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Food and the Media: Production, Representation and Consumption

Roger Dickinson

Introduction

The media bring the social and cultural significance of food to public attention in all their forms. Food – its production, its preparation and its consumption – is a topic that features increasingly frequently in print, on radio, in the cinema, on television and online. Over the past sixty years there has been a gradual, but in recent years, quickening rise in food's prominence in the media. This is partly because there has been a steady global expansion in the media industries themselves and there have been large increases in the range and forms of output. It is also partly because of the simultaneous rise of the global food industry and its dominance of commercial advertising. Both these trends are clearly discernible in the US and the UK and appear to have been shaped and reinforced by local conditions. In the UK, for example, the challenges brought about by food rationing during and in the years following the Second World War created a need for increased public information and instruction about food. Advice and recommendations about food and its economical use, recipes making the most of limited ingredients, although evident in Britain long before this period, started to feature more noticeably in women's magazines and newspaper columns throughout the 1940s and 50s. The early television producers, sensing the telegenic properties of food and cookery, also responded by placing them firmly in their schedules, creating programmes that featured presenters who were either already, or who went on to become, successful food or cookery writers. Julia Child and, later, Martha Stewart in the US (see Goldstein, 2005 and Polan, 2011 on their cultural significance) and a string of television cooks in the UK from the 1940s through to the 1960s (e.g. Marguerite Patten, Philip Harben and Fanny Craddock) helped to establish food as a central feature of the television calendar.

Commercial television, fuelling and fuelled by the post-war consumer boom built much of its early financial success on food advertising. Food has since become a growing presence on television to the point where, for regular television viewers, it is almost impossible to avoid. In one week in the summer of 2011 the schedules of the five British television channels with the largest share of total viewing contained nineteen programmes with food as a central feature (cookery programmes in a range of formats, reality shows featuring restaurants, cooking contests, and travel-and-food documentaries) amounting to a total of more than twenty hours of food-related programming.¹ The total figure for 2010 was more than twice that of a decade earlier (Dickinson, 2000, p 24). The audiences for programmes about food are now so large as to warrant the creation of entire channels devoted to the topic. Since 1993 an American cable television channel – The ‘Food Network’ – has been transmitting programmes that are exclusively about food (see Meister, 2000, and Swenson, 2009 for discussions). The rapid rise of the ‘Food Network’ in the US and elsewhere (it now has channels showing in Britain, Canada and Asia) and the 2010 launch in the US of its more instructionally-oriented, ‘Cooking Channel’ stimulated competition from mainstream networks seeking to capture the expanding audience for food-related viewing. There are now similar channels in Australia (‘Lifestyle Food’), Britain (‘Good Food Channel’) and France (‘Cuisine TV’). The US company that owns the ‘Food Network’ ‘family’ – Scripps Networks – captures the essence and extent of its media/food enterprise on its website homepage:

Scripps Networks Interactive has become the dominant media and marketing company in the home, food and lifestyle categories. Our brands provide relevant ideas, information and entertainment to a passionate audience, delivering content across multiple media platforms - television, the Internet, satellite radio, books, magazines, in-store and the latest mobile and emerging media - to provide value to our distributors and advertisers.

(Scripps Networks, 2011)

The celebrity chef shows, the publishing and merchandising tie-ins that are promoted across these ‘multiple media platforms’ are all evidence that the subject of food attracts large and

lucrative audiences. Perhaps for this reason more than any other in the study of food the role of the media is frequently acknowledged; the sheer volume and variety of material about food in the media make them variables that are difficult to ignore. Surprisingly, however, they are only now beginning to be studied with the necessary theoretical and methodological sophistication required to understand their role and significance. More than twenty years after a detailed review of the field concluded that the topic was ‘seriously under-researched’ (Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo, 1992: 90), the situation has changed quite markedly, but, like media and communication research in general, research on the media and food is represented in scholarship belonging to several different disciplines and research traditions that addresses the subject in differing ways and sets out to answer differing research questions – a varied intellectual terrain that can be difficult for newcomers to navigate across.

This chapter is an attempt to bring some of that disparate work together and to evaluate its contribution to the wider field of food research. It will take a perspective that is ‘western’, its discussion derived from mainly North American and European sources and limited to those written in English, reflecting the fact that, although there are both emergent and established centres of media scholarship elsewhere, most academic research on media and communication originates from the west. The main preoccupations of western media scholars lie in the interrelationships between, on the one hand, human society and culture, and, on the other, the institutions of the media and the social structural factors that underpin them. This entails the examination of the ways the media work and the contribution they make to the creation of culture, defined narrowly at one end of the research spectrum at the level of the individual, or defined broadly at the other at the level of society and social structure. Often lay and, sometimes, policy concerns about food and the media have focussed on the narrow end of the spectrum, the role of the media being thought of in negative terms, the overriding and rather limiting view being that they are to be blamed for promoting

unhealthy eating behaviours or for perceived deficiencies in public understanding of health and food-related matters. These are themes that have motivated much of the research that has been carried out so far on the media and food and will be evident at various points throughout the chapter.

