MARION NESTLE

The Politics of Food Choice

In this excerpt from her influential book *Food Politics*, Marion Nestle summarizes how the food industry influences individual behavior and government regulation. The food industry shapes consumers' food preferences through marketing, and it shapes citizens' views about government regulation through alarmist emotional appeals. The food industry affects the political process through lobbying and relationships with government officials. She draws a parallel between the tactics of tobacco companies and the tactics of food companies, and she suggests that efforts to promote healthier food choices should be modeled after successful antismoking efforts.

The food industry uses lobbying, lawsuits, financial contributions, public relations, advertising, partnerships and alliances, philanthropy, threats, and biased information to convince Congress, federal agencies, nutrition and health professionals, and the public that the science relating diet to health is so confusing that they need not worry about diets: When it comes to diets, anything goes.[1]

Representatives of food companies and their trade associations repeatedly make the following claims:

- The keys to healthful diets are balance, variety, and moderation (especially when their products are included).
- All foods can be part of healthful diets (especially theirs).
- There is no such thing as a good or a bad food (except when their products are considered good).
- Dietary advice changes so often that we need not follow it (unless it favors their products).
- Research on diet and health is so uncertain that it is meaningless (except when it supports the health benefits of their products).
- Only a small percentage of the population would benefit from following population-based dietary advice (if that advice suggests restrictions on intake of their products).
- Diets are a matter of personal responsibility and freedom of choice (especially the freedom to choose their products).
- Advocacy for more healthful food choices is irrational (if it suggests eating less of their products).
- Government intervention in dietary choice is unnecessary, undesirable, and incompatible with democratic institutions (unless it protects and promotes their products).

Dr. Rhona Applebaum of the National Food Processors Association, for example, succinctly expresses such views when she says that diets should conform to "the three principles of sound nutritional advice: balance, variety, and moderation" and that societal measures to support more healthful food choices are unnecessary. Changing the

environment of food choice is possible, she maintains, only

> if the federal government, in the role of "Big Brother," mandates what foods can or cannot be produced—which is not the role of government in a free market economy. Controlling, limiting, and outright banning of products deemed "unfit" does not work, and history attests to the failure of such extremist measures. . . . Food consumption is not supply driven, it is demand driven, and consumers are in the driver's seat . . . you cannot force people to comply with the Dietary Guidelines and it is wrong to try. It is an unworkable, totalitarian approach that brings with it all the evils associated with such a philosophy.[2]

With such statements, food industry officials appeal to emotion (in this case, fears of totalitarianism) to argue against something that no nutritionist, private or governmental, advocates. Nutritionists are simply trying to educate the public that some foods *are* better for health than others. The food industry fiercely opposes this idea and uses its substantial resources, political skills, and emotional appeals to discourage attempts to introduce "eat less" messages into public discussion of dietary issues and, instead, to encourage people to eat more.

These tactics on the part of food companies are, in one sense, a routine part of doing business; they are no different from those used by other large commercial interests, such as drug companies, or—as we shall see—tobacco companies. But sellers of food products do not attract the same kind of attention as purveyors of drugs or tobacco. They should, not only because of the health consequences of dietary choices, but also because of the ethical issues raised by industry marketing practices. Food marketing raises ethical dilemmas, but so does attempting to regulate or change people's food choices, deciding how government should protect health within the context of a free market economy, determining what kinds of policy changes might support more healthful food choices, and identifying the role of individual responsibility in making such choices. This chapter explores such dilemmas.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF FOOD CHOICE

We are fortunate to live in a free market economy that gives us an abundant—indeed an overabundant—food supply at low cost. What we choose to make of this supply is, of course, a matter of personal responsibility, as food company officials are quick to argue. But we do not make food choices in a vacuum. We select diets in a marketing environment in which billions of dollars are spent to convince us that nutrition advice is so confusing, and eating healthfully so impossibly difficult, that there is no point in bothering to eat less of one or another food product or category. We may believe that we make informed decisions about food choice, but we cannot do so if we are oblivious of the ways food companies influence our choices. Most of us, if we choose to do so, can recognize how food companies spend money on advertising, but it is far more difficult to know about the industry's behind-the-scenes efforts in Congress, federal agencies, courts, universities, and professional organizations to make diets seem a matter of personal choice rather than of deliberate manipulation. The emphasis on individual choice serves the interests of the food industry for one critical reason: if diet is a matter of individual free will, then the only appropriate remedy for poor diets is education, and nutritionists should be off teaching people to take personal responsibility for their own diet and health—not how to institute societal changes that might make it easier for everyone to do so.

