**Critique: “How Much Are You Willing to Pay for a Burrito” by Julie Creswell, New York Times, January 21, 2022**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/business/fast-food-prices-inflation.html>

Julie Creswell’s recent article, “How Much Are You Willing to Pay for a Burrito”, documents inflation’s impact on popular fast-food chain menu items. At its heart a financial story, Creswell grounds her reporting with hard data points and price points.

This factual and numbers-based foundation leaves little to be disputed in Creswell’s story – the price of low-cost food is on the rise, and the documented payout to fast food chains is considerable.

Creswell does a nice job navigating through dense information and cutting through the weeds for the reader. Data on food and labor costs have been well-documented for many years, as have been company profits. This serves Creswell well in the sense that she is able to lay out trends for the reader in concrete terms, but does present a challenge organizing this information. With so many data points to weigh against each other, it becomes a challenge for both author and reader to draw conclusions behind what is driving increased prices at fast-food chains. This is only complicated further with Creswell’s inclusion of delivery app’s impact on rising food costs, which Creswell documents as having a 21% increase in total price, in one instance. Arguably, the impact delivery apps have on food costs are a separate issue from the direct retailer to consumer price increase. Although certainly a piece of the puzzle, it seems to take away from the crux of the matter at times and throws more actors into an already crowded arena.

The narrative element Creswell incorporates into her story are crucial in breaking up information for the reader and putting the story into “human terms”. I think she could have taken this opportunity to lean further into the narrative style, showing the real-life implications of rising food costs. At times,

What struck me as missing in this story as a whole was the lack of data visualizations. Particularly with so many factors to weigh and a dynamic, evolving issue, it would have been helpful to see this data laid out on a chart. For example, Creswell frequently compares the cost of certain food items present-day to the previous cost. She relies solely on text to convey this data, stating:

“In Ann Arbor, Mich., a ShackBurger at Shake Shack used to cost $5.69; now it’s $6.09. And in Oklahoma City, an order of 50 bone-in wings from Wingstop that cost $41.99 early last year is now $47.49, a 13 percent increase.”

While Creswell references “early last year” when describing rise in cost for bone-in wings from Wingstop, it’s unclear in many examples what timeframe we are analyzing, including in the example prior, detailing a ShackBurger. Are her comparisons consistently based on a year change, or is she pulling from various data sets that include different ranges? Her method is likely the former, but to eliminate the question in the reader’s mind, a chart could have been inserted to show the trends over a defined time frame.

This use of data visualization would have also aided in reader fatigue, which was notable for me about halfway through the story. With so many examples, all in text, it becomes a bit wordy and burdensome for the reader. A chart could disseminate all of this information, in much less time to sink in with the reader.

Towards the end of the story, Creswell introduces the aspect of profitability of companies and the increase costs of menu items. This data has a huge potential to leave a lasting impact on the reader. Although fast-food establishments cite rising labor and material costs as the impetus for rising costs to the consumer, Creswell is able to document significant increases in revenue for many of these companies. However, without information on a company’s profit margins, the story lacks the information needed to fully understand the matter. Although I hesitate to suggest adding yet another data set to this story, it would be beneficial to summarize this information in a graph – one that tracks various companies average food cost increase compared to their annual revenue increase, and another that tracks if the profit margin for the company has shifted. This would be useful in conveying easy to digest information without adding much, if any at all, to the overall word count.

Overall, I enjoyed the content of this story but felt it lacked the tools necessary to truly engage the reader and leave them wanting to learn more about the topic. With a better eye towards what data to include in the story, what to leave out, and how to present it, Creswell could have seen higher engagement and understanding in her audience, and make more impact with a shorter time commitment from the reader.