From a broader perspective the media have significance in relation to food in their representations of poverty and hunger, famine, food science and agriculture, and the global food industry. Studies of news have sometimes placed these issues at the centre of their analyses (e.g. Philo, 1993; Shanahan, Scheufele and Lee, 2001); sometimes the media are peripheral concerns in studies of the food industry (e.g. Nestle, 2002; Lang and Heasman, 2004). The Internet is also increasingly relevant as a space for public expression, and conversation, about food (see Lynch, 2010; Cox and Blake, 2011 on the growing global interest in food blogs). While attention to these topics is clearly essential in order to fully apprehend the media's contribution to and reflection of contemporary culture as it relates to food, they will receive less attention here. Instead, via a tour of some of the dominant approaches to the study of the media and food, taking research on television and the press as its main focus, the chapter will take a narrower and more socially-situated approach and will suggest new and potentially fruitful approaches to the subject that will not only help to provide the basis for a more complete understanding of the media's role in their representation of food and the creation of food-related meanings on the one hand, but will also add to what is known about their influence on the social practices concerned with food and eating on the other.

One notable medium will be omitted from the discussion: the cookery book – the subject of a separate chapter in this volume. Just one relevant observation can be made here. Although books about cooking have been important disseminators of information and instruction for more than a century and written information in other forms about cooking and

food preparation has been around for much longer, research on their role in domestic practice is hard to find (but see Brownlie, Hewer and Horne, 2005 and Gallegos, 2005). While, as Mennell *et al* suggest, by the 1950s other mass media such as television, magazines and advertising had become as important as vehicles for cookery instruction and for spreading information about new products and new ways of preparing and cooking food, books on cooking have continued to sell in vast numbers (Mennell *et al*, 1992: 88). In the UK the rising popularity of television programmes about food and the books they help to promote have given cookery book sales an added boost. A glance at Amazon UK's archive of best selling fiction and non-fiction books between 2000 and 2010 shows that there was at least one, often two cookery books in the top ten each year (Amazon, 2012)². As Mennell *et al* point out, the sociology of how people learn to cook and what use they make of printed materials in the process are neglected research topics.

Understanding the Media as Independent Variables

The media are rightly at the centre of many studies of food. Indeed, in as much as the study of food is concerned with its meanings and representations, a food studies that neglected the media would be seriously lacking. But in food research the media often appear as *dependent* variables – individually in particular forms (the magazine, the television documentary, the celebrity chef show) or collectively – as indicators of societal-level social processes, of shifting behavioural trends, or of public fads and fashions. The media are frequently conceived in food research as mirrors of social change in public attitudes and practices relating to food and its production, preparation and consumption, most often seen as reflecting the outcomes of these changes, rarely as variables implicated in the social processes that give rise to them³. As I will argue, the studies that conceive of the media in this

way are limited because, despite their centrality to the analysis, they are cast in a minor, somewhat passive role, their products seen as sites onto which social meanings are reflected. This, I want to suggest, provides a less than fully rounded understanding of the forces shaping social change.

For example, a small number of academic studies over the past thirty years have treated popular media forms as useful sources of discourse – and therefore useful sources of evidence – about cultural boundaries and status distinctions, about group membership and exclusion and identity in terms of age, gender, ethnicity or social class in contemporary society. For example, Stephen Mennell's seminal historical study of changing food habits in England and France is one of the earliest and most well-known works that can be placed in this category (Mennell, 1993, first published in 1985). For part of his analysis Mennell examined the food columns and recipes published in British and French women's magazines from the nineteenth century to the 1970s. He lists several reasons for doing so, but important among these were the fact that the readership for these publications was, at the time, numbered in the millions, that they appealed across the social classes, that they contained large amounts of advertising for food and food-related products, and that there was a correlation between their representations of food and the descriptions of domestic food consumption to be found in the literature and journalism spanning that period. This suggested to Mennell that the content of magazines of this kind could be taken as a reflection of common practice (Mennell, 1993: 233). Warde (1997) carried out a similar survey but conducted a narrower and more systematic content analysis of recipes printed in British women's magazines in 1967 and 1991 in order to measure the changes between those years in the types of foods recommended. Following Mennell, Warde noted that in Britain women's magazines have a very large readership, devote substantial space to articles and advertisements about food, are therefore likely to bring information about food to a large

proportion of the British population, and thus 'have some influence on the determination of food taste and knowledge' (Warde, 1997: 45). However, the aim of Warde's study being to explore the significance of trends in food consumption, he shows relatively little interest in the influential role that magazines might play in this. In fact, as does Mennell, he simply takes magazines to be mirrors of public taste. As he puts it 'magazines may both reflect current practice and, [...] even more likely, reflect and reproduce contemporary categories of judgement.' (Warde, 1997: 49). Similar, though with slightly different intent, is Warde's more recent study based on an analysis of the British *Good Food Guide*. He charts the shifts across more than fifty years of publication in the *Guide*'s definitions of 'British' cuisine and its nature and quality (Warde, 2009). In this a role for the *Guide* is claimed as a 'barometer of general pressure in the cultural climate', Warde's analysis of the book being 'guided by the prevalence of the different ways in which judgments of quality have been framed.' (p155).

Neither Mennell's nor Warde's work has the workings of the media at the centre of their attention, but if an important goal for food research is a better understanding of the factors that help to condition and determine food provisioning and consumption, then the lack of focus in food research on the media's role as a source of influence is an important omission. Mennell's and Warde's are sophisticated analyses but their weight needs to be brought to bear in the analysis of the media not as variables that merely reflect 'current practice' in relation to food, but as *independent* variables implicated in the shaping of that practice. This must entail an equally sophisticated view of the media and the processes of influence in which they play a part, not as all-powerful shapers of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, but as being significant in the contribution they make to meaning making, interpretation and social practice.

The need for this shift in thinking in food research, and not just in the study of the media, is also important because conceptualising the media as independent variables helps to

open to scrutiny the forces that shape them. The economic, political, historical, cultural and institutional factors that determine media structures and processes – might then, in turn, receive due theoretical and empirical attention among sociologists of food. The benefits of this will become clear in a subsequent section of this chapter, but before that I will describe the research approach to the media and food that appears to have been more active than any other in the last ten years.

Food and Cultural Studies

Research in cultural studies has attempted to understand consumption practices by exploring the social and cultural significance of food and eating in approaches that take media output as reflecting emerging, as well as enduring, social values and mores. There is a similar strand of enquiry in the field of film studies, although detailed treatment of it lies beyond the scope of this chapter⁴. The cultural studies work on food is worth considering in some detail partly because it seems to be where researchers in the sociology of food and those interested in the study of the media have recently begun to come together most productively, and partly because there are important things to say about its limitations that could contribute usefully to debates in both fields.

Cultural studies research on food seems promising because it places food and its representation in the media much more at the centre of its analysis than previous sociological work. Where it is perhaps least convincing is over its theorisation of media/audience processes, but, while not always clearly treating the media as independent variables, these studies do attribute a far more important, determinant role to them.

Over the past decade several studies have examined popular media forms that contain or feature food and presented analyses that aim to illuminate their cultural significance and

symbolic power (see, for example, de Solier's study of food on television (de Solier, 2007) and Hollows's analyses of celebrity chefs (e.g. Hollows 2003)). The objectives in this work are somewhat different from the sort that Warde and others pursue. In place of an interest in social change and social structure, although sharing some of their theoretical scaffolding, there is a much tighter focus on the nature of popular cultural forms and the meaning of their language and symbolic codes. Cultural studies work on food treats media representations as repositories of meaning that can be uncovered using the techniques of discourse analysis to examine the way language represents ways of thinking that delimit both what can be understood and the ways it can be understood.⁵

Despite their greater attention to what the media might convey about food, however, cultural studies writing on this topic is similarly neglectful of the role media actually play in what and how people eat. Ashley, Hollows, Jones and Taylor (2004), for example, explore the cultural significance of television chefs. After a detailed and thought-provoking examination of the meanings they discern in the phenomenon of the celebrity chef they note in their conclusion that there is little evidence that the programmes that feature well-known chefs have any influence on cooking practices (a point suggested in an earlier study by Caraher, Lang, and Dixon, 2000). Instead Ashley *et al* suggest that the way to understand the significance of celebrity chef shows for viewers is in terms of the pleasure they give. They speculate that for the audience it is the fantasy that they might themselves be able to cook what they see being cooked on television that is the source of their viewing pleasure, and concluding, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984), that this has something to do with the urge for social distinction, the audience for these shows enjoying the fantasy of the cultural capital that the culinary skills and the lifestyles they promise might afford them. Different work in this vein has explored the phenomenon of the celebrity chef in increasing depth (Hollows, 2003; de Solier, 2005; Goldstein, 2005; Ray, 2007; Hansen, 2008;

Hollows and Jones; 2010a, 2010b) some taking a broader, contextualising ‘television studies’ approach to try to explain their popularity and assess their significance (Adema, 2000; Meister, 2000; Inness, 2005; Ketchum, 2005; Collins, 2009; Bennett, 2010). The analysis of food in these and other specific media forms – ‘lifestyle’ programmes and magazines, for example (Hollows, 2006; 2008) – draws attention to the representation of female roles and femininity, ethnicity, gender identities, social class and domesticity. Perhaps rather more here than in the sociological work on food, the media in these studies are at the same time assumed to be directive and determining influences. Their role is, however, an uncertain, often unexplained and under-theorised one with accounts of imagined (and sometimes imaginary) impacts and influences being offered alongside the textual analysis and culture critique.

