

Communication and Social Change Term Paper

Food as a Commodity and the Influence of Opinion concerning Dietary Health in the Public Sphere



<https://www.indiewire.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/joker-movie-trailer-gq-1.jpg>

When Joaquin Phoenix accepted his award for the film *Joker* in the 2020 Oscars, instead of just giving thanks for his achievement, he stated the greatest gift he received was the opportunity to use his voice for the voiceless, and bring attention to inequalities facing the world today. (J. Phoenix, 2020). Furthermore he stated,

"We've become very disconnected from the natural world. Many of us are guilty of an egocentric world view, and we believe that we're the centre of the universe. We go into the natural world and we plunder it for its resources. We feel entitled to artificially inseminate a cow and steal her baby, even though her cries of anguish are unmistakable. Then we take her milk that's intended for her calf and we put it in our coffee and cereal. We fear the idea of personal change, because we think we need to sacrifice something; to give something up. But human beings at our best are so creative and inventive, and we can create, develop and implement systems of change that are beneficial to all sentient beings and the environment" (J. Phoenix, 2020).

Joaquin's speech made me think, the food we eat is less about sustenance and nutrition in our society, and treated more as a commodity. Treating food as a commodity can have devastating consequences. Corporations will influence opinions about our food choices in the public sphere, and can negatively impact our health. However, human beings are creative and inventive, and often will fight against these challenges. This essay will critically explore how treating food as a commodity can influence negative health implications, and will assess whether or not the influences facilitate positive social change as a response.

Food as a commodity allows for unequal food distribution for the poor populations, and policy making can help, but there are barriers to policy implementation. William Domhoff has a critical perspective on policy making in the US; Domhoff argues "the answer to the question of 'who owns America?' was a very powerful corporate community that dominated the policy making process for its own ends" (D. Freedman, 2008). This is a historical perspective, but one that is still relevant today. Governments of nations will support citizens need for food, rather than leaving the food commodity to the market, but lack of public funding requires supplement from special interest groups that lobby for influence and power (K. Hite & J. Seitz, 2016). Special

interest groups wish to keep political figures in power as long as possible. In developing nations, urban masses are a threat to political leaders, and not the rural poor. Therefore, leaders send "plentiful and inexpensive food" to urban areas to pacify the masses (K. Hite & J. Seitz, 2016). Even though food is a justifiable right and need for all living things, its distribution is unequal due to external influences of power, which use the food resource to keep political figures in power. Therefore in this case, food is a political tool to halt social change, rather than facilitate it.

Treating meat as a commodity has negative implications on health, and unsustainable effects on the environment. The free market responds to demand, and globally, meat consumption has doubled in the last 50 years (R. Stubbs et al, 2018). In a study on health and meat consumption behaviors, R. Stubbs et al. claim "the intensification of meat production directly impacts the relationship between food, environment and human health" (R. Stubbs et al, 2018). Overconsumption of meat, and particularly red and processed meats, increases the risk of developing diabetes, colon cancer, and heart disease (R. Stubbs et al, 2018). Meat production also contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, and increased pesticide use on the environment (R. Stubbs et al, 2018). These environmental impacts effect human health, and are irreversible for future generations. High meat consumption behaviors are influenced by a variety of socio-economic factors, and will require social change facilitated through policy making at the governmental level.

The Canadian federal government has updated the Canadian Food Guide to support more sustainable diets, after its previous contents were influenced by food industries. The meat industry has influenced Canadian eating behaviors as early as 1942. In 1942, the Canadian Food Guide was influenced to fatten up Canadians whom were to become soldiers in World War Two, however this was not a negative influence (K. Crowe, 2019). 50 years later, Health Canada increased servings and meat and dairy in the Canadian Food Guide due to "industry pressures." (K. Crowe, 2019). As deep as these industry influences are, the new Canadian Food Guide released in January 2019 includes more sustainable meals. Meat and dairy no longer their own categories, but listed under "protein foods" (K. Crowe, 2019). Health Canada claims the new food guide recommends "plenty of vegetables and fruits, whole grain foods and protein foods. Choose protein foods that come from plants more often" (A. Zafar, 2019). Treating food as

a commodity had allowed human health to be influenced by the economics of specific industries, when realistically those industries should be influenced by the needs of human health. It is too soon to see if the new Canadian Food Guide will facilitate a positive social change through healthier eating habits, but it is a step in the right direction.

The popular Netflix documentary "Game Changers" attempts to facilitate a social change, promoting plant based diets, however it has negative implications as the film misinforms its findings, and is influenced by external factors. Game Changers has been viewed over 10 million times as of 2019, and includes celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, and athletes such as Cycling champions, record-breaking strongmen, NFL players, and UFC fighters; the film describes the benefits of plant based diets from the perspectives of these athletes (D. Gallan, 2019). From what we know about overconsumption meat, the focus of this documentary aims to promote positive social change for people's dietary health, but some claims have no scientific evidence. Game Changers makes claims that "plants are more efficient sources of protein than animals," and plant based proteins can produce "harder, longer lasting erections," but critics say data is manipulated, sample sizes are small, and findings are anecdotal (D. Gallan, 2019). Critics also point out producers have external interests in promoting plant based diets for the masses; one producer is the CEO of an organic pea protein company (D. Gallan, 2019). Again, we know meat based diets have health implications, however people may be reluctant to change if they perceive information promoting healthier lifestyles to be untrustworthy.

The commodification of food allows unhealthy food advertisements to influence dietary behaviors in children, which can have negative implications on a family's dietary health. The module 8 documentary, "Corporation", describes how corporations can manipulate children into wanting unhealthy food products; children will nag their parents until parents give in, and buy the unhealthy products for them (M. Achbar et al, 2003). Furthermore, 20-40% of purchases would not have occurred if children did not nag their parents (M. Achbar et al, 2003). As technology grows and the network society becomes more interconnected, these manipulative tactics are getting more pervasive. In my own anecdotal experience, I had bought Cheese Strings from Safeway, often a heavily advertised food for children; later that day I had begun receiving Cheese String advertisements on Youtube through my personal home network. In light of child

influence by corporations, one study believes that parents educating themselves about influence of media will effectively defend family dietary health (E. Austin & B. Pinkleton, 2015). Since people are becoming more aware about their food choices and media influence, and understanding the implications of an unhealthy diet, many families are facilitating social change towards their diet.

Since 1996 Disney has partnered with McDonalds to use Disney toys to get children to eat at the fast food chain, a partnership that influenced an increase in childhood obesity. In Module 8's video, "The Mickey Mouse Monopoly," the author describes how Disney is a media conglomerate, having TV and Radio networks, cable systems, internet sites and Theme Parks, which creates a "tremendous influence on national and international popular culture." (C. Sun et al, 2002). Furthermore, with Disney's collection of media, they have "an unprecedented control over the images and messages in which we are exposed to," the documentary claims (C. Sun et al, 2002). In the 1990s and early 2000s, Disney extended its influence to McDonalds in which the fast food chain could sell its brand, seeing doubling and tripling of its Happy Meal sales (R. Abramowitz, 2006). In the wake of childhood obesity claims in the early 2000s, Disney did ended its partnership with McDonalds in 2006. The Disney culture for young children (and adults!) may not want to harm its audience outright, but the outcome of chasing profits can have subtle negative implications on vulnerable demographics.

After 12 years, Disney and McDonalds renewed their partnership despite previous links to childhood obesity. A 2018 CNBC article claims the new partnership is different than the previous relationship as Disney created a set of nutritional guidelines for McDonalds, if the two corporations were to be partnered; the article claims, "McDonalds' has seen a 14% point increase in Happy Meals ordered with water, milk or juice as their beverage" (S. Witten, 2018). More evidence will have to be conducted to see if McDonalds-Disney commodification of food resulted in a positive social change, as children may still choose french fries over apple slices.

After the break-up between McDonalds and Disney in 2006, and due to the childhood obesity epidemic, the late Steve Jobs spoke out about his relief about the break-up. Steve Jobs was CEO of Pixar Animation Studios, recently bought by Disney at the time, which didn't stop Jobs

from speaking out about his issues with the Disney partnership (R. Abramowitz, 2006). Jobs stated, "There is value in fast-food tie-ins, but there are also some concerns, as our society becomes more conscious of some of the implications of fast food." (R. Abramowitz, 2006). Like Joaquin Phoenix, Steve Jobs and others wish to speak out against world issues (including dietary health) to influence social change. During the same period of time, the Clinton Foundation spoke publicly to persuade soft drink companies like Coca-Cola to be removed from schools due to childhood obesity.

In the wake of reduced profits for fast food and soft drink companies from knowledge of obesity in the public sphere, Coca-Cola chooses to market towards vulnerable groups, and fund campaigns to mask the negative effects of the sugary drink. Coca-Cola is the largest drink business in the world, having a market value of \$78.4 billion, offering over 500 brands under the Coca-Cola umbrella, with it's flagship brand being 3rd most valuable brand in the world after only Apple, and Google (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). Coca-Cola's high market value, and household brand created a medium for influencing public opinion about sugary drinks. The Gertner and Rifkin's 2018 Coca-Cola case study found evidence "seeing, touching, or tasting a Coca-Cola can actually trigger changes in brain activity, which may evoke positive emotions" (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). The Coca-Cola brand is so powerful that it can invoke behaviors in consumers resembling addiction. With increased awareness about the obesity, profits have been dropping for Coca-Cola however, and Coca-Cola finds itself balancing its corporate needs, and the dietary health needs of society.

Coca-Cola has used a number of devious strategies to address its contribution to obesity in response to reduced sales. For example, Coca-Cola has marketed itself to College freshmen in Columbia on the first day of classes, at a time when Gertner and Rifkin say, "students are creating new routines and habits," and as such students are vulnerable to influence (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). Other examples of influence from Coca-Cola include making claims physical activity must coincide with drinking a Coke, and funding research campaigns citing other obesity causes (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). Furthermore, between 2010 and 2015 Coca-Cola funded obesity research through Louisiana State University which found a "lack of exercise, not enough sleep, and too much television," as the main sources of obesity, without any mention of

consuming soft drinks (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). Coca-Cola funded the university studies for the sum of \$7.5 million (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018).

Coca-Cola's deceptive marketing projects have facilitated positive social change concerning healthy food choices in addition to the negative ones. Political figures such as Michelle Obama, and Micheal Bloomberg have chosen to speak to the public about the negative impacts of sugary drinks. Michelle Obama created the "Drink Up" campaign to promote drinking water instead of soda (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). Micheal Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York, created policies for a "soda tax" on soft drinks (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018). The policies were defeated by soft drink lobbyists, but the soft drink companies did create grants for \$10 million for Philadelphia's Children's Hospital, and the soda tax movement created interest for soda warning label policies in California (D. Gertner & L. Rifkin, 2018).

Treating food as a commodity first, and a sustenance second, has detrimental, however subtle negative implications on our health. The government has a responsibility to create policies to protect our health, but barriers to this process exist. Like the Canadian Food Guide, the government does the best it can with the public funding it receives. Culturally, our diets consist of a high proportion of meat proteins that have negative effects on our dietary health; since the market reacts to demand, the market exasperates this issue by overproducing. Furthermore, many people suffer from cardiovascular disease as a result, and the environment suffers from deforestation, and green house gas emissions for overproducing these commodities, which also affects our human health.

Sometimes the media we consume does misinform, and can be influenced by external forces, which is barrier for people wanting to change. People must be critical about the information they receive. Our capitalist and globalized society treats everything as a commodity, but is especially concerning when it affects our health.

We need more people like Joaquin Phoenix to use their voices to influence social change. [Small Spoilers] Ironically his character, the Joker uses his mass communication platform for hate at the end of the movie, and influences a riot, as we watch the world burn. Similarly, corporations influence our media like this, whether on social media, television commercials, or with fast food toys.

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