That suggestions to change the social environment of food choice are threatening to industry is evident from the vehemence with which trade associations and the business press attack advice to restrict intake of one or another food group, to get "junk" food out of schools, to label foods more explicitly, or to tax sales of foods to generate funds for nutrition education. Business commentators equate such approaches with nothing less than fascism: "If [President] Bill Clinton really wants ideas for a healthy eating crusade, he must surely look to the

only political regime that thoroughly made them part of national policy: Nazi Germany."[3] They could not be more sarcastic about societal approaches to dietary change: "This being America, of course, ordering Biggie Fries instead of the salad bar can't possibly be our own fault. . . . If all this sounds a bit preposterous, it only means you have an underdeveloped sense of victimhood. The parallels between Big Tobacco and Big Fat are too striking to be overlooked. . . . Come on, America. Get off that couch and sue."[4]

Sarcasm aside, if the business press finds parallels between the tobacco and food industries, it is because the parallels are impossible to avoid. Cigarette companies famously argue that smoking is a matter of individual choice and that it is wrong for government to interfere unduly in the private lives of citizens. They use science to sow confusion about the harm that cigarettes can cause. They set the standard in use of public relations, advertising, philanthropy, experts, political funding, alliances, lobbying, intimidation, and lawsuits to protect their sales. In efforts to expand markets, they promote cigarette smoking to children and adolescents; to minorities, women, and the poor; and to people in countries throughout the world, developing as well as industrialized.[5] The similarities between the actions of cigarette companies and food companies are no coincidence. Cigarette companies sometimes owned food companies.

No matter who owns them, food companies lobby government and agencies, and they become financially enmeshed with experts on nutrition and health. Although the food industry frames such tactics as promoting individual liberty and free will, its true objective is (not surprisingly) "trade and unrestricted profit."[6] With respect to cigarettes, most Americans by now are thoroughly aware of the marketing practices of tobacco companies; we learned about them through decades of antismoking campaigns. These campaigns succeeded in getting warning labels on cigarette packages, getting smoking-restricted areas in businesses and on airplanes, and even inspiring an attempt by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to regulate tobacco as a drug. The parallel practices of food companies, however, have elicited nowhere near this level of protest.

The principal reasons for this difference must surely lie in the complexity of the messages about foods and their health effects. Although cigarettes and diet contribute to comparable levels of illness and death across the population, cigarettes constitute a single entity, in contrast to a food system that currently supplies 320,000 food products.[7] No nutritionist could ever suggest that eating an occasional candy bar or bag of potato chips might cause disease—it truly is the overall dietary pattern that counts, and it counts over a lifetime. Unlike the straightforward "don't smoke" advice, the dietary message can never be "don't eat." Instead, it has to be the more complicated and ambiguous "eat this instead of that," "eat this more often than that," and the overall prescription, "eat less."

THE ETHICS OF FOOD CHOICE

Ethical issues arise whenever actions that benefit one group harm another. Food choices have economic, political, social, and environmental consequences that place improvements to the health of individuals or populations in conflict with other considerations. Underlying the notion of food ethics is the assumption that following dietary guidelines improves health and well-being. If ethics is viewed as a matter of good conduct versus bad, then choosing a healthful diet—and advising people to do so—would seem to be virtuous actions.

Ethical or not, a message to eat less meat, dairy, and processed foods is not going to be popular among the producers of such foods. It will have only limited popularity with producers of fruits and vegetables because their scale of production is limited and they cannot easily add value to their products. The message will not be popular with cattle ranchers, meat packers, dairy producers, or

milk bottlers; oil seed growers, processors, or transporters; grain producers (most grain is used to feed cattle); makers of soft drinks, candy bars, and snack foods; owners of fast-food outlets and franchise restaurants; media corporations and advertising agencies; manufacturers and marketers of television sets and computers (where advertising takes place); and, eventually, drug and health care industries likely to lose business if people stay healthier longer. The range of economic sectors that would be affected if people changed their diets, avoided obesity, and prevented chronic diseases surely rivals the range of industries that would be affected if people stopped smoking cigarettes.

TAKING ACTION: IMPROVING PUBLIC AND CORPORATE POLICIES

What should health professionals and concerned citizens do to improve the social and political environment in which people make food choices? And how can we make sure that the actions we take are both responsible and effective? Once again, the parallel with tobacco is instructive. In the 30 years or so since publication of the surgeon general's first report on smoking and health, cigarettes have become socially unacceptable—on health grounds—among many groups and in many locations. Many of the lessons learned from the "tobacco wars" apply just as well to food, especially the lesson that the industry will relentlessly counter even the slightest suggestion to use less of its products. That actions typical of antismoking campaigns are only rarely applied to nutrition issues is a tribute to how well the food industry has sown confusion about the research linking diet to health, about advice based on that research, and about dietary choices based on that advice. The result is the widely held idea that "eat less" need not apply to categories of foods, to specific food products, or to food in general.