Academic work in marketing and consumer research has been heavily influenced by cultural studies and the intellectual traditions that underpin it. In this context it represents what can be thought of as the extreme end of the textual analytic spectrum. Studies here are less about media forms as reflections of ‘contemporary consumer culture’ but are readings of, for example, cookery books as ‘artefacts of cultural life in the making’ (Brownlie, Hower and Horne, 2005: 7) or certain features discernible in television advertising for fast food, considered ‘in terms of their wider relations to the systemic and cultural vicissitudes of contemporary global capitalism’ (Brewis and Jack, 2005: 51). Often highly speculative and impressionistic, such work does not aim overtly to provide definitive interpretations of either what producers intend their messages to mean or what viewers or readers make of them. These authors do, nevertheless, sometimes make implied claims about the significance of their analyses for the understanding of the media's influence on domestic cooking and eating.⁶

Elsewhere, the question of media influence is sometimes not so much explained as simply explained away. In an account of a study of food advertising in a popular Australian women's magazine, the authors describe their focus on the advertisements themselves as follows:

In looking for evidence of the systematic construction of meaning and instructions on ways of consuming, one could look to consumers (*sic*) responses; however, individual variations and a lack of consensus is almost inevitable in taking this perspective. Thus it may make more methodological sense to explore evidence created and manifested by the institutions of the time. Documentary evidence in this instance may provide better insights into the phenomenon than speaking to consumers or directly to the 'producers', such as the manufacturers.

(Schneider and Davis, 2010: 33-34)

The point seems to be that the challenge of exploring the meanings created by representations of food in the media is too great to overcome. This is a surprising conclusion because for several years cultural studies researchers working in the wider field of media and communication have acknowledged the need to explore not only the ordered meanings in media texts but to investigate the ways those meanings are, or are not, incorporated into people's views, beliefs and social practices, and have developed methods to help them do so. Yet it seems that most if not all cultural studies work on food has narrowed its focus onto texts. The problem with this is that it is difficult to explain textual meanings without at the same time investigating production and reception processes. Discourse analysis which remains text-based cannot examine where those texts come from and how they were arrived at, what other texts might have been possible, how external factors shaped their production, and what meanings different parts of the audience derive from the texts in question. As I explain later in this chapter, this is more than a problem of method.

The Promise of a Cultural Sociology of Food and the Media

The work of North American sociologists Johnston and Baumann (2007; 2010) represents a rapidly developing strand of scholarship in cultural sociology which attempts to bring together sociological concerns in the study of food and the tools of cultural analysis to assess the meaning and significance of food and incorporate a study of media discourses into a study of social practices. This work is worth describing in detail to highlight the benefits of blending the traditions of empirical social science with those of cultural studies.

Johnston and Baumann identify a social category they call ‘foodies’ – people with a special interest or, perhaps, a devotion to food. They use the concept of ‘the foodscape’ as the basis for a discussion of how food preferences and patterns of food consumption can be seen as expressions of class identity and cultural distinction. Their interest is, again, in social and cultural change and the way that older distinctions between the social practices of cultural elites and those of the working class have become eroded. They argue that the old divide is being blurred and that the response to this among cultural elites can be illustrated in the social practices, values and mores of foodies ‘and the phenomenon (*sic*) that surrounds the label: the food television, the obsession with celebrity chefs, the glossy food-porn, the food blogs, and the general obsession with culinary pursuits’ (Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 2) so that new markers of distinction emerge as sources of status for those with high levels of economic and cultural capital. The practices of foodies that make distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ foods reveal how cultural consumption creates and maintains status in American society.

Unlike previous sociological studies on food, Johnston and Baumann’s account of ‘the contemporary American foodscape’ therefore credits the media with considerable significance. Journalism is especially important. In the 1960s restaurant reviewers began to take a critical stance on the European-influenced gourmet culture promoted by Julia Child’s television programmes and acted to de-mythologize the goings-on in the kitchens of top restaurants. This and the success of restaurants in California with a more direct connection

with farming, the influence of Elizabeth David's celebration of Mediterranean peasant cuisine, and the politics of the 1960s counterculture (see Belasco, 2006), further weakened the division between gourmet and ordinary food.

The foodscape is structured by class and race: programmes on the 'Food Network', for example, are dominated by the white middle class. Where ethnicity is present it is confined to 'ethnic cuisine' and tokenism. Foodies occupy a small part of the American foodscape where concerns over obesity, health, class and racial inequalities, sustainability, and the domination of corporate interests in the food industry are central. The gourmet foodscape, on the other hand, is exclusive, affluent and white.

Apart from the detailed historical-cultural analysis, Johnston and Baumann studied 'food discourse' produced by 'food experts' – gourmet magazines, restaurant columns and food sections in US newspapers – and interviewed foodies to discover the distinctive features of the ways they talked about food. The key assumption here is that media sources are influential in defining 'worthy' food choices – identifying dishes and foods, spotting culinary trends, providing a repertoire of legitimate and desirable choices. It is in this that Johnston and Baumann's work represents a departure from those belonging to the cultural studies tradition and, at the same time, takes a step beyond the work of Warde and Mennell discussed earlier: they want to assert a relationship between media representations of food and the audiences who consume them.

This is a welcome and promising advance, although this work is not without shortcomings. One is that, in common with discourse analytic studies in general, Johnston and Baumann's analysis of media content tends towards the impressionistic: it lacks the precision of more focussed, systematic analyses charting specific media forms and genres coupled with a strong sense of the broader context of media representation. Another difficulty is that a focus on individual media texts isolates them from the complex of commercial non-

media and internal media production processes that help to shape them. These are matters to which the chapter now turns.

‘Food Scares’, the Media and the Politics of Food

Between the late 1980s and 2001 a number of ‘food scares’ occurred in Britain which had dramatic effects on food sales⁷. These were triggered by media reports of widespread food contamination. In 1988 salmonella in the British egg supply led to a collapse in that market. Shortly afterwards listeria bacteria were found in pâté and soft cheese being sold in many British supermarkets. The incidence of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), colloquially known as ‘mad cow disease’, though detected some years before began to receive increasing publicity in the early 1990s. This reporting drew public attention to farming methods and speculation over the risks to human health. Despite attempts by the government and the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF) to reassure the public one effect of the media coverage was to dramatically lower sales of British beef. In 1996 when the British government announced that there was evidence of a possible link between BSE and recent cases of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) – the human form of the condition – sales fell again. The European Union’s embargo on British beef products inflicted even further damage. Towards the end of the 1990s the media began to report on growing public disquiet, as well as activist campaigns about – and food industry defence of – ‘genetically modified’ (‘GM’) foods. Finally, in 2001 the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease generated more criticism and negative publicity about the food supply, farming methods, food industry regulation and the links between them and public health.

Beardsworth (1990) was one of the first to investigate the phenomenon of food scares and the media’s part in them. Following much earlier work in the sociology of deviance that

had described the process of ‘deviancy amplification’ (Young, 1981), Beardsworth suggested that a spiralling process occurs in which pre-existing public anxieties about food and health become heightened by media reports of incidents relating to the food supply. These anxieties, in turn, are amplified by the media and this causes further anxiety which leads to changes in patterns of consumer purchasing. Beardsworth points out that several factors – not least the role of experts from the scientific community expressing scientific uncertainty – interact in this process. Whether this analysis adequately accounts for all cases remains an empirical question.

Freidberg (2004) confidently suggests that one cause of public alarm during this period was in each case the knowledge that the risks associated with the rise in the industrialization and globalization of the food supply were imperfectly understood by the scientific community (Wynne, 2001) and poorly regulated by government. However, it was common during this period for food scares to be accounted for in terms of public ignorance and gullibility, media sensationalism, irresponsible journalism, and scientists’ failure to communicate effectively (e.g. Anderson, D, 1996; Anderson, W.A., 2000). In doing so, attention was drawn to both the production and the consumption of media meanings about food.

On the consumption side the question of public understanding and the so-called ‘knowledge deficit hypothesis’ was addressed in research by MacIntyre, Reilly, Miller and Eldridge (1998) who investigated how media messages about BSE, food and health were interpreted by the public. They found that people receive a lot of information about food and diet from the media and are highly knowledgeable about it but that this information did not necessarily lead people to alter their eating habits. This is partly because they were sceptical about ‘expert’ views. Scepticism stemmed from an awareness that clear messages amplified in the mass media about this or that foodstuff on one day could very likely be contradicted

the next, and because, from a lay perspective, experts expressed their views with a level of certainty that seemed, in the light of apparently changing scientific opinion, unwarranted. MacIntyre *et al*'s informants were active in negotiating their understandings of health and food safety issues, being influenced by the media in terms of the issues they considered important, but influenced also by their own views of food production and marketing, and by their own social networks and personal and material circumstances (MacIntyre *et al*, 1998: 249.)

Related research (Reilly and Miller, 1997; Miller, 1999) turned attention away from consumers of media coverage of BSE towards matters of production. Here media-source relationships were the main focus with researchers examining the interactions between scientists, government policy-makers, lobbyists and journalists – a relatively neglected research topic but one clearly essential for a complete understanding of the phenomena in question (see Murcott, 1999). Reilly and Miller identified 'definitional struggles' between scientists and medical experts, public policy officials, and pressure groups over the way the underlying issues about food and risk should be understood and therefore presented in the media. It is a complex picture, but it is clear that the assumption that scientists had failed to communicate effectively in these episodes is unjustified.

Miller shows that if the public do indeed receive a distorted view of risk from media representations it is in large part because of the corporate and political forces that shape them, concluding that the reasons why food scares occur, how they are managed and how they progress cannot be grasped until it is recognised that the material interests of all the participants involved in producing media reports are central to these processes. Policy makers make decisions about the funding of scientific research and the information they release to the public according to the way a food scare story has already been covered, the way the public has already responded, and in response to scientific opinion. Understanding the

dynamics of these interrelations in terms of the ‘production of definitions’, Miller argues, might lead to improvements in the management of risk (Miller, 1999: 1253). In more recent work on the food and alcoholic drinks industries, Miller comes to similar conclusions (Miller, 2007; Miller and Harkins, 2010).

Research of this sort is rare but its importance obvious. Not only does it help to explain the social and political significance of media representations of food, it also deepens understanding of the social processes that give rise to them. In the next section the discussion turns to the other end of the communication process and more narrowly-focussed research on the media’s influence on eating.

Media influences on food consumption – from effects to performance

There have been several studies that suggest that food advertising is one of the most significant factors influencing food consumption, preventing the uptake of healthier diets in both the population at large and among young people (e.g. Lewis and Hill, 1998; Story and French, 2004). A topic of growing research interest is the influence of the media on eating disorders and here too, the emphasis is on advertising and marketing (see Levine and Harrison, 2009 for a review of this work).

Public and official concern about harmful media effects has a long history, and is renewed at intervals as the media themselves evolve⁸. Those making claims about the media’s negative influence often make reference to what they regard as strong supporting research evidence. However, in the wider field of media and communication research the question of media effects is the subject of continuing academic debate and dispute. The communication research tradition which is dominant in the US contrasts quite sharply with approaches that tend to be more widely accepted in Europe. It is common for US researchers

to assert that the media can, and frequently do, have direct effects on behaviour. The majority of the US research on television advertising and children has adopted experimental or quasi-experimental designs, these being most suited to a search for evidence of a causal relationship. In European communication and media research interpretive and critical perspectives are more common and claims of powerful advertising effects are often questioned on theoretical and methodological grounds (e.g. Gauntlett, 1998). From a European perspective, the dominant US approach to the topic can be criticised for employing methods that have doubtful external validity, confuse causality with correlation, and take an individualistic approach that neglects the social context of media use. Against the certainties asserted by 'effects research' are claims for indirect effects mediated by a range of social factors.

One of the main difficulties for those trying to establish a link between specific types of media output and audience behaviour lies in the complexity of the contemporary communications environment. The multiple channels of promotional and non-promotional output and their mutual interactions are very difficult to investigate simultaneously. That being the case, evidence from research designed to show that promotional media have direct effects on human behaviour is unlikely to be conclusive. As Livingstone notes, the effects of food promotion in all its forms are therefore most likely to be more indirect than direct (Livingstone, 2004, p13).

Advertising is just one component of the sum total of television output, made up of non-fiction as well as fiction programme formats, most of which may not carry such clear or overt persuasive messages as advertisements, but which none the less contain messages which audiences will interpret according to their own specific views and demographically and materially variegated social contexts. A handful of studies have analysed the food-related content of television programmes or attempted to link data about television content in general

to data about viewers (Kaufman, 1980; Story and Faulkner, 1990; Signorielli and Staples, 1997; Korr, 2008; Murphy, Hether and Rideout, 2008; Radnitz, Byrne, Goldman, Sparks, Gantshar and Tung, 2009). All these studies found that foods in television programmes were most likely to be low in nutritional content and that characters in television fiction commonly exhibited what some authors describe as ‘poor nutritional practices’ (Story and Faulkner, 1990: 740), even though they were likely to be portrayed as healthy individuals of normal weight. Where they contain evidence about the television audience – this is relatively rare⁹ – the authors of these studies want to suggest a causal link between television programme content about food and eating behaviour, but, because of the theoretical foundations on which much of this research has been based, these findings are again open to doubt.

Researchers working in the ‘media cultivation’ tradition have criticised media effects researchers for ignoring the way people watch television. They argue that media influence occurs indirectly over long periods of time. Television, the main source of information for most people in western societies, can be thought of as a socializing agent that helps to cultivate beliefs and world views (see Morgan, Shanahan and Signorielli, 2009, for a summary of this work). A key finding is that, especially among those who watch a lot of television, viewing tends to be continuous and indiscriminate¹⁰. In other words, habitual viewers watch television for continuous periods rather than interspersing their viewing with other activities or choosing to watch certain programmes. Cultivation researchers argue that it is the whole ‘message system’ of television that shapes viewer beliefs; singling out advertisements, programmes or programme genres for scrutiny (as does much of the research in question here) distorts what viewers actually experience.

Other researchers have shown that the different formats and genres of television require varying degrees of audience involvement and audience identification (Katz and Liebes, 1986). This can result in varying audience interpretations of content. Audience

involvement in advertising, for example, seems to be at a low level compared with, say, audience involvement in television soap opera.

