



# SPECIAL REPORT

## AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

THE MEDIA RESEARCH CENTER • 325 SOUTH PATRICK ST. • ALEXANDRIA, VA 22314 • WWW.MRC.ORG

June 2, 2004

# SUPERSIZED BIAS

## Big Media's Role In Covering — And Promoting — the Obesity Debate

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**M**ore and more Americans are obsessed with their weight, and the news media have responded with an abundance of stories about food and fat. But there's more to the fat story than just giving the public more news they can use. Some anti-corporate activists have seized upon the public's worries about weight to bash the companies that feed America. They argue that the fattening of America is less the result of poor personal choices than poor behavior by U.S. businesses, and that the "obesity epidemic" can best be cured through a diet of new taxes, more regulations, and a flood of lawyer-enriching lawsuits.

So how successful have these radical activists been at getting their agenda taken seriously by the major media? To find out, researchers with the MRC's Free Market Project analyzed all 205 news stories about obesity published in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, or aired on the three broadcast network evening newscasts and nighttime magazine shows between May 1, 2003 and April 30, 2004.

### Among the major findings:

- **More Blame for Food Sellers than Food Eaters:** About half the news stories debated the causes of obesity, and a large majority of these (66) blamed America's weight problems on the behavior of food corporations rather than on the personal behavior of those who eat the food (just 26 stories). Only 11 stories treated readers or viewers to a balanced debate over the causes of obesity.
- **ABC and The New York Times Were the Most Biased:** ABC aired 15 stories blaming business practices for obesity, compared with just one story highlighting personal

responsibility. *New York Times* stories were similarly skewed against business by a margin of 20 to two. CBS, NBC and *USA Today* were much more balanced.

- **Shunning Companies, Pumping Anti-Corporate Activists:** By a three-to-two margin, news stories featured more quotes from a relatively small group of anti-corporate activists led by a Naderite organization called Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) than all of the spokespersons for the industries being attacked.
- **Camouflaging the Crusaders:** No news story applied an ideological label to any anti-corporate activist, although *USA Today* was careful to stick a “conservative” tag on the Family Research Council’s Patrick Trueman. Instead, reporters promoted CSPI as “a health advocacy group” (ABC), “a Washington-based consumer group” (*USA Today*) or “a consumer advocacy group” (*New York Times*).
- **Personal Choice Favored Over Government-Imposed Solutions:** Despite the media’s bias in favor of blaming corporations for obesity, a plurality of stories (80, or 39 percent) focused on personal solutions to obesity. But one-fourth of all stories (49) included arguments for new burdens on business such as regulations or a “fat tax” on some products, and another fifth of the total (39) discussed milder ways of putting pressure on companies, such as lawsuits or the shame of negative publicity.
- **But the Free Market Was Practically Ignored:** Even as activists claimed that cynical corporate marketing really determines what’s on Americans’ plates, the marketplace was responding to consumer desires for healthier products and smaller portions. But less than 10 percent of news stories (just 19 out of 205) even hinted at how the free market is already helping to solve America’s obesity problem.

The report concludes with three recommendations for better coverage: First, news organizations must do a better job of investigating and reporting the agenda and track record of advocacy groups such as CSPI, and not falsely present them as sources of objective and unbiased information. Second, fairness requires that when outside groups criticize big business, journalists strive to include in their story an appropriate response from either the targeted corporation or an industry association.

Finally, while it is easy for reporters to build stories around activists’ demands for more government intervention, it is important to balance those demands with a recognition of the principles and benefits of America’s free market system. Without government lifting a finger, consumers will inevitably reward companies that provide the most desirable products for the best price, and any businesses that fail to meet the public’s expectations will be punished in the marketplace. That’s as true for the food business as any other, but that truism was lacking in most of the media coverage we examined over the past year.

# SUPERSIZED BIAS

## Big Media's Role In Covering — And Promoting — the Obesity Debate

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It's hard to turn on a television set and not be bombarded with news about fat — a new warning about the dangers of obesity, a new diet that lets you eat more while the pounds melt away, or the unveiling of a new drug that just might make you thin again. As more and more Americans become obsessed with their weight, the news media are responding with an abundance of stories about food and fat.

But there's more to the fat story than just giving the public more news they can use. While most people — fat, thin or somewhere in the middle — probably regard their weight as their own business, some anti-corporate activists have seized upon America's worries about weight to launch a campaign against the companies that produce the food that feeds us all. They argue that the fattening of America is less the result of poor personal choices than poor behavior by U.S. businesses, and that the "obesity epidemic" can best be cured through a diet of new taxes, more regulations, and a flood of lawyer-enriching lawsuits.

So how successful were these radical activists at getting their agenda taken seriously by the major media? To find out, researchers with the MRC's Free Market Project analyzed all news stories about obesity published in *The New York Times* or *USA Today* (excluding editorials and opinion columns) or aired on the three broadcast network evening and nighttime news shows (ABC's *World News Tonight*, *20/20*, *PrimeTime* and *Nightline*; CBS's *Evening News*, *48 Hours*, *60 Minutes* and *60 Minutes II*; and NBC's *Nightly News* and *Dateline*) during a one-year period, from May 1, 2003 through April 30, 2004.

