that problems in food systems can seem more inevitable, more acceptable (as the cost of progress), and less associated with actors who have made decisions. (Instead it can seem like an impersonal, even “natural” process that is transforming the world under its own irresistible momentum.)

The report also discusses a number of ways in which articles related to food systems frame issues productively. Among these are:

- Highlighting the relationship between farmers/food-producers and the rest of the actors in a region.
- Embedding discussions of particular farms/farmers thoroughly within big-picture discussions of agricultural, environmental, economic or other big-picture issues – rather than framing them in iconic isolation.
- Focusing explicitly on the food supply chain – how particular foods come to be produced (and marketed and distributed) in particular ways. How are the decisions made and who makes them?
- Appealing to readers as responsible actors – either by highlighting the power of educated, activist consumers, or better yet, by showing how individuals have a stake in solutions that are not commercial in nature.

Method

For purposes of this analysis, Cultural Logic reviewed roughly 115 newspaper articles collected from newspapers in various parts of the country, from Miami to Seattle to Detroit to Washington, DC. The articles were identified by searching archives for terms such as “food,” “food systems,” “food production,” “food trends,” “agriculture,” “farms,” “farming,” and “farm production.” The sample was designed to exclude the overwhelming number of articles that focus strictly on *eating* – i.e. food-related topics like diet plans, recipes, restaurants, etc. Instead, we searched for articles on all other aspects of food and food systems – from agricultural methods to consumption trends to health and environmental impacts to economic issues.

Articles from the period of January 1, 2004 to the present were drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. AP Newswire articles appearing in other mainstream, mid-size or smaller market newspapers were also included.

Unlike analyses performed by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, for instance, this analysis is not a quantitative look at the frequency of topics, for example, but a qualitative examination of how topics related to food systems are treated in the materials, and the likely implications for readers’ thinking. The analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and aren’t mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics within a story are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, the metaphors used to talk about food-related topics, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials. The analysis also focuses on the relationship between the stories

told in newspapers and the stories people already have in their heads, as established by previous rounds of qualitative research. (See Research Background below.)

Much of the report is devoted to harmful patterns in the coverage of food systems—i.e. ways in which the coverage is likely to create counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers, or to encourage a continuing “cognitive blindness” to the nature of food systems. However, we also discuss pieces that avoid these traps, since these positive examples can help guide advocates (and responsible journalists) identify ways of providing more constructive framing.

Research Background

This analysis is informed by a substantial body of previous research (much of which was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute) on how Americans think about food and food systems. The previous research includes Cultural Logic’s own in-depth interviews with diverse collections of Americans on the topics of food systems and rural life, and conversations with experts participating in the annual Food and Society conference (Landsdowne, VA, April, 2005).¹ Some key findings from this previous research are summarized below, since they play a role in the analysis presented in this report.

Americans’ patterns of thinking about *food* make it much harder for them to think about food systems.

The experiential domain of food is so cognitively rich that people typically have no sense that there is something more to know. Patterns of thinking based on the lived experience of eating, shopping, cooking, being served, and so forth essentially “crowd out” thinking about a bigger picture.

Another powerful effect of the default, little-picture patterns is to “translate” new information into confirmation of existing understandings. Warnings about food risks, for instance, are interpreted as confirmation that *individuals* need to make smarter choices, and that *individual foods* should be avoided.

Importantly, the default patterns of understanding also *discourage* critical thinking about where food comes from. The lived experience of food creates close ties in people’s thinking between food and a passive sense of being nurtured. Along with a default consumer stance, which prompts people to trust merchants, for example, this food receiver stance encourages a trusting complacency, and dampens interest in *any* information about the ultimate sources of food.

Finally, the patterns of thinking about food are mostly unconnected with thinking about how food is produced. The worlds of food and agriculture tend to exist separately as unconnected domains of thought.

¹ For the full reports, please see “The Agrarian Myth Revisited: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations,” October 2003; “Not While I’m Eating: How and Why Americans Don’t Think about Food Systems: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations,” June 2005; and “All Trees and No Forest: How Advocacy Paradigms Obscure Public Understanding of the Food System,” July 2005.

Food systems are just another example of “modernization.”

When Americans are induced to think about food production in broader terms, their thinking often reflects a generic sense of how the “modern” world works. People may have fragmentary knowledge about food systems, but this knowledge rarely adds up to a fuller picture that could help them understand the importance of the changes advocated by experts. Instead, people often operate from a generic model of modernization, into which they add in their smattering of factual knowledge about food and food production.

The result is an exaggerated picture of giant conglomerates, completely mechanized food production, extinct family farmers, and a trend towards the reduction of food to powders and pills.

Importantly, the modernization narrative obscures the existence of specific actors and decision-makers (modernization is a massive, impersonal trend), implies that changes in food systems are inevitable, and that problems are the price of progress. Furthermore, the modernization frame filters out various key ideas – e.g. the role of diversity (of crops or farmers – modernization is largely “about” standardization), and the meaning of sustainability (modernization is not about the natural world, nor about preserving things as they are).

Advocates’ communications generally do not promote an understanding of food systems as a whole.

Instead their work often focuses on particular sets of ideas that amount, from a cognitive perspective, to *self-contained paradigms*. Issues like ecologically sustainable agriculture, the living wage for farm workers or the return to the traditional pleasures of the table are rich enough to feel like worlds of their own, and are largely insulated from each other.

Furthermore, these paradigms may seem only tenuously connected to the food system. For example, it is easy for average people to think about farm workers’ wages in a way that has little or nothing to do with food – as a matter of greedy employers paying their workers too little (a story that might as well take place in the garment industry).