Turning to the question of food-related behaviour, another difficulty for those searching for evidence of media effects is that eating patterns and preferences are dynamic. One of the assumptions in much of the discussion about the media's impact is that it influences the food *choices* people make, yet the concept of choice in this context is problematic. As Murphy, Parker and Phipps (1998) point out, it may not always be appropriate to conceptualise eating practices as being the result of choices, for decisions about food are not choices in a simple sense. These sorts of social practices have a processual nature – decisions may be altered over time in the light of changing material conditions and cultural contexts, and increasing knowledge and experience. To the extent that decisions about eating can be characterised as 'choices', they are, as it were, moving targets.

Researchers intent on establishing a direct relationship between media messages and eating behaviour therefore set themselves a major conceptual and methodological challenge.

These difficulties and the differences between European and American research approaches can sometimes create problems for policy making and media regulation. In Britain in the early 2000s the part that television advertising plays in food selection and levels of consumption was the focus of policy debate between consumer health lobbyists (Ashton, Morton and Mithen, 2003), the British government's Food Standards Agency (FSA), the advertising industry, and Ofcom, the media regulator. The perception that food advertising has the effect of persuading children to eat less healthily and that there is a link between food advertising on television and the rise of childhood obesity had led to calls for increased restrictions on the advertising of certain foods at times when children might be watching. A perception of growing public concern prompted the FSA to commission a review of research to guide the policy-making process (Hastings, Stead, McDermott, Forsyth, MacKintosh,

Rayner, Godfrey, Caraher and Angus, 2003). The advertising industry commissioned their own reviews (Young, 2003; Paliwoda and Crawford, 2003) which drew contrasting conclusions as to the strength of the evidence of a link between television advertising and food choice (see Ambler, 2006 for a discussion). To a large extent the contrasts reflected those between US and European research traditions. A detailed commentary commissioned to help resolve the issue concluded that:

there is a modest body of fairly consistent evidence demonstrating the direct effect of food promotion (in the main, television advertising) on children's food preferences, knowledge and behaviour.

(Livingstone, 2004, p 28)

In the event this evidence was felt by policy makers to be sufficiently strong to support regulatory change and new controls came into effect during 2007 and 2008 banning the advertising of food and drink products that are high in fat, salt and sugar during and around programmes for children under the age of sixteen. This was, by global standards, a significant tightening of advertising regulation in this area.

Towards a socially-situated understanding of the role of the media

Dickinson (1998, 2000 and see Dickinson and Leader 1997) attempted to address the difficulties of studying the influence of television on eating by conducting a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of British commercial and non-commercial television output and an exploratory qualitative study of household viewing. The findings present a complex picture in which the low nutritional content of foods in advertisements was balanced with programmes containing fewer images of low nutrition foods and more images of 'healthy' foods. Qualitative content analysis revealed different interpretive frames in the media coverage of food, each representing a distinct way of thinking about the topic of food and

eating, emphasising different issues and ideals. The findings from the research with households suggested that television may be an important source of images and information about food, but different sorts of output seem to be filtered and assessed by viewers a) one with another and b) against other, non-media sources of information. Household members were able to decode television's food frames to provide explanations and justifications for their own or other household members' eating habits, even when they were contradictory. Audience engagement with food images on television was thus as disordered as the television content itself. Television's contribution to eating may be understood therefore as a repository of different frameworks of understanding, different ideas and prescriptions about food use which help to give shape to the patterns of food consumption in the home. Television images of food can be thought of as resources on which members of the household draw to help them make, and make sense of, decisions about food.

These findings represent the beginnings of a socially-situated understanding of the media's contribution to food-related behaviour. An important shortcoming in this work is that it is limited in its scope with regard to the media – television, despite its dominance as a source of information and entertainment, contains only part of the myriad media channels containing constructions and representations of food and eating that most people encounter as a matter of routine, a point noted earlier. Research that goes further to uncover the complex and changing interdependencies between the personal experiences of people in different social groups and contexts and their subjective readings of media output will make some important inroads into the more complete understanding of food and the media that is required.

Future Directions for Research on the Media and Food

Much more research is needed to examine the nature and extent of the relationship between media use and cooking/eating habits. A small amount of research has already given some indication of the types of resources that the medium of television offers in helping to shape the decisions that are made about food and eating (Dickinson, Murcott, Eldridge and Leader, 2001) but further understanding of the role of the media more generally as a resource for people's thoughts and actions over food is necessary. For this, examination at close quarters is needed of day-to-day food and media consumption, recognizing that domestic food use is a complex of classificatory, physiological, aesthetic, and sensory processes. This makes the home, which can be taken to be the main site of food consumption, and the household, which can be taken to be the central social and cultural context in which decisions about food are made, the key units of analysis. Charting the strategies that individuals and households adopt in their consumption practices and the resources that one consumption practice affords another in this way will help to disentangle and make sense of the many factors involved. There are encouraging signs that such an objective would find common ground with developments in the theorisation of domestic food practices (Delormier, Frohlich and Potvin, 2009).