All three television networks provided a remarkably similar amount of coverage. By a very slight margin, CBS aired the most stories (37, including 6 brief anchor-read items)

followed by ABC with 34 stories (29 full reports, 5 anchor briefs) and NBC with 31 (27 full reports, 4 anchor briefs). *The New York Times* ran 55 stories on obesity, many in the Business or Health sections. *USA Today*, which only publishes five editions a week, ran 48 stories, many in the Life section.

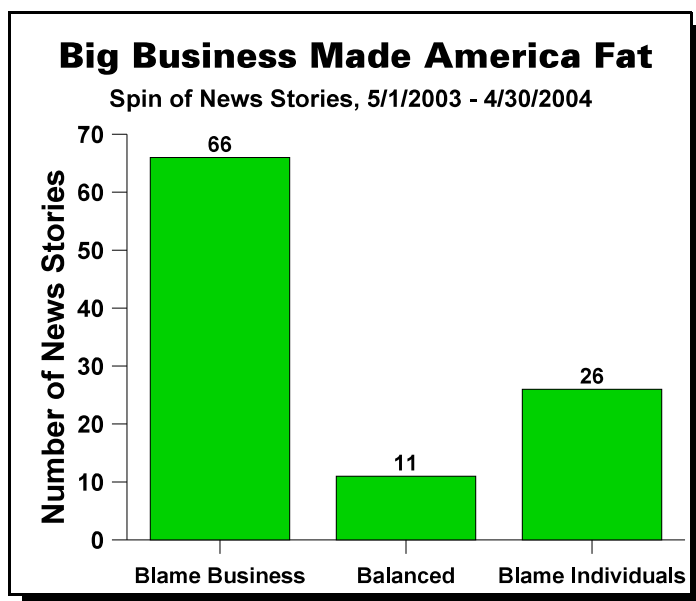
## **Blaming Food Sellers, Not Food Buyers**

Is obesity principally a personal problem, the result of either poor lifestyle choices or medical conditions that make weight gain almost inevitable? Or are more of us getting fatter because callous, or even corrupt, food companies are cynically devising new ways to get us to buy too much food, or at least too much bad food?

The debate over what has caused the increase in obesity was featured in about half of the news stories we examined. While a handful of stories suggested other causes (such as federal farm subsidies or growing suburbanization), nearly all of the stories that discussed causes of obesity referenced either business practices or personal choices.

To gauge the balance of this debate, the researchers were asked to tally all of the comments in a story by both the reporter and individuals either quoted or shown in TV soundbites. They counted the number of statements presenting the idea that responsibility lies a) with individuals or b) with the business practices of individual companies or the food industry at large. If the comments tilted in favor of one of those concepts by a greater than two-to-one margin, the story was categorized as promoting that point of view. If the ratio was less than two-to-one, the story was classified as balanced.

Using this yardstick, only 11 stories treated readers or viewers to a balanced discussion, which means most of the stories that talked about the causes of obesity were dominated by a single point of view. Mostly, the message was that corporate strategies were to blame for Americans' weight gain. Just 26 stories presented obesity as primarily a result of personal circumstances, compared with 66 that blamed big business. (See chart.)



Those news stories that presented obesity as a consequence of an individual's lifestyle or medical situation tended to focus on a single individual, offering their personal story as a template for the overall problem. On March 5, for example, a segment on CBS's *48 Hours* profiled actor Wayne Knight, best known for his portrayal of "Newman" on NBC's *Seinfeld* in the mid-1990s.

### **ABC: Blame Business**

**"Old and young, Americans are getting fatter, and fatter, and fatter. We all think it's our own fault. It is not that simple. The food industry is also at fault."— ABC's Peter Jennings introducing his Dec. 8 special, "How to Get Fat Without Really Trying."**

Since his days on *Seinfeld*, *48 Hours* reported, Knight has lost close to 100 pounds. He told reporter Susan Spencer how he was obsessed with food. "I used to have a tan from the light inside the refrigerator," Knight quipped. "I was eating for reasons that had nothing to do with hunger. I was eating to numb myself. And when I began to have to look at the fact that I was eating as an addiction and treating it as such, that's when, you know, I turned the corner."

Similarly, *USA Today* profiled TV talk show host Phil McGraw on September 9, 2003, the release date of his book, *The Ultimate Weight Solution: The 7 Keys to Weight Loss Freedom*. "Dr. Phil" told reporter Nanci Hellmich that the problem for many people was emotional: "What I've found about chronically overweight people is they don't believe they can ever be different."

But the vast majority of news stories ignored or downplayed such personal factors. On the March 9 *World News Tonight*, ABC reporter Lisa Stark linked the food industry's behavior with poor health: "It's estimated 64 percent of Americans weigh too much. That increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and some form of cancer. Those who help people lose weight say they're not surprised by the new numbers. The food industry spends \$34 billion a year to market its products." The notion that food industry advertising causes obesity is a key argument of the anti-corporate activists.

A couple of weeks earlier, on the February 24 *CBS Evening News*, Elizabeth Kaledin had framed an entire story around a negative report from the Center for Science and the Public Interest (CSPI) that charged that children's menus at restaurants such as Outback and Red Lobster were dominated by unhealthy choices.

"Move over, McNuggets," Kaledin crowed. "There's a new food villain in town. New research finds kids' meals at many popular restaurant chains are loaded with more fat and calories than the average fast food fare."

The five news outlets we examined were hardly identical when it came to the blame game. CBS, NBC and *USA Today* all presented roughly as many stories stressing personal responsibility as stories pushing the idea that business was at fault. But the

debate at ABC and *The New York Times* was almost entirely dominated by the idea that business was at fault. On ABC, 15 out of 16 stories discussing the causes of obesity blamed business, as did 20 out of 22 *New York Times* stories. (See chart.)

*The New York Times*, for example, ran a lengthy Business section story on November 15, 2003 that began by accusing food companies of “exploiting” labeling laws in order to deceive consumers.

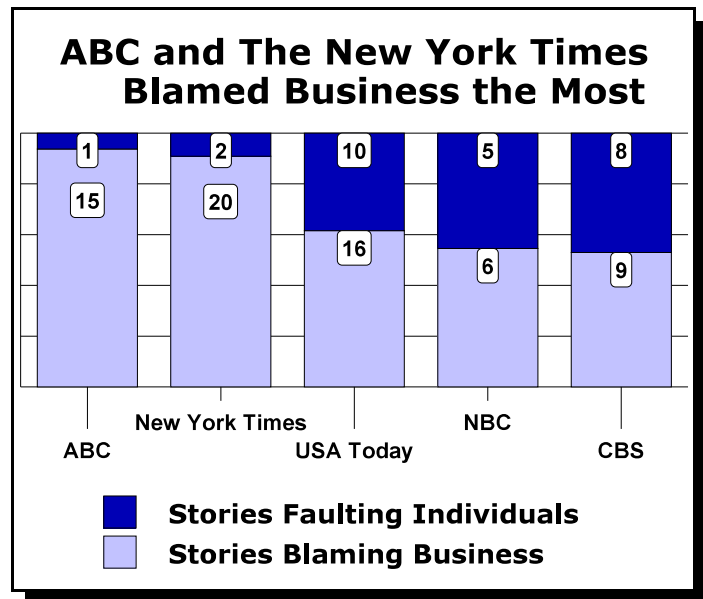
“Food companies – including some that have pledged to act in the face of rising obesity rates – routinely exploit labeling laws that allow them to make their products seem less fattening than they really are, according to nutritionists and consumer groups,” was how the story by Sherri Day misleadingly began.

Deep into the article, Day let readers know what the real problem was: “The FDA’s [Food and Drug Administration’s] own guidelines on serving sizes are based on old data, which is out of step with current portion sizes. For example, according to the FDA’s calculations, which were established in 1990, a serving of bagel is 55 grams, or about 2 ounces.” In other words, companies that were dutifully adhering to some bureaucrats’ impractical regulations were being attacked by activists for being sneaky.

According to the business-bashers, the answer was even tougher government protections. “If people are misled by serving sizes, they could easily consume far more calories than they think,” a CSPI spokeswoman fretted to the *Times*. The first quote from a food company spokesman came in the story’s 15th paragraph.

ABC’s coverage was even more slanted against business. On December 8, 2003, Peter Jennings narrated a special edition of the ABC newsmagazine *PrimeTime* devoted exclusively to the subject, “How to Get Fat Without Really Trying.” He announced his mindset at the beginning of the show: “Old and young, Americans are getting fatter, and fatter, and fatter. We all think it’s our own fault. It is not that simple. The food industry is also at fault.”

Jennings argued that U.S. food manufacturers were creating unhealthy products. “When you look at all the products introduced by the industry in recent years, one



thing is absolutely clear: the vast majority are foods that Americans should be eating less," he charged. "It is hard to imagine the companies sacrificing their profits for the benefits of public health."

After making all of this junk food, companies then sleazily tried to foist it on young children unaware of the risks. "Have you noticed how most food is marketed to kids, directly to kids?" the ABC anchor rhetorically wondered in another segment of the hour-long program. "All the marketing to children is feeding an epidemic of childhood obesity," Jennings apocalyptically concluded. "The diet of many American children may already be condemning them to a lifetime of illness."

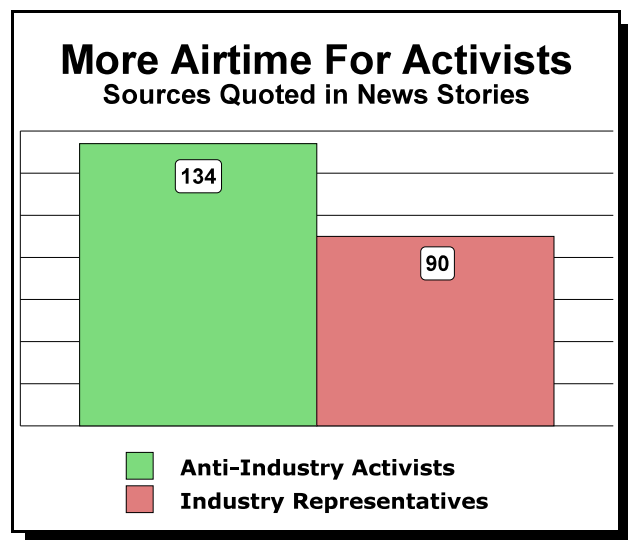
## **Shunning Companies, Pumping Anti-Corporate Activists**

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Why did so many obesity stories end up pointing an accusing finger at those in the food business? The main reason is that reporters mostly followed the agenda of anti-food industry activists, especially the left-wing Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), and included their comments, or those of university professors aligned with their cause, in news stories far more frequently than quotes or soundbites from representatives of the industry under attack.