Finally, the paradigms used by advocates may reinforce the default, “little-picture” patterns in people’s thinking – e.g., given the current lack of understanding of food-related issues, the notion of “food security” probably conjures images of well-sealed cans in the supermarket, stockpiles of food in the basement, or guards posted outside food warehouses.

Rural America is often thought of in terms of a distorting “rural utopia” model.

A strong default pattern of thinking defines rural people as hard-working, virtuous, simple, and poor. (Note that rural people themselves are not immune from this pattern.) This view may be sentimentally positive, but also leads to serious problems, including the following:

- *Rural poverty becomes invisible as a problem.* The fact that rural people may have little money is simply a natural facet of their simpler and more virtuous lives – and their condition is not generally considered “poverty” per se.
- *Rural America is system-less and cause-less.* Life there is often seen as qualitatively different in ways that can both obscure understandings of problems, and frame helpful interventions as corruption.
- *Rural America is self-sufficient.* The rural utopia frame obscures the fact that many rural people are not in situations where they can get the help they need from friends and family, and frames “outside help” as unnatural and immoral.

- *Development is the main threat.* In the rural utopia view, rural areas are a resource to be preserved, rather like water or gold. Sprawl means an overall reduction of rural spaces, which are gradually eroded from the edges in. This understanding obscures the fact that much of the harm to rural ways of life is about *disrupted systems* (social, economic, etc.).

As we discuss in the remainder of this report, these unhelpful patterns are often in play – or are inadvertently reinforced – even in articles that seem to address food-related issues in otherwise positive ways.

Problem 1: The Disconnect between Food and Food Supply Systems

Many of the stories in the sample fall into one of two categories – stories about farmers and farming, and stories about consumers and their food.

For Farmers, Subsidies Are a Matter of What Kind of Row You Hoe

Taking root in a new land: Immigrants fill need for farmers by renewing a passion for planting

Fresh Spinach Is Growing On Americans

Once and for All, It's Not Kerry Ketchup [about the ups and downs of the Heinz brand]

[Note that the sample excluded the very numerous articles that focus solely on diets, restaurants, and other aspects of eating.] Articles very seldom draw effective bridges between the system of food production on one hand and the lived experiences of the consumer/reader on the other. This common aspect of the journalism reinforces one of the central problems in Americans' thinking, from the perspective of food systems advocates: food-related models and farming-related models are largely disconnected in people's minds. While of course journalists are under no obligation to address the two domains in ways that reinforce their interconnection, this is an area where advocates can offer direct or indirect help in crafting stories that tie food and food systems together in a meaningful bigger picture.

Problem 2: Using and Reinforcing Rural Stereotypes

When writing about topics related to food systems, journalists regularly invoke images that play on well-established, even stereotyped understandings of rural people and rural living – particularly in an article's opening lines. From advocates' perspective, these models are counterproductive because they emphasize that rural people are essentially different from everyone else – that they live in a world apart, in a kind of timeless, tradition-bound existence. (These cultural models are discussed in more depth in Cultural Logic's report, "The Agrarian Myth Revisited.")

Symbols of the rural: family farms and farmers

One of the most common leads for an article about food systems is a brief portrait of an individual farm or farmer.

Tom Carpenter picked at a bud on a Granny Smith apple tree, blooming and unpruned. The Central Washington farmer didn't bother to cultivate this particular block of apples after learning his water would be rationed this summer because of drought.

Judging by the laws of nature and the cruel twists of the farming life, Joan Lundquist is doing just fine as she takes another stab at making a living from the rich dirt of the San Joaquin Valley.

Like stories on other topics – from child abuse to health insurance – these articles which focus on individuals automatically steer readers' thoughts toward little-picture understandings that make it harder to see the bigger picture of systemic problems and solutions. The problems seem to be those of individuals, and the solutions seem to be the kind that smart, hard-working individuals can create for themselves.

More subtly, but just as damagingly, the familiar image of the farmer carries along with it a great deal of symbolic baggage that can work powerfully to prevent readers from acquiring new information. When an article about food systems begins with an image of a farmer – the central character in American myths about rural life – it almost inevitably evokes models related to tradition, virtue, and nostalgia. What it does not do is cause people to come to a better understanding of food systems.

Farmer virtues

It is the farmer that most epitomizes the rural virtues of hard work, endurance and piety. It is the farmer who is family-oriented, stoical in poverty, connected with nature and her rhythms, and uncorrupted by the modern world. Another of the most powerful of farmer virtues is self-reliance.

Leslie Hendry lives 75 miles from Casper on her family ranch near the tiny community of Lysite in central Wyoming.

Shopping and socializing are an hour-and-a-half drive. The nearest neighbor is five miles away.

Her older son is away at college, and her younger boy, a high-school freshman, has to ride a school bus three hours a day; he doesn't get back until supper time.

During busy seasons, like calving, Hendry works outside with her husband and the hired men. But right now, she's inside, dealing with the piles of paperwork needed to run the business of a ranch.

All day, alone, without even the radio on for company.

That's how she likes it.

"I'm just home, and that would probably drive some people nuts," she said.

A portrait like this one naturally reinforces stereotypical views of rural self-sufficiency, making it seem *unnatural or even wrong* to work against rural problems caused by isolation and dispersion.

Although the following article goes on to discuss numerous reasons for the success of the farm, the reader is very likely to see its success in the particular virtues of the Roney family, who have somehow resisted change.

Marilyn Roney recalls many sweet moments from her farm-kid upbringing that later helped lead her to join her parents in farming the land tilled by her family for four generations. "I remember when I was little sitting on the tractor with Pa and singing as loud as I could to the tune of the engine," she says of one such happy moment, smiling as she strolls amid crops of corn, bright yellow squash and other vegetables destined for Seattle-area farmers markets. "I want my (future) children to grow up just like I did," says Roney, 31, fresh-faced in jeans and sweatshirt and now the lead decision-maker at the farm, known today as The Farmer's Daughter.