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) argue that the process of 'audiencing' and the creation of what they call the 'diffused audience' mean that issues prominent in the media become increasingly significant in everyday life. Social life and media meanings have an interrelationship. Meanings that people make when they consume media of any kind contribute to social life and social processes. They do so unevenly, profoundly on some occasions, much less so on others. It remains to be understood fully how meanings made

between people and the media ebb and flow in the course of daily life, but it seems likely that the media's significance in contemporary society lies in their providing a subject and vocabulary for social interaction. The resulting model of media consumption characterizes audiencehood as essentially 'performative', the media providing resources for the 'performance' of daily life (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). Everyday performances will, in turn, involve, among other things, consumption of other kinds. People will on some occasions use the resources provided by the media to make decisions, and adopt and incorporate patterns and routines of behaviour that bear some relationship to those resources into the styles and strategies of daily life. The challenge for research on the media and food is to capture those occasions empirically so that they can be more fully understood. The subtle and complex links between culture, social class, ethnicity, age and the reception of media texts are only beginning to be addressed by studies examining both media content and audience interpretations. The task is to disentangle the web of interrelationships between media representation, social structure and personal experience from a perspective that recognizes the embeddedness of media in everyday life and their importance as resources for its performance.

Notes

¹ In May 2011 BBC1, BBC2, ITV1, Channel 4 and Channel 5 together accounted for over half the total amount of television viewing in the UK (BARB, 2011).

² This seems not to be a global phenomenon. Over the same period cookery books appeared rarely on Amazon's other country website bestseller lists. They were absent from the lists on the sites for Amazon's customers in China; France (apart from a brief surge in the popularity of books promoting the 'Dukan diet' around 2007 to 2009); Germany (although the German translation of the British 'celebrity chef' Jamie Oliver's *The Naked Chef* reached number 17 in 2003); Italy (one Dukan diet book appeared in the top ten in 2011 and 2012); Japan (two weight loss recipe books reached the top ten in 2010 and 2011); Spain (only one cookbook in

the top 100 in early 2012); and the US (excepting the odd weight loss cookbook hovering around the foot of the table in some years). The global pattern of cookery book sales would repay closer investigation.

³ Benson (2004) makes a similar point in his discussion of political communication as a field of study

⁴ Baron (2006) reviews a wide range of research on film and food and shows that while there is similar work in film studies, it has more aesthetic preoccupations (see, for example, the contributors to Bower, 2004; Keller, 2006). While some film scholars have explored the symbolic work that food does in films to help develop characters, narrative structures and emotional tone and there is also research on the way food consumption is related to the film-going experience (Lyons, 2004), the majority of research on food and film, unsurprisingly perhaps, takes a text-focussed approach. Baron detects signs of a change of emphasis in some food/film research that might find useful synergies with 'food studies' – Dana Polan's study of Julia Child's US television series *The French Chef* would be one example (Polan, 2011). The dominant perspective in film studies, as in some cultural studies explorations of various popular media discussed in this section, is that this medium is simply a reflection of social mores, trends, and social values, not a factor that might be implicated in their formation.

⁵ Discourse theory has also been an important influence on scholarship in that branch of communication studies that arises from the humanities that is concerned with the creation and transmission of meaning. Research on 'food discourse' has recently begun to emerge from this wider field to examine not only discourse in popular film and television, but also in the discourse of other social practices, institutions and cultural forms such as household mealtimes, gardening, types of restaurant and cuisine, and convenience foods. The volume edited by Cramer, Greene and Walters (2011) contains a valuable collection of this work.

⁶ For example, Brewis and Jack add, in a footnote to their article, the caveat that 'although we do not place any empirically grounded store by our reading of the advertisements, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the fast food industry relies much more heavily on television advertising than it does on other media [...], and that the British consumer is also notable for their high consumption of convenience food especially as compared to their counterparts in mainland Europe [...]. Even our quasi-journalistic analysis of British television advertisements may therefore be instructive with regard to the marketing uses of time, and their wider implications, in this context' (Brewis and Jack, 2005: 65).

⁷ These were not the first events of this sort. See Smith (2007).

⁸ One of the more recent concerns is over food product marketing via the Internet and the phenomenon of 'advergaming' – the use of web-based games that revolve around food brands and products which, it is claimed, are in effect extended advertisements that encourage deep involvement and prolonged exposure (see Moore, 2006; Kelly, Bochynska, Kornman and Chapman, 2008).

⁹ Even rarer in this type of study is the attempt to analyse the demographic and material variations that exist across television audiences and the extent to which they might intervene in the process of influence.

¹⁰ In western countries the average number of viewing hours per week ranges from around 25 to around 30. Weekly television viewing hours tend to be highest in the US.

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