The Jennings special, for example, leaned heavily on three outspoken activists: CSPI's executive director, Michael Jacobson; its Nutrition Policy Director, Margo Wootan; and Marion Nestle, a former CSPI advisory board member and a professor from New York University. While Jennings also included quotes from spokesmen for Kraft Foods and the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the very premise of his show was built around the activists' indictment of the food industry.

These activists all argued that business practices lay at the heart of the country's obesity problem. Indeed, the very fact that food today is plentiful and inexpensive struck Professor Nestle as harmful. "If you were going to design a strategy to get people to eat more food, you'd make food more convenient. You'd make it ubiquitous. You'd encourage people to eat more frequently, on more different eating occasions, and you'd encourage them to eat larger portions. And all of these are *deliberate strategies* to



sell more food,” Nestle charged in a soundbite aired on Jennings’ special. (Emphasis added.)

Such activists were quoted by name in newspaper stories or shown on camera in television stories a total of 134 times, or about 50 percent more frequently than anyone from one of the food companies or industry associations was cited (90 times). *The New York Times* and ABC were slightly more likely than *USA Today*, CBS and NBC to cite these activists, but the differences were minor.

These statistics actually understate the degree to which the activists controlled the news agenda. Often, entire stories were pegged to new CSPI reports or complaints about alleged corporate misbehavior. “Ever heard of the Internet’s Oreo dunking game?” ABC’s Dean Reynolds asked on the November 10, 2003 *World News Tonight*. “How about Chip Ahoy’s chip blaster? Or baseball with Cheese Nips? The message here is that food is fun, specifically, fun for kids. And to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, that’s a problem.”

Reynolds then aired a condemnation from CSPI’s Margo Wootan at a press conference: “The reality is that marketing aimed directly at children makes it much harder for parents to feed their children well.”

Reynolds did show a soundbite from a representative of the Grocery Manufacturers of America, Lisa Katic, who scoffed at CSPI’s theory: “If you’re eating a well-balanced diet, there’s nothing wrong with having a treat every once in a while, and parents know that.” But as Reynolds let Katic dispute the validity of the CSPI study, ABC viewers saw overweight kids huffing and puffing around a playground, and a child’s little fingers peeling away the wrapper from a Hostess chocolate cupcake.

Reynolds then listed more of the alleged instances of “food marketing to children,” showing an offending cereal box illustration: “The Rugrats pal around with Cap’n Crunch.” Then he went back to Wootan, who showed viewers a Barbie doll in a McDonald’s uniform. “Kids love Barbie,” she sniffed. “This is an example of turning marketing into a toy.” ABC underscored the validity of CSPI’s critique by showing a soundbite from a frazzled parent: “It’s hard to keep junk food out of your house when your kids see it everywhere. They’re bombarded by it. They want it.”

In total, ABC that night devoted 2 minutes 20 seconds to CSPI’s charges compared to just 20 seconds for the rebuttal from GMA’s Katic — a seven-to-one ratio in favor of the anti-business argument.

Similarly on March 3, NBC’s Bob Faw reported on McDonald’s decision to phase out supersized french fries and drinks, but the vast majority of quotes in the story came from McDonald’s critics.

Faw touted Morgan Spurlock, who directed and starred in the tendentious film "Super Size Me," in which he chronicled a month in which he only ate McDonald's food. "An award-winning documentary to be released this spring says supersized portions in fast-food chains is one reason we're so blubbery....In one month, the film's director ate nothing but McDonald's and put on almost 25 pounds," Faw enthused, as though Spurlock's stunt was relevant to anything in the real world.

Faw argued that McDonald's was changing its menu "because of bad publicity and because the number of lawsuits against chains serving fatty foods is growing." Then he played a soundbite from George Washington University Law Professor John Banzhaf, the activist best known for his crusading lawsuits against the tobacco companies. "Food companies, beware," Banzhaf chortled. "Look at what happened to big tobacco and start performing now."

As with the ABC story, the airtime was heavily tilted in favor of the activists, with McDonald's Executive Vice President Jeff Stratton receiving a mere 10 seconds in a more than two minute story.

## **Camouflaging the Crusaders**

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Since the media gave advocacy groups like CSPI a starring role in the debate over obesity, one might logically assume that news reports would have stressed the background and agenda of this group, or the record of other like-minded activists.