In this regard also, we have much to learn from the tobacco wars. Successful antismoking campaigns are based on four elements: a firm research base, a clear message, well-defined targets for intervention, and strategies that address the societal environment as well as the education of individual smokers. The research basis of antismoking messages is firmly established: Cigarettes cause lung cancer. The message is simple: don't smoke. The targets are well defined: antismoking efforts focus not only on individuals who smoke but also on the companies that produce cigarettes. The strategies include education but also encompass environmental measures, such as age thresholds for buying cigarettes, cigarette taxes, and bans on smoking in airplanes, restaurants, and workplaces.[5]

Could the four principal elements of antismoking campaign strategies—research, message, target, and tactics—be applied to dietary change? With regard to research, the evidence for the health benefits of hierarchical dietary patterns that emphasize fruits, vegetables, and grains is strong, consistent, and associated with prevention of as much illness as cessation of smoking. The message to follow *Pyramid*-like dietary patterns is more complicated than "don't smoke" but not impossible to understand. Just as "don't smoke" applies to everyone, so does the dietary message; everyone benefits from following a dietary pattern that contributes to prevention of so many diseases. Perhaps the most important lesson of all concerns tactics: antismoking campaigns succeeded when they began to focus on *environmental* issues rather than on the education of individuals. If we want to encourage people to eat better diets, we need to target societal means to counter food industry lobbying and marketing practices as well as the education of individuals.

Table 1 provides suggestions for actions that might improve the social environment of food choice in order to make it easier for people to eat better diets and be more active.

TABLE 1. Modifications of public policies that would promote better food choices and more active lifestyles

Education
Mount a major, national campaign to promote "eat less, move more."
Teach teachers about nutrition and weight management.
In schools, ban commercials for foods of minimal nutritional value and teaching materials with corporate logos.
End the sale in schools of soft drinks, candy bars, and other foods of minimal nutritional value.
Require school meals to be consistent with *Dietary Guidelines.*
Require daily opportunities for physical education and sports in schools.
Food labeling and advertising
Require fast-food restaurants to provide nutrition information on packages and wrappers.
Require containers for soft drinks and snacks to carry information about calorie, fat, or sugar content.
Restrict television advertising of foods of minimal nutritional value; provide equal time for messages promoting "eat less, move more."
Require print food advertisements to disclose calories.
Prohibit misleading health claims in advertising and on package labels.
Health care and training
Require health care training programs to teach nutrition and methods for counseling patients about diet, activity, and health.
Sponsor research on environmental determinants of food choice.
Transportation and urban development
Provide incentives for communities to develop parks and other venues for physical activity.
Modify zoning requirements to encourage creation of sidewalks, pedestrian malls, and bicycle paths.
Taxes
Levy city, state, or federal taxes on soft drinks and other "junk" foods to fund "eat less, move more" campaigns.
Subsidize the costs of fruits and vegetables, perhaps by raising the costs of selected foods of minimal nutritional value.

NOTES

1. Parts of this chapter draw on material previously published as: Nestle M. Ethical dilemmas in choosing a healthful diet: Vote with your fork! Proceedings of the Nutrition Society (UK) 2000;59:619–629 (with permission), and Nestle M, Jacobson MF. Halting the Obesity Epidemic: A Public Health Policy Approach. Public Health Reports 2000;115:12–24 (courtesy of Michael Jacobson and Oxford University Press).

2. Applebaum RS. Commentary. Food Policy 1999;24:265–267.

3. Anderson D. Americans get fatter, but refuse to die. How naughty. Wall Street J June 8, 2000:A24.

4. Bernstein MF. A big fat target. Wall Street J August 28, 1997:A14.

5. Kluger R. Ashes to Ashes: America's Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. Advocacy Institute. Smoke & Mirrors: How the Tobacco Industry Buys & Lies Its Way to Power & Profits. Washington, DC: Advocacy Institute, 1998. Glantz SA Balbach ED. Tobacco War: Inside the

California Battles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

6. A manipulated dichotomy in global health policy (editorial). Lancet 2000;355:1023.

7. McGinnis JM, Foege WH. Actual causes of death in the United States. JAMA 1993;270:2207–2212. Gallo AE. Fewer food products introduced in last 3 years. FoodReview 1999;22(3):27–29.

QUESTIONS

1. Nestle takes objection to the emphasis on individual choice in public discussions about healthy eating: "The emphasis on individual choice serves the interests of the food industry for one critical reason: If diet is a matter of individual free will, then the only appropriate remedy for poor diets is education, and nutritionists should be off teaching people to take personal responsibility for their own diet and health—not how to institute societal changes that might make it easier for everyone to do so." What is Nestle saying in this passage? How might emphasizing that eating is an "individual choice" undermine environmental approaches to making eating healthier? Can we acknowledge that eating is an individual choice, in some sense, while still making the case for environmental changes and societal changes that make healthy eating easier?
2. In what ways are the "food wars" similar to the "tobacco wars," according to Nestle? What tactics does the food industry use to undermine efforts to promote healthy eating? How are these similar to tactics used in the past by the tobacco industry?
3. Nestle argues that the food industry is a powerful influence on what consumers think and choose, and on what government does. In Nestle's view, it is a problem that the food industry has this much influence. What do you think?

Food, Ethics, and Society

An Introductory Text with Readings

Anne Barnhill

Mark Budolfson

Tyler Doggett

2016

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS