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# Parasites, Killing Their Host

## The Food Industry's Solution to Obesity

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You can buy food from farmers — directly, through markets, any way you can find — and I hope you do. But unless you're radically different from most of us, much of what you eat comes from corporations that process, market, deliver and sell “food,” a majority of which is processed beyond recognition.

The problem is that real food isn't real profitable. “It's hard to market fruit and vegetables without adding value,” says Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University. “If you turn a potato into a potato chip you not only make more money — you create a product with a long shelf life.” Potatoes into chips and frozen fries; wheat into soft, “enriched” bread; soybeans into oil and meat; corn into meat and a staggering variety of junk.

How do we break this cycle? You can't blame corporations for trying to profit by any means necessary, even immoral ones: It's their nature.

You can possibly blame them for stupidity: Even a mindless parasite knows that if it kills its host the party's over, and by pushing products that promote “illth” — the opposite of health — Big Food is unwittingly destroying its own market. Diet-related Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease disable and kill people, and undoubtedly we'll be hearing more about nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, or NASH, an

increasingly prevalent fatty liver disease that's brought on by diet and may lead to liver failure.

Food companies are well aware of the health crisis their products cause, and recognize that the situation is unsustainable. But one theory has it that as long as even one of the big food companies remains cynical and uncaring about its market, they all must remain so.

Chief among the hopeful arguments is one that goes something like this: The first big food outfit to recognize that its future lies in creating a market for healthy and even environmentally neutral food (let's throw in justice for workers and animal welfare while we're at it!) may show the way to the future of healthy food as a sound business model. Some profitable corporations nibble at the edges of this already, but — as a piece in the current Harvard Business Review points out — American capitalists have become poor innovators.

Only the naïve, however, would believe that Big Food is generally working toward this. As Nestle and Michele Simon, author of “Appetite for Profit,” have been saying for years, these organizations represent not the public interest but the corporate one, and since they haven't devised a way to improve or even maintain their bottom lines selling real food, they have to appear to be selling “better” food.

But the key remains selling. A new paper in the journal *Social Currents* by Ivy Ken, an associate professor of sociology at George Washington University, discusses Big Food's strategy of “working together” with communities to fight the obesity crisis. The goal is threefold, according to Ken: Corporations want us to focus on the importance of their role in “solving” childhood obesity and presenting themselves as part of the solution. “Their part of working together is re-engineering their products; our part of working together is to buy more and more of this food that's not real,” Ken said to me.

The food industry also wants us to ignore its use of that strategy to increase its market share and profits; and it wants to maintain legitimacy at a time when community groups and public health officials are, writes

Ken, “demanding limits to their involvement” in supplying food to children.

Our efforts to demand limits on the sale of junk to children are a threat to Big Food. If we succeed, it fails, or at least suffers. But if industry succeeds, whether in selling blatant junk or re-engineered versions that are low in fat or sodium or gluten- or sugar-free or reduced-calorie or high fiber or whatever — companies can create any Frankenfood they feel will sell — we will continue to suffer. (Nestle often says, “A slightly-better-for-you junk food is still junk food.”) Our health will decline further, the environment will be further degraded, and our health care system (and therefore economy) will spend an increasingly disproportionate amount of money on diet-generated chronic disease.

If the most profitable scenario means that most food choices are essentially toxic — in the sense that overconsumption will cause illness — that’s a failure of the market, not of individual choice. And government’s rightful role is not to form partnerships with industry so that the latter can voluntarily “solve” the problem, but to oversee and regulate industry. Its mandate is to protect public health, and one good step toward fulfilling that right now would be to regulate the marketing of junk to children. Anything short of that is a failure.

Maureen Dowd is off today.

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