One would be wrong. During the year's worth of coverage we analyzed, few news reporters approached these activists with anything like healthy professional skepticism (ABC's John Stossel was an exception), and many reporters actually helped these crusaders camouflage their ideology by presenting them as either knowledgeable "experts" or public-spirited "consumer advocates."

None of the newspapers or television news program we studied referred to CSPI as "liberal," but just skimming CSPI's literature or Web site ([www.cspinet.org](http://www.cspinet.org)) makes it clear they are an extremely liberal, even far-left, organization. Echoing some of the more hard-edged elements of the environmental movements, CSPI's Nutrition Policy Web page argues that modern society is itself a problem: modern conveniences — elevators, leaf blowers, and even washing machines — are harmful because they deprive people of opportunities to burn calories, while the very abundance of food is bad because there are more calories out there than we can eat without getting fat.

As with most liberals, CSPI's bottom-line answer is more government: "Funding for nutrition education pales in comparison to what the food industry spends advertising unhealthy foods," CSPI's Web site warns. "Given all the forces working against

Americans' attempts to maintain a healthy diet and weight, the government needs to do more than just cross its fingers and hope that the obesity problem goes away."

**A Tad Exaggerated?**  
"NBC News 'In Depth' tonight: Americans eating themselves to death." — Tom Brokaw on the March 9 NBC Nightly News.

When it comes to restricting business, CSPI wants nutrition labels on everything from soda cups in movie theaters to menus in fancy restaurants. CSPI also demands that every newspaper or magazine advertisement report the number of calories in the food product being sold, and CSPI does not want any food advertisements allowed on TV when children are watching — as if ads for Wendy's or Burger King are as noxious as the raunchy sexually-explicit programming most parents worry about.

(In fact, CSPI's "Nutrition Action" newsletter has branded Burger King's "Big King" hamburger and "Cini-mini" rolls, along with many other high calorie products, as "food porn," presumably an attempt to embarrass companies selling items which are evidently obscene in CSPI's eyes.)

Liberals generally like taxes, and so does CSPI, which has a "fat tax" on its wish list. The group wants higher taxes on "soft drinks and other foods high in calories, fat, or sugar," and the government is instructed to use the money "to fund campaigns and programs to promote and support good nutrition and physical activity."

Not only was CSPI never labeled as "liberal" or "left-wing," neither were any of the other prominent activists who shared CSPI's philosophy and desired the same policies. One of these is New York University's Marion Nestle, who collaborated with CSPI executive director Michael Jacobson for a January/February 2000 article in *Public Health Reports* in which they made the "fat tax" proposal described above, plus a tax on new TV sets and video equipment, and a penny increase in the gasoline tax. Yet Nestle was often described merely as a "New York University professor" or, as ABC's Dean Reynolds dubbed her on March 3, "a leading nutrition expert."

Similarly, George Washington University law school professor John Banzhaf was never called a liberal, even though he has made a second career out of using lawsuits to force the courts to enact social changes. News stories typically promoted Banzhaf as a swashbuckling Robin-Hood type, taking on entrenched powers to help the little guy:

"Perhaps no one scares the fast-foodies more than John Banzhaf," Bruce Horowitz enthused in the July 1, 2003 *USA Today*. "He's best known for spearheading billion-dollar victories over the tobacco industry and is widely credited for the removal of cigarette commercials from television. Now, the professor of public interest at George Washington University is taking aim at food."

But not every journalist was buying what Banzhaf was selling. On the July 18, 2003 edition of ABC's *20/20*, co-anchor John Stossel questioned Banzhaf's assertion that his lawsuits would improve public health. "They say they're protecting us. What they're really going to do is make hamburgers cost more and make rich lawyers richer," Stossel asserted in a rare display of media skepticism directed at the activists.

When Banzhaf told Stossel how tobacco lawsuits were once laughed off as frivolous, only to have those lawyers now enjoying multiple millions of dollars, Stossel noted that time is on the activists' side: "The lawyers almost always win eventually. They can just keep suing until they do. So far, they've already collected \$13 billion from big tobacco, enough to buy them 80,000 Bentleys or 13,000 yachts. The food business is even bigger. Who knows what they'll make there."

While they never labeled the liberal players in the obesity debate, *USA Today* was careful to stick a "conservative" tag on the Family Research Council's Patrick Trueman on February 24 when he challenged the liberal notion that business should be forbidden from advertising to children.

"If you ban ads, you'll just eliminate kids' TV, because who's going to pay for it?" Trueman told *USA Today*. "I don't feel I should give up my duty as a parent to the government." But Trueman was the minority position in that story, the first eight paragraphs of which presented the idea that "government should either ban commercials on TV programs for children younger than 9 or order changes to prevent kids from being easy prey for marketers."