In another typical article, about two entrepreneurs returning to the Midwest, a journalist writes:

Here was a farm-raised, self-reliant work force made to order for expanding businesses like theirs, old neighbors who possessed a traditional work ethic, openness and loyalty – hallmarks of rural life, but traits sometimes hard to find in urban America.

Stories that are ostensibly about food systems have a way of becoming fables about the power of rural virtues. And because virtues are housed in people rather than systems, these fables fail to suggest solutions other than individual ones. Worse, the virtues themselves are typically compatible only with a traditional world, the stories subtly imply that our modern interventions would themselves be destructive and unwelcome.

Farming as a “calling” rather than a living

People do not see small-scale farming as economically sensible (anymore), and newspaper reporting tends to reinforce the understanding that farmers don't farm for money.

“My idea of paradise was helping my grandma and grampa on their farm in Nebraska,” Ms. Manix said. “And here, we got to have all the animals, the calves and the chickens and the goats.”

But there was no money in it. So Mr. Manix worked as a carpenter and tilled gardens and cut hay for other people. Ms. Manix used to pick a whole field of Lincoln peas by herself.

“We worked for 20 years, making about \$15 a day on our vegetables,” Ms. Manix said.

Instead, farming is a calling or vocation, pursued for personal and idiosyncratic reasons. This Calling model has a number of destructive implications:

- Farms are not linked to the “real” economy. Money is only necessary in order to allow farmers to continue doing what they love, or to continue a family tradition.
- Farms are not linked to the real world of our food supply.
- Farmers who seem too concerned with making money are “greedy.” Ironically, entrepreneurship – on which the continuing existence of small farmers depends – is incompatible with this common understanding of farmers – as well as with the “rural virtues” of poverty and modesty, for example.

Given these understandings, it is inevitable that readers will regard farming as a subject that does not concern them directly. It may be sad when someone has to stop doing something they love, but it is hardly unusual or a cause for public concern.

Farming as “out of time”

Articles like those already cited also promote the perception that farmers are somehow “of another time.” As most Americans see it, farming epitomizes the traditions of the country's rural past. It is an admirable and virtuous (and arduous) way of life, but a poor fit with the contemporary world – as a result, it is inexorably passing away. In fact, when people think about where the world is going, farms often provide a central image that represents what we are “leaving behind.”

“The Fall”

When people are operating within the rural utopia frame, the actual *problems* of rural areas are typically understood in terms of a familiar “next chapter” in the story of rural utopia, its “fall” in the face of modernization. The article about entrepreneurs cited earlier describes the fallen state of the rural towns:

Across the Great Plains, farm towns are dying, their downtown shops going dark, their young people forsaking failing family farms and sputtering local economies to make a living elsewhere.

The story of the decline of rural areas has become so ingrained that a common way of introducing good news from rural areas is by reminding people that rural areas are a place where “bad news” usually comes from. For example:

Across the Great Plains, the story is as familiar and as mournful as the unremitting prairie wind. Rural schools are closing, small towns are dying and young people are in ruinously short supply, having run off to cities rather than stay home to take over daddy’s cow farm.

This article goes on to explain an effort on the part of rural officials to take advantage of new market opportunities. However, everything about the story that is hopeful or solution-oriented has to fight against the prevailing direction established by the fall model – a story of steady decline of a traditional rural way of life, and the plight of people and places that are now old-fashioned and outmoded. Even if the journalist does ultimately suggest an optimistic message, the story has inadvertently confirmed the stereotype that rural areas are “usually” in terrible shape these days. The exception ends up proving the rule.

Rural dystopia: still an easy model to trigger

Another of the cultural models that all Americans hold somewhere in their minds frames rural areas as blighted backwaters. People are familiar with the image of rural areas as places of illiteracy, ignorance, poor health, poor housing, inadequate education and violence. Appalachian shacks, run-down Indian reservations, “redneck” trailer parks, and other similar stereotypes are specific instances of this rural dystopia model that people sometimes use to think about the problems of rural areas. In the following example a journalist criticizes a politically well-connected farm by playing on the rural dystopia model.

PISCATAWAY, N.J. There are no cows at the Cornell Dairy Farm. A few shaggy ponies graze in its overgrown pasture, behind a hand-painted sign announcing “pony rides.” A goat wanders among the trash containers, rusted construction equipment and ramshackle outbuildings. A few roosters scratch in the driveway outside the farm store, which sells one item: eggs that are trucked in from Pennsylvania.

While writers rarely use the stereotypes of rural dystopia in their articles to mock or denigrate people, journalists may sometime trigger this model incidentally, especially when they are trying to shed light on problems in rural areas. One story of a man returning to a family farm begins:

When Jack Manix showed up at his grandfather’s farm here 31 years ago, the 200-year-old homestead was headed for ruin. “The roofs leaked, the fences needed fixing, the cider shed had broken down,” Mr. Manix recalled. “Grampa had to give up his cows because he couldn’t take care of them.”

The image of run-down buildings and poverty-stricken farmers can trigger negative stereotypes about ramshackle country lives, and confirm people's ideas that rural areas and rural people are best ignored or left behind.

Overwhelming power of stereotypes

The counterproductive "traditional" images described in this section typically appear before an article moves on to its actual point – often the description of a situation that actually *contradicts* the default models. By beginning a piece with an emotionally resonant and familiar image, reporters are often successful in "hooking" readers into a story. The "news" of the article becomes the *difference* between what people expect to hear and what the journalist is actually reporting.