## **Personal Choice Favored Over Government-Imposed Solutions**

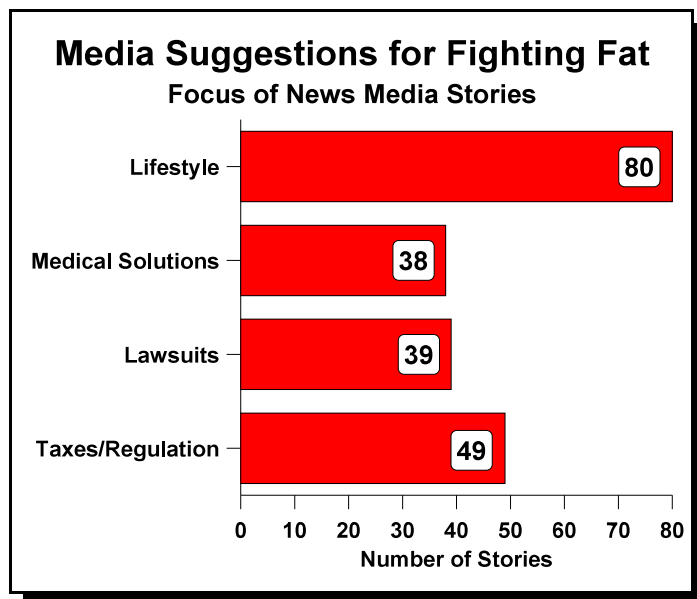
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Despite the fact that far more news stories blamed corporations than individuals for obesity, more stories actually focused on personal solutions than any of the tax and regulatory schemes recommended by the activists. The reason is that many news stories, especially on television, profiled individuals who had succeeded in shedding unwanted pounds, or asked medical experts for advice that would help those who wanted to trim their profile. These stories tended to bypass the controversial proposals of anti-corporate activists (like a "fat tax") to stress solutions that had already been found to work.

Some news stories mentioned more than one solution, and some obesity stories never suggested any way to remedy the problem, but our Free Market Project researchers identified four ideas that received the most coverage: new taxes or regulations on food companies; lawsuits or other attempts to bully companies into conforming with the activists' wishes; medical solutions, including new drugs or

surgery; and lifestyle changes, where individuals improved their own eating and exercise habits.

As one might expect, a plurality of stories (80, or 39 percent) focused on personal solutions to obesity. But one-fourth of all stories (49) included arguments for new burdens on business such as regulations or a “fat tax” on some products, and another fifth of the total (39) discussed milder ways of putting pressure on companies, such as lawsuits or the shame of negative publicity. Another fifth (38) focused on medical solutions to obesity. (See chart.)



TV’s prime time magazine shows favored the tale of personal triumph over the activists’ policy pronouncements. Last June 27 on *20/20*, ABC’s Deborah Roberts presented a follow-up report on two teen-aged sisters who had gastric-bypass surgery, developed better habits, and were going to the prom. On March 26, NBC’s *Dateline* aired a report called “Generation XL,” on the efforts of three teenagers going through a weight-loss program at “Camp La Jolla” in California. The same edition of CBS’s *48 Hours* that featured actor Wayne Knight also showcased the weight loss story of Subway pitchman Jared Fogle, who lost 245 pounds eating turkey and vegetable sandwiches.

On December 29, 2003, *The New York Times* profiled a Russian-born inventor from California who had figured out how to put sensors into a car seat to weigh the driver and sound an alarm when he or she had gotten too fat. “The best way to ensure people have information about their weight and they don’t forget is to create a system that does it by itself and they don’t have to think about,” Yefim G. Kriger told the *Times*.

But even as some journalists were documenting how individuals were solving their own weight problems either on their own or with a doctor’s assistance, others were handing the megaphone to activists who argued that the real answer was to start passing laws or put even more pressure on big business.

“I mean, what can you do? Implore people to eat better and exercise more? Well, there’s plenty of that going on already, and there’s still a problem,” argued Professor Kelly Brownell, the Director of Yale’s Center for and Weight Disorders and a member of

CSPI's Scientific Advisory Board, on ABC's *Nightline* on July 17, 2003. Equating food with tobacco, Brownell hinted that winning the fight against obesity may mean limiting some freedoms.

"Tobacco was a great example. I mean, we could implore parents to ask their children not to smoke, and ask the parents not to smoke themselves, but that hasn't gotten the job done. So we tax cigarettes, we forbid smoking in public places, we take other quite bold and dramatic actions to protect the public health," Brownell argued.

On June 25, 2003, *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Mike Taibbi outlined the movement's demands: "A so-called fat tax on junk food and fast-food items, a ban on their sale in schools and tougher requirements about their stated nutritional value. And some lawyers are already fighting big food for those concessions the same way big tobacco was fought a decade ago with new laws and new lawsuits."

Taibbi then aired a boastful soundbite from Banzhaf, the law professor: "We think that the same tools and techniques can also be very effective against the problem of obesity. And, indeed, the seven suits so far and the industry's response certainly convinces me that we're on the right track."

But Taibbi also quoted a member of Congress, Ric Keller, who mocked Banzhaf's premise: "We've got to get away from this society where everybody plays the victim and tries to blame other people for their problems."

On August 20, 2003 *USA Today's* Life section enumerated Brownell's anti-business demands: "Some of the nation's top researchers, alarmed about the rise in childhood obesity, are calling for Americans to demand a complete overhaul of the way unhealthy foods and drinks are marketed to kids," reporter Nancy Hellmich opened her story about Brownell's request for a ban on advertising to children, and end to celebrity and cartoon character endorsements of junk foods, and smaller portion sizes.