A large body of research suggests, however, that once a dominant model has been evoked, it is *reinforced* rather than *undermined* by what follows. Once dominant cognitive models are triggered, they are very difficult to contradict. This is true even when the journalist spends the rest of the article trying to change people's minds about rural areas. The new information tends to confirm the model or to be "filtered out" by people's pre-existing understandings. As a result, rather than displacing old models, articles like these tend to entrench them further, taking readers further from where advocates would like them to be.

Problem 3: Feeding the Modernization Myth

Cultural Logic's research has shown that people tend to "toggle" between two contradictory models of the food system. On one hand is the model of traditional farms and farmers discussed in the previous section. On the other hand, people often speak as though those small farms are purely a thing of the past and as though agriculture has been entirely transformed into something unrecognizably "modern." Americans may know very little about the actual food supply system, but they do have a familiar cultural model about modernization and tend to plug their fragmentary knowledge into this model, producing an extreme picture of high-tech, unnatural, corporate-run agribusiness.

Because people think of modernization as a one-way, un-stoppable, uncontrolled movement toward greater size, complexity, centralization, and technological sophistication, they unconsciously conclude that this is the direction in which agriculture (if it can even be called that anymore) is moving as well. Trends in agriculture that don't fit this model are very hard for people to appreciate or take seriously. In many of the articles that we surveyed, journalists reinforced this hyper-modernization model.

High-tech answers to agricultural problems

Some reporting simply plays up the benefits of scientific and technological developments. For instance, in "One-Billionth Acre of Biotech Seed Planted" (*Washington Post*, 5/10/05) the journalist portrays a system that is embracing high-tech solutions.

Tom West, vice president of biotechnology affairs for Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., said in a statement Monday [that] biotech crops are one of the greatest technological advances in the history of agriculture. Such crops have been at the center of heated debate between environmentalists, who worry they're not safe for the land or human consumption, and industry organizations, that say biotech crops reduce the use of pesticides and other farm chemicals.

Despite a brief reference to the environmentalists who “worry,” the article goes on to convey the industry’s stance that the rapidly increasing use of biotech is an established fact.

The hyper-modern food system

Other articles make more creative use of people’s ambivalence about the benefits and the dangers of modernization. In some cases, agriculture is described in terms that exaggerate the industrial and high-tech aspects of food systems. An article promoting the benefits of mechanization opens with a vivid description of a futuristic, monstrous, (and still imaginary) orange-picking robot.

A hulking, nameless creature lumbers among the citrus trees, its eight arms and eyes in constant motion, searching for its prey: oranges. Part robot, part tractor, the contraption is an unusual combination of one internal-combustion engine, four rubber tires, eight digital cameras, eight electronic arms and an excruciating number of computer algorithms that choreograph every movement. Its metal arms maneuver among the branches, where “eyes” spot the fruit and suction-cup “hands” grasp them even more gently than human hands, which is what they are designed to replace (“How to pick an orange,” *Los Angeles Times*, p. 118, 1/2/05).

The article goes on to argue that technology will solve the problems that have plagued the citrus industry, including the persistent injustices of the migrant labor system and the US’s lagging competitiveness.

One-way modernization: from farms to factories

Journalists contribute to people’s idea that agriculture has become more akin to manufacturing than farming. Even when articles are critical of trends in agriculture, they tend to use language that emphasizes an industrialized system, which is “modern,” and an alternative system that is “traditional” and therefore of the past. In the article below about the intensification of dairying in Ohio, the journalist writes:

Where Mr. De Haan envisions bovine splendor, some of his neighbors see the farming equivalent of a smoke-belching chemical plant. “These are not farms, they are factories,” said Mary Pierce, 44, who lives down the road from Mr. De Haan. “And they should be regulated as such.”

Critics say the farms, which typically have several hundred and sometimes thousands of cows, are an insult to another tradition: the small farm where herds of 60 to 150 cows graze on open grassland. The large farms, known as confined animal feeding operations, have too little acreage to allow grazing, produce more manure than they can handle and threaten to pollute aquifers, critics contend (“Seeking, and Seeking to Preserve, Greener Pastures,” *New York Times*, 3/26/05).

Articles like these, while accurate and worthwhile, also reinforce the tendency for Americans to believe that the food industry is progressing in lock-step with other changes in their society. To the extent that problems in agriculture are understood as symptoms of the general process of modernization, readers are likely to conclude that these changes are inevitable, that there are no particular actors responsible, and that their own role is simply to make the best of the situation.

Problem 4: Consumer-Centered Reporting

Not surprisingly, most reporting on food and food systems assumes that the reader is primarily a consumer. This is a problem from advocates' point of view, first because the "Consumer Stance" is basically passive, and incompatible with the systems-oriented, critical approach that most experts would like to promote. Secondly, consumer-oriented portrayals of the food supply system tend to exaggerate the influence of consumers on the nature of food production, and to obscure the active and important roles of producers, advertisers, distributors and retailers in shaping consumption.

Interestingly, reporting on food and food systems contributes to a particular kind of "toggling," between two equally damaging views. On one hand, it can encourage the passive consumer stance in which people don't imagine or create, but merely wait to see what the market offers. On the other hand, the articles can promote a model of a consumer-driven market – in which consumers are in the driver's seat when it comes to setting the food-production agenda. In this model, all the institutions and actors of the food supply system revolve around the desires of the consumer, like planets orbiting around the sun. Importantly, however, this model asks nothing of consumers other than that they buy what they want. In short, each of these stances encourages complacency toward the food supply system.

The free-choice paradigm

According to the logic of this simple organizing model, consumers choose what they eat, unconstrained by any other factor.

Every year, more than 30,000 new products squeeze onto grocery store shelves. Every year, somewhere between 60 percent and 80 percent of them flop.

The battle to win consumers' tastes can drive food and drink makers to the edge of reason. Some new foods fail because they taste bad. Some fail because they look funny. Some might never get a second look because they are too similar to other products. Some products also fall victim to bad business planning or inadequate distribution. Toss in the fact that consumers are becoming more educated and more demanding while stubbornly sticking to brands and formulas they know. In response, food marketers are trying to become more clever — and in some cases more daring — according to the Food Marketing Institute ("Strange but New," *Detroit Free Press*, p. 3F, 12/28/04).

In this model, the driving force is demand. For example, the article below reports on the end of the long-standing U.S. trade surplus in foodstuffs. Despite the complexity of this historic change, it is framed as a simple outcome of consumer preferences:

The ever-increasing appetite for foreign foods and beverages in the United States is among the reasons the nation is expected to pay as much for imported farm products in fiscal 2005 as it earns by selling wheat, soybeans and other products abroad, according to a Department of Agriculture report released this week.

The article goes on to mention several other reasons for the change – ranging from currency rates to patterns of global trade to the conservatism of US commodity farming – but the article's opening establishes the powerful consumer-driven frame, making it less likely readers will take in the other causal forces that are mentioned.

“Untapped Markets”: Counter-examples that don’t undermine the model

Many groups of people are poorly served by the food systems, yet reporting on the topic emphasizes only that the system hasn’t yet noticed them, or that retailers have finally noticed an “untapped market.” A typical instance would be the following article on a historically-underserved population, U.S. Hispanics.

At Minyard’s Carnival stores, the bakery has plenty of cakes, but it also has a tortilleria capable of making 4,800 corn tortillas an hour. The seafood department’s live tanks hold swimming catfish instead of pincher-taped lobsters.

The grocery business along the Mexican border in Texas and California is ahead on this trend,” said Michelle Del Toro, research manager at the Food Marketing Institute in Washington. Ms. Del Toro is the author of a 55-page report that bears out what Dallas-area grocers have known for some time: that Hispanics make up a lucrative market just waiting to be tapped.

Rather than reporting on decades of neglect by a highly centralized supermarket system, the report highlights the fact that Hispanics have grown so numerous that they are now being catered to by the food retail industry. Given a choice between portraying a system successfully driven by consumers or one structured and limited by corporate practices, the journalist has exaggerated the power of the consumer.

Even articles that report on the industry’s more questionable practices of marketing and product design reinforce the “common-sense” idea that things exist on menus and on shelves because consumers want them there.

In November, Hardee’s debuted the double-patty, four-strips-of- bacon Monster Thickburger—a 1,420-calorie, 107-grams-of-fat behemoth that got plenty of notice from late-night talk-show hosts and critics. One health-and-nutrition advocacy group dubbed Thickburgers “food porn.”

Frazer and others at Hardee’s flick off such criticism, saying they’re only giving consumers, namely “young hungry guys” ages 18 to 34, what they want.

In the article, “Fast Food goes beyond Supersize” (*Detroit Free Press*, 7/19/05), the journalist begins the article with the claim that the larger (and much more profitable) portions being promoted at fast food restaurants are just giving consumers what they want:

What health-food trend? Turns out there’s still a large chunk of diners looking for big slabs of burger basics like cheese, bacon and layers of beef patties. In an about-face to the flurry of low-carbohydrate items introduced over the past two years, fast-food chains have been out-supersizing each other with new menu items. Hardee’s, Burger King and Wendy’s are promoting hefty sandwiches with names like the Monster Thickburger and the Enormous Omelet. Even Starbucks is tapping into the pleasure-seeking sect with the launch of Chantico Drinking Chocolate, which it calls a “drinkable dessert.”

“It’s a backlash by the American people against the food police,” said Dean Haskell, an analyst at JMP Securities. “And operators are catering to it. We try to eat healthy at home, but when we go out we want to splurge.”

The model of consumer responsibility is so engrained that the same article offers no remark upon counterevidence showing that consumers, when given both information and choice, chose healthier (but less profitable) options than the ones the restaurants are promoting.

In April, casual-dining chain Ruby Tuesday's reversed a bold move it made last September to prominently post nutritional data on its menus and at tables to help customers make informed food choices. Customers did just that, choosing not to eat Colossal Burgers or signature rib dishes.

Articles that report on efforts to create new consumer "demands" do not offer any analysis about the forces behind the push to market new products nor the cumulative affect of all of this marketing. The overall effect is to distill the portrayal to the simple clarity of the consumer-driven model.

Missing Mechanisms: factors other than consumer choice

The defining characteristic of the free-choice model is that forces that might affect or constrain consumer choices seem to have no clear mechanism. By contrast, the consumer-driven model of food systems offers a very clear mechanism of how consumer purchases influence supplier decisions.

Nutrition guidelines: Who reads them?

For example, an article looking at the new national nutrition guidelines conveys the anxiety they have created in the food industry: "A single word or phrase can mean millions of dollars in additional – or lost – sales for food companies." Yet, because the article does not explain how such guidelines might affect the food consumers choose from the shelves, the argument is much weaker than the clear and powerful consumer choice model. In fact, one authority cited in the article downplays the power of the guidelines.

Harry Balzer, who tracks American eating habits as vice president of the NPD Group in Rosemont, said he didn't expect the guidelines to have a huge impact on consumption.

Diet gurus, product marketers and media outlets: Who heeds them?

The integrated and "synergistic" relationships between marketers, dietary experts, government, and media outlets are described in several articles, but again, with no compelling explanation of the forces acting on consumers. As a result, such reports don't encourage the reader to think beyond the consumer-driven model.