"Short of banning ads, Brownell recommends that the government should charge fees for ads for unhealthy foods or a small tax on the foods themselves to create 'a nutrition superfund' to use to promote health foods. The 'snack tax' or 'Twinkie tax' has been the subject of much debate," Hellmich outlined.

### **Mocking the Vote**

**"The food lobby is powerful on Capitol Hill. Members of Congress have received \$1.5 million from the restaurant industry, and even more, \$2.5 million, from food producers and sellers in this election cycle alone. There is a candy lobby, a sugar lobby, a snack food lobby. Today, House members argued the food industry is being made the scapegoat for people who choose to overeat."— ABC's Linda Douglass on World News Tonight, March 10.**

Although her story was framed entirely around the activists' agenda, Hellmich's story did include a response from a business or association spokesperson for each of the items Brownell proposed. Gene Grabowski of the Grocery Manufacturers of America, for example, argued that a ban on ads for children was "absurd. You have to allow appropriate advertising and marketing to all segments of society."

On March 10, when the House of Representatives passed a bill to limit the ability of activists like Banzhaf to sue food companies that were otherwise playing by the rules, ABC's Linda Douglass on *World News Tonight* ridiculed the legislators as the handmaidens of big business: "The food lobby is powerful on Capital Hill. Members of Congress have received \$1.5 million from the restaurant industry, and even more, \$2.5 million, from food producers and sellers in this election cycle alone. There is a candy lobby, a sugar lobby, a snack food lobby. Today, House members argued the food industry is being made the scapegoat for people who choose to overeat."

In his December 8, 2003 *PrimeTime* report, ABC anchor Peter Jennings looked for new regulations: "The Bush administration urges Americans to exercise more and eat healthier. But there is no sign that government will obligate the food industry to change how they make and market food, and no sign whatsoever that government will try to change agricultural policies, so as to benefit the public health."

"As we made this program, we often thought about how long it took before government recognized that smoking was a public health issue," Jennings revealed at the end of the program. "And now, it's obesity. Just think of the money it is costing the country. So, how long will it take government to act? I'm Peter Jennings. Thank you and good night."

## **But the Free Market Was Practically Ignored**

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Even as activists claimed that cynical corporate marketing really determines what's on Americans' plates, the marketplace was responding to consumer desires for healthier products and smaller portions. But less than 10 percent of news stories (just 19 out of 205) even hinted at how the free market is already helping to solve America's obesity problem.

One of the rare instances of journalists highlighting how businesses were shifting to accommodate changing consumer desires came on the *NBC Nightly News* on February 18. In a report that anchor Tom Brokaw announced was produced in conjunction with *The Wall Street Journal*, NBC's Rehema Ellis showed how companies were experimenting with new, smaller portion sizes of some products, including a 4.5 ounce toasted sandwich offered by Quiznos.

“In the era of the Big Gulp, soda giant Coca Cola is now offering new 12-ounce bottles. Pepsi is offering eight-ounce cans. Why? Companies are responding to changing demand from aging, weight-conscious baby boomers and warning about rising obesity rates.”

Still, Ellis pointed out, the smaller packaging means the relative price per ounce of the same product is higher than with the larger sizes. “Market analysts say it’s a big gamble whether consumers will buy into the change,” Ellis concluded, “but food companies are banking that diet-conscious Americans are willing to pay more for less if it means healthier eating.”

While Ellis never used the phrase “free market,” that’s exactly what she was talking about. As she documented, businesses believe that many weight-conscious individuals want smaller sizes, so they’re making an effort to comply. But if too few customers actually purchase the smaller sizes, the marketplace will tell businesses that their theory about what people wanted was wrong, and the items will be modified or discontinued.

The next night on *NBC Nightly News*, reporter Kevin Tibbles showed how fast food restaurants were changing their menu to suit some dieting customers’ desires for fewer carbohydrates. “How do you eat a bunless burger? At Burger King, it comes in plastic with a knife and fork,” Tibbles explained. “At Hardee’s and Carl’s Jr., they come wrapped in lettuce. CEO Andy Puzder says he got the idea when he saw a customer on a low-carb diet removing the bun.”

“He said, ‘I’ve got 25 pounds.’ I said, ‘Maybe we ought to test this,’” a chuckling Puzder related to Tibbles.

“All the fast food mainstays have alternatives now — salads instead of fries, bottled water instead of soda, frozen yogurt instead of ice cream,” Tibbles reported.

Of course, these variations will succeed in the marketplace if enough customers truly desire them. But these two NBC reports made it clear that companies, especially those with creative management, will always seek ways to bring new products to market when consumer demands change. When activists insist on government-mandated change, they’re denying the fact that the free market is always adapting to meet consumers’ desires — or they’re expressing a lack of faith in the ability of ordinary citizens to make intelligent choices in a free marketplace.

The anti-corporate activists focus on advertising and marketing to make their case that the average American consumer is a victim of business manipulation. “The government spends about \$3 million a year on a five-a-day campaign to promote fruit and vegetable consumption — \$3 million a year,” CSPI’s Michael Jacobson fretted to

CBS's John Roberts in a May 11, 2003 story. "McDonald's, one company, spends \$1 billion a year encouraging people to eat hamburgers, fries and Cokes."