In 2004 food companies increased the number of low-carb offerings more than fivefold, to 2,378 products, just as Heath and more than 16 million others appeared to have lost their appetite for low-carb diets. Atkins Nutritionals Inc., the products company behind the popular diet of the same name, and other firms such as Northfield-based Kraft Foods Inc. and Chicago's Sara Lee Corp. flooded the market with products, many of which failed to stick.

In only two years [Atkins] has gone from producing almost all its products in-house to licensing the power of its brand to other food producers who have put Atkins goods in the dairy, refrigerated and freezer aisles as well as in the rest of the supermarket. It's that potential and the power of the Atkins name that prompted Parthenon Capital and Goldman Sachs to pay a reported \$533 million for an 80 percent stake in the privately held Atkins in October 2003 ("Low-carb audience, full of other food choices, thins out," *Chicago Tribune*, p. 1, 1/16/05).

Ironically, the plethora of product lines, the huge monetary stakes involved, and the massive efforts on the part of food suppliers to create and maintain inertia of fad diets or health crazes, only serve to confirm how central the (fickle) consumer really is. Ultimately, the model insists that it is the individual consumer that makes his or her free choice.

Weak mechanisms: Advertising and misinformation

The paradigm of freedom of consumer choice is so well-engrained that there were no articles in the samples that questioned it. There were a few articles that mentioned influences on the consumer – one discussed the power of advertising, for instance – but for each of these there were many that offered quotes like, “That’s the bottom line for any company. If it doesn’t sell, it’ll go off the menu.”

The end result is that the whole question of food industry responsibility disappears entirely, because in this model all that the food industry does is sell people what they want. Even when a story focuses on safeguards to prevent schoolchildren from eating unhealthy food, the measures are framed in language that is about limiting the children’s freedom (i.e. the use of words like “limit” and “ban”):

National statistics on childhood obesity and on the low consumption of fruit and vegetables among youth have prompted school districts around the country to limit the amount of junk food available to students. The Seattle School District earlier this month adopted policies that banned the sale of pop and foods high in sugar and fat.

Ask students at Everett High School what they think of the district’s new policy banning pop, candy, chips and french fries in favor of healthier food, and you’ll hear yelps of protest.

In the rare cases where advertising goes so far as to be fraudulent, the consumer-driven model is “saved” because a compatible model is evoked to explain the undue influence on consumers: Sometimes people can be tricked.

In what has become a near free-for-all marketplace for health claims on food products, consumers are often convinced that the more they eat of these products, the healthier, or thinner, they are likely to be. ... [T]hink again. Congress has made it extremely difficult for the Food and Drug Administration to closely regulate health-related claims for foods and supplements (“Beware Food Companies’ Health Claims,” *New York Times*, 9/21/04).

Taken together, these consumer-centered patterns constitute a very challenging obstacle for effective communications about food systems, and allow producers to position themselves on the high ground of freedom.

Constructive Patterns of Coverage

The counterproductive patterns discussed above describe the bulk of the stories sampled in this research, and it might be natural to conclude that more constructive stories are simply not compatible with the parameters of the mainstream press. This is, in fact, not the case. A number of stories actually do succeed in framing the issue of food in ways that are conducive to a better understanding of the food system. In this section, we show that more productive coverage of food is possible, and that this coverage is characterized by a number of specific patterns. While a few articles are models of coverage that do much to provide the reader with a “big picture,” many others simply contain productive elements – examples of which are discussed here.

Avoiding the rural stereotypes trap by reporting on real interactions between farmers and non-farmers.

Not all articles use models like rural utopia as the “hook” in order to involve readers. Some stories instead make an attempt to describe the actual relationships that Rhode Islanders, for instance, are likely to have with farms and rural areas, including

Ever take a quick trip to the local farm for some good deals on fresh produce? Do your children like to play in the autumn mazes or take field trips to farms? Or do you just enjoy the quiet scenery and beauty of having farmland so close to the city? “*Many R.I. farms are cultivating the tourist crop,*” (Providence Journal, p. 1C, 12/19/04),

This brief article explains the ways in which farmers and non-farmers interact in Rhode Island (through direct sales at farms stands and markets, “agritourism,” and through the shared landscape and economy). It goes on to show how each affects the other, and how both are part of a shared system. In regions other than New England, the nature of the interactions are different, of course, and journalists would presumably need to work to discover just what people’s real connections to farmers and rural areas actually are. But in any case, these story lines of interconnectedness deserve creative adaptation.

Using the farmer as illustration not icon

Sometimes journalists successfully use individual farms and farmers as illustrations of larger issues. However, the symbolic baggage that farming images carry means that this requires careful, meticulous effort on the part of the journalist. The stories must emphasize again and again that this is not about farmer-myths, but about contemporary people engaged in agriculture in the contemporary system. In “Sell in Bulk, Lose Farm. Sell Locally, and Watch Revenues Grow,” (*New York Times*, 9/21/04), journalist Keith Schneider chooses a particular farm as an illustration, but in nearly every sentence he makes it clear that this farm and these happenings are merely specific instances of larger trends. The images of tradition and rural virtue are minimized in order to emphasize that this family of farmers is making its way in the modern world. It is worth quoting at length to demonstrate the consistency of his approach.

One of the truly good-news stories in American agriculture, and one with meaning for small businesses of all kinds, is what’s happening on Tyler Road here at the Shetler Family Dairy.

Not that long ago, George and Sally Shetler were small fry in an industry dominated by big players, producers of a bulk commodity in which prices essentially had not budged for 20 years. Continuing to supply the conventional fluid milk market, the Shetlers concluded, would take them down the same bankruptcy path that the Department of Agriculture says claimed almost 400 farms a week from 1974 to the mid-1990’s, most of them small.

So in 1995, the Shetlers decided to try a more entrepreneurial approach. If the markets they could reach through conventional channels were unsatisfactory, what new market could they tap? The one right around them, as it turned out bottling and delivering their milk directly to stores in Traverse City, 25 miles away, the center of a five-county region with 165,000 residents and growing faster than almost any place in the Midwest.

This kind of article does more than describe the plight of a family farm or spin the story of a scrappy farmer whose skill and hard work finds success where others find failure. Instead, it

helps give people a more accurate understanding of how agriculture of various types fits within our food supply system, and more specifically it lays out the mechanism through which something like direct sales and producer processing can allow smaller operators to make a living.

Spanning the gap from seed to table: showing readers the system at work

In a detailed article about strawberry growing (“Strawberries and Dreams,” *New York Times*, 4/13/05), journalist David Karp carefully lays out all of the factors that go into the selection and design of commercial varieties of this fruit. While the article is critical of the food industry in suggesting that the taste of strawberries suffers in some of the compromises, it does not adopt a kind of “food scare” tone. Rather, it shows that the actual strawberry on the shelf is the result of a complicated system where consumers’ desires are only part of the equation. Grower’s needs (for hardiness and ease of harvesting), distributor’s needs (for durability and consistency of shape and size) and retailers needs (for attractiveness and flavor) all factor in, often at the expense of flavor and variety.

This level of detail can also give readers a mechanism to understand that the particular compromises that are being made aren’t the only imaginable ones. For instance, the article gives enough information to make it clear that a choice is being made between a system based upon long-distance shipping, versus one anchored in local growers.

Because they don’t sweeten after harvest, strawberries must be picked fully ripe for best flavor. But to ship berries cross-country commercial growers have to compromise and harvest before full maturity.

Local vendors can do much better. Harry’s Berries, a farm in Oxnard, grows Seascape and Gaviota, two University of California varieties with good flavor that are a bit too soft and low-yielding for commercial growers. The owners pick the berries fully red and sell them at a premium, \$4 a pint, at 24 Southern California farmers’ markets. When everything goes right, the berries are quite sweet and richly flavored.

But most growers would sooner raise wombats than highly flavored but perishable strawberries. In contrast with the marketing of industrially grown tomatoes, whose insipidity inspired a small revival of heirloom varieties, almost all California strawberry shippers focus on mainstream markets, assuming that Americans look for price more than quality.

The article also works to counteract the problems of the passive consumer discussed above. On the one hand, it shows just how the consumer isn’t entirely in the driver’s seat. On the other hand, it shows the real and potential power of consumers not only to make more informed and satisfying choices, but also ultimately to have some effect upon the produce that they find upon the shelves.

Showing the citizen making changes to the food system.

Many articles show the food supply system as an evolving system, but the engines of change are always distant and outside the influence of the average citizen. Distant producers, distributors or marketers come up with new strategies. Government regulators and nutrition experts make obscure changes from within distant bureaucracies. Consumers, in their vague, aggregate way, alter their shopping habits. Of the hundred plus articles surveyed for this research, only two gave a positive portrayal of citizen-consumers making intentional changes to the nature of the food system. The absence of this type of story is all the more striking, given that grass-roots activism is an important goal of advocates.

An important counter-example is from the Chicago Sun Times:

When Austin community organizer LaDonna Redmond began addressing her son Wade's food allergies, she found herself traveling all over — and paying top dollar — for organically grown produce and other natural foods. Austin, a largely black and relatively poor community on the West Side, didn't have its own supermarket, let alone an organic-foods emporium like Whole Foods.

Redmond, who had developed programs for nonprofit organizations, put her professional skills to work. With her husband, Tracey, Redmond formed the Institute for Community Resource Development, a nonprofit group that works on food systems for “underserved communities.” Their first project was the 15-year-old Austin Farmers Market, which had fallen on hard times (“Grass-roots group sows seeds for farmers market harvest,” *Chicago Sun Times*, p. 57, 10/6/04).

The article goes on to relate the vitality and economic cohesion of the local community directly to the food system, and to show how the food supply system interacts with other aspects of life.

A second example of successful citizen-consumer action is provided by a well-developed article about community-supported agriculture: “More families get subscriptions to buy veggies from local farms” (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, 6/18/05). Although this article sometimes portrays the CSA as a fringe movement motivated more by philosophy than practicality and profit (which is off-putting to many people), it nevertheless clearly explains the multiple advantages of local purchasing, including freshness, healthfulness, variety, and local economic good. It even successfully introduces the idea of food security and shows that mainstream venues like restaurants and supermarkets are getting involved.

Combating consumer complacency

Although getting citizens to understand and act directly upon the food supply is an important goal, for the foreseeable future most people will continue to act primarily as supermarket consumers. Most articles surveyed tend to feed this tendency by taking for granted the passive nature of consumer activity (e.g. buy or don't buy what you're offered), and by portraying the food system as nonetheless driven by consumers and their desires. Very few articles traced consumer choices outward into larger social contexts.

Not just price and convenience: exposing consumers to the implications of their choices

A first step in getting consumers to make choices that impact the food system in constructive ways, is convincing them that their choices are not just about the quality of their dinners and the state of their weekly budget. For example, in “Doing good by trading fair,” (*Providence Journal*, p. 1G, 10/27/04) journalist Gail Ciampa explains how the coffee that consumers buy (i.e. FreeTrade or commercial) affects economic and environmental sustainability as well as fair wages and social justice for farm workers. The article is careful not to preach that consumers *must* let these concerns influence their shopping decisions, it simply makes the case that such decisions have far-reaching effects either way.