But consumers are not mindless robots, eating only what the TV commercials tell them to eat. A *USA Today* article from February 25 showed that enough diet-conscious consumers were shifting their buying habits for the results to show up in national sales figures. "Comparing 2002 with 2003, fewer consumer dollars were spent on fresh potatoes, rice, white bread, cereal, cookies and pasta," reporter Nanci Hellmich revealed.

But many journalists seemed to share the activists' lack of faith in the free market. *New York Times* business reporter David Barboza wrapped up a July 10, 2003 story about obesity with an anecdote that seemed to imply that it was hopeless to expect consumers to make responsible choices: "The extent to which overindulgence has seeped into American culture was summed up by a flight attendant on a Southwest Airlines flight from Providence, R.I., to Chicago on Monday.

"'Having a balanced diet,' she told the passengers over the intercom, 'means having two cookies in each hand.' She got applause."

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

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When covering the obesity issue, the news organizations that we studied aimed most of their skepticism toward business and business-friendly politicians, and treated the liberal activists pushing for taxes and regulations as impartial, civic-minded truth-tellers. Instead of impartially mediating a debate about the causes and solutions to the obesity problem, too many reporters — especially those at ABC News and the *New York Times* — crossed the line and became advocates championing a cause.

Activists like Marion Nestle, for example, argued that the country's growing girth was not an ordinary health problem, but an "epidemic," a problem so severe that drastic action could not be delayed. In about one-third of the stories we analyzed (66 out of 205), journalists parroted that sensationalized language and hyped the problem as an "obesity epidemic." On the March 9 *NBC Nightly News*, anchor Tom Brokaw even suggested "Americans [are] eating themselves to death."

There is no doubt that obesity is a growing health problem, but out of 205 stories, only one report tried to put the alarming statistics into context. "Until 1998, a 5-foot-5 woman who weighed 164 pounds was considered normal," *USA Today's* Nancy Hellmich and Rita Rubin explained in a June 16, 2003 article. "Then the official body mass index (weight/height) criteria changed, and all of a sudden she was considered

overweight if she weighed 150 pounds. The guidelines labeled another 29 million people as overweight. Now, almost 65 percent of Americans weigh too much.”

Only about one-third of adults were officially considered overweight before the change, according to a January 1, 1998 *New York Times* article by science reporter Gina Kolata. While millions have gotten fatter on their own in the last five years, millions more were re-defined as “overweight” by government bureaucrats, even though their actual weight may not have changed.

Once reporters had adopted the activists’ mind-set about the severity of the obesity problem, it was more likely they would be receptive to activists’ desire to blame business practices for the problem and “solve” the problem by punishing businesses with new taxes and regulations. We found most news reports about the causes of obesity did indeed convey the activists’ spin that business was to blame, although most media discussions of obesity solutions emphasized personal or medical cures, not new taxes, regulations or lawsuits.

But apart from a few stories, such as those on the *NBC Nightly News* that we highlighted, reporters generally failed to document how America’s free market system was already translating weight-conscious consumers’ wishes into a myriad of new products in the marketplace.

It’s one thing for self-appointed activists to champion their own notions of positive change, even for them to argue that the free market has failed and government needs to step in and protect individuals from their own bad choices. But it’s dangerous for news reporters to stray over that line and abandon the role of objective mediator in order to become advocates themselves.

Once supposedly neutral reporters, like ABC’s Peter Jennings for example, make it obvious that they’ve taken sides on an issue, the public will rightly worry that their coverage may be designed more to push a point of view than to bring audiences a fair and balanced discussion. Reporters should resist becoming advocates, for advocates do not possess the open-mindedness that is essential for professional objective journalism.

Here are a few recommendations for better, less biased coverage in the future:

- **First, news organizations must do a better job of investigating and reporting the agenda and track record of advocacy groups such as CSPI, and not falsely present them as sources of objective and unbiased information.** CSPI’s own publications make it clear that they advocate wide-ranging changes in business practices and government policy, and many of those changes would be harmful to the free market system. Any such reforms need to be openly debated, not deceptively sold as improvements in public health with no negative consequences for the U.S. economy.

- **Second, fairness requires that when outside groups criticize big business, journalists strive to include in their story an appropriate response from either the targeted corporation or an industry association.** We found a number of stories in which the critics enjoyed a three-to-one, four-to-one or even greater advantage over business spokespersons. While some stories made it clear that a besieged business had refused to speak on camera, reporters must still try to serve their audiences properly by presenting balanced coverage. If a business won't talk, perhaps for legal reasons, then journalists should find free market experts who could debate the merits of these activists' claims and charges.
- **Finally, while it is easy for reporters to build stories around activists' demands for more government intervention, it is important to balance those demands with a recognition of the principles and benefits of America's free market system.** Without government lifting a finger, consumers will inevitably reward companies that provide the most desirable products for the best price, and any businesses that fail to meet the public's expectations will be punished in the marketplace. That's as true for the food business as any other, but that truism was lacking in most of the media coverage we examined over the past year.

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