It's the right thing to do,” said Susan Wood, CEO for Providence's Coffee Exchange. “How can you make a living on the back of someone else? How could you live with yourself?”

And even if you turn a cold heart to her moral argument, consider Wood's roaster's point of view.

"If we don't help the farmer, we're not going to have access to great coffee because farmers aren't going to be able to do their job anymore," she said. "Then we all lose."

So when you see that "Fair Trade Certified" label, understand it's not just food with a cause. The concept blends powerful components of sustainability (growing things that enrich, not drain or pollute the land); artisan products (hand-tended rather than mass-produced); organics (not using chemicals and pesticides); and social responsibility.

The non-accusatory tone and the careful inclusion of other issues dear to the (unenlightened) consumer's heart, including, quality, cost, and convenience, seems well-designed to reach out to shoppers who otherwise would resist calls to join a "social movement" like fair trade.

While appeals based on enlightened consumption do not go so far as to encourage a Citizen stance *instead*, they are about as close as anything we found in the sample.

Conclusion

Newspapers are often considered our best source of authoritative journalism – the kind that gives us the most accurate and informative picture of the world. We might therefore expect print coverage – especially the kind provided in in-depth stories – to produce narratives that advance the public's grasp of the issue of food systems. An analysis of more than one hundred articles suggests, however, that newspaper coverage of food issues is subject to the same unproductive framing tendencies that we might expect from other media.² Even if print journalism is generally better than local TV news coverage, for example, newspaper articles often still fall into patterns that prevent readers from deepening or broadening their understanding of food systems.

Moreover, unproductive patterns of the kind discussed in this report don't necessarily reflect bad intentions, lack of skill or any other easily-identified journalistic flaw. Instead, they reflect common patterns in American reasoning and discourse, or a lack of attention to the ways in which a perfectly reasonable story can interact with the understandings and assumptions of the reading public. Food systems present special challenges to journalists and other communicators – the public's counterproductive ideas are easily evoked, and ways of framing the issue that seem productive at one level too often cut against the goals of advocates in other ways.

At the same time, as a brief survey of more productive articles demonstrates, careful attention to some basic principles can make a tremendous difference in the impact on an audience's thinking. But there is no reason to expect journalism to move in these directions unless advocates offer journalists very concrete help in reframing their stories. The analysis reported in this report offers one tool in helping advocates work towards reshaping coverage of this critical issue.

² For a discussion of unhelpful tendencies of local TV news, for instance, see Shanto Iyengar, "Is Anyone Responsible?," University of Chicago Press, 1991.

About the FrameWorks Institute

The mission of the FrameWorks Institute is to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems.

FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by a team of communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing remedial policies.

FrameWorks also critiques, designs, conducts and evaluates communications campaigns on social issues. Its work is based on an approach called "strategic frame analysis," which has been developed in partnership with UCLA's Center for Communications and Community. Susan Nall Bales established the FrameWorks Institute in 1999 and serves as its president.

About the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation was established in 1930 "to help people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources to improve their quality of life and that of future generations." Its programming activities center around the common vision of a world in which each person has a sense of worth; accepts responsibility for self, family, community, and societal well-being; and has the capacity to be productive, and to help create nurturing families, responsive institutions, and healthy communities.

To achieve the greatest impact, the Foundation targets its grants toward specific areas. These include health; food systems and rural development; youth and education; and philanthropy and volunteerism. Within these areas, attention is given to the cross-cutting themes of leadership; information systems/technology; capitalizing on diversity; and social and economic community development programming. Grants are concentrated in the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the southern African countries of Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

About the Authors

Public Knowledge, Inc. founded by veteran communications strategist Meg Bostrom, is a communications research organization and frequent collaborator of the FrameWorks Institute. Public Knowledge has worked closely with the FrameWorks Institute and other researchers to develop Strategic Frame Analysis. The organization has researched public opinion and analyzed communications strategies on a variety of social issues, including the environment, children's issues, foreign policy, health care, and the working poor, among others.

Meg Bostrom, President of Public Knowledge LLC, is a frequent FrameWorks collaborator and a veteran communications strategist with a unique perspective resulting from her experiences

as communicator, opinion analyst, advertising executive, and political consultant. Meg started her career as a political pollster, consulting for nonprofit groups, political candidates, foundations, and national associations. She then served as Executive Vice President of Strategic Planning at the advertising agency Trahan, Burden and Charles, where she was responsible for determining communications strategy for corporate and non-profit clients. Meg founded Public Knowledge to serve as a bridge between public opinion research and communications strategy. Public Knowledge uses public opinion data to develop communications strategy that will advance public understanding of, and support for, public policies to address social issues, including the environment, children, foreign policy, healthcare, and the working poor. A Chicago native, she received her bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois, and holds a master's degree from the University of Connecticut.

Cultural Logic, founded by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum impact. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, we focus primarily on research relating to public interest issues.

Cultural Logic investigates the shared understandings – cognitive and cultural *models* – that underlie opinion and behavior, applying the latest findings from the cognitive and social sciences to generate analyses of how people think and talk about specific cultural domains such as teenagers, global warming or health insurance. Research approaches include cognitive interviews, rapid ethnographic assessments, “TalkBack” testing of language and framing, and cognitive analysis of media and other public discourse.

Cultural Logic's research has been presented at the Aspen Institute's Wye River Conference Center, the White House Conference on Teenagers, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Pocantico Conference Center, the Benton Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the W. T. Grant Foundation, among other forums.

Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. co-founder of Cultural Logic, is a psychological anthropologist whose academic research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Aubrun has been a lecturer in cultural anthropology at the University of California, and manager of public relations for an advertising firm in San Diego.

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