



Harmful and Productive Patterns in Newspaper  
Representations of Food Systems

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute

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## INTRODUCTION

This analysis, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and building on previous research on how Americans think about food systems, examines the ways in which the topic is presented to readers, directly and indirectly, in the nation's newspapers. The effects of the news media on people's understanding of issues has been well documented, and goes beyond the question of whether people are "informed" about particular facts. Instead, the collective effect of the media is to create a set of default understandings and expectations that act as a kind of lens through which Americans see the world. Viewed through this lens, some facts about the world make more sense and are easier to see, while others are a poorer fit with people's default understandings, and become harder to see. As advocates struggle with the difficult job of raising Americans' consciousness regarding food systems and related issues, they will do well to bear in mind the ways in which current news coverage is helping and hurting their cause – both because this coverage partially defines what they are up against in American public discourse, and because an understanding of current journalism can help advocates plan ways of *improving* the coverage, by introducing ideas of their own through interviews, press releases, news events, and other opportunities.

Previous research by Cultural Logic, FrameWorks and others has established that Americans don't naturally think much about the systems that supply their food, or easily grasp that there are such systems at work. (See "Research Background" below for further discussion of current patterns in Americans' thinking.) One of the places where people do run across references to the food system is in news reports – in stories about food scares, about changing trends in consumption, about farmers who are finding new markets for their goods, and so forth. The central question guiding this analysis concerns the likely impacts these articles have on readers: In what ways would consumers of these articles come away better educated about the food system, and in what ways might the coverage actually reinforce some of their erroneous (and counterproductive) default understandings?

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this section we summarize some of the important implications that emerge from the media review.

### **Many pieces play (destructively) on traditional images of farming and rural America.**

Among the most destructive patterns in the material is the tendency for writers to (intentionally or unintentionally) evoke stereotypes that work against advocates' goals.

*The materials tend to reinforce a cognitive disconnect between Food and Food Supply Systems.*

In Americans' prevailing patterns of thinking, food and food production have separate lives, as distinct and unconnected cognitive and experiential domains. The materials tend to reinforce this disconnect by addressing either the domain of food (including eating,

dining, shopping, etc.) or the domain of agriculture and agricultural economics – but not both.

*There is a strong tendency to reinforce little-picture thinking by focusing images of the Individual Farmer.*

The image of the lone farmer struggling to eke a living from the soil is laden with many layers of meaning and symbolism in American culture. Therefore it is no surprise that many writers choose to open many of their stories with this evocative icon. But, as in other issue areas, a focus on individuals tends to obscure broader issues that are critical to an understanding of advocates' perspectives. (Occasional stories manage to weave the image of the individual farmer into a piece that promotes big-picture thinking about food systems, but these are the exceptions.)

*The materials suggest that farming is removed from the “real economy.”*

Many of the depictions of farmers suggest that farming is a calling that people pursue for personal, idiosyncratic reasons. This image removes agriculture from the real world of economics, and from the realm of public, as opposed to private concerns.

*Farming is depicted as anachronistic occupation.*

Many stories reinforce the idea that farmers belong to another century – thereby further removing them from understandings of modern problems, approaches and solutions related to food systems.

*References to “The Fall” of traditional Rural America make problems seem inevitable.*

There is a strong background narrative underlying many of the pieces – the story of the “fall” of the rural utopia that defines America's past (and its “best years”). While it is appropriate for journalists to describe problems in rural areas, this evocative framing makes it less likely readers can take a “responsible Manager” stance towards current problems in the food system.

### **A strong focus on consumers and a consumer-perspective obscures the real dynamics of food systems.**

When pieces are not focusing on farmers, they are often focusing on food from a consumer perspective that is unhelpful in a number of ways – in particular, the pieces support the illusion that consumer choice is the driving force that shapes the food system, and obscure all other causal forces. Articles on food trends, on particular agricultural sectors, and so forth exaggerate the extent to which consumer preferences determine what food gets produced (and how, where, etc.). This model obviously obscures the role of the many other actors who actually wield much more direct and deliberate control over the systems – including the decision-makers at firms that produce, market and distribute food.

**Many pieces tend to reinforce the negative implications of the “generic Modernization” understanding of food systems.**

Lacking a clear conceptual model of food production and food systems, Americans often think about the topic in terms of their generic understandings of the overall processes of Modernization. Pieces that emphasize scary or dehumanized aspects of current food production tend to reinforce these associations, with the result that problems in food systems can seem more inevitable, more acceptable (as the cost of progress), and less associated with actors who have made decisions. (Instead it can seem like an impersonal, even “natural” process that is transforming the world under its own irresistible momentum.)

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The report also discusses a number of ways in which articles related to food systems frame issues productively. Among these are:

- Highlighting the relationship between farmers/food-producers and the rest of the actors in a region.
- Embedding discussions of particular farms/farmers thoroughly within big-picture discussions of agricultural, environmental, economic or other big-picture issues – rather than framing them in iconic isolation.
- Focusing explicitly on the food supply chain – how particular foods come to be produced (and marketed and distributed) in particular ways. How are the decisions made and who makes them?
- Appealing to readers as responsible actors – either by highlighting the power of educated, activist consumers, or better yet, by showing how individuals have a stake in solutions that are not commercial in nature.

## **METHOD**

For purposes of this analysis, Cultural Logic reviewed roughly one-hundred fifteen newspaper articles collected from newspapers in various parts of the country, from Miami to Seattle to Detroit to Washington, DC. The articles were identified by searching archives for terms such as “food,” “food systems,” “food production,” “food trends,” “agriculture,” “farms,” “farming,” and “farm production.” The sample was designed to exclude the overwhelming number of articles that focus strictly on *eating* – i.e. food-related topics like diet plans, recipes, restaurants, etc. Instead, we searched for articles on all other aspects of food and food systems – from agricultural methods to consumption trends to health and environmental impacts to economic issues.

Articles from the period of January 1, 2004 to the present were drawn from *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Seattle Times*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. AP

Newswire articles appearing in other mainstream, mid-size or smaller market newspapers were also included.

Unlike analyses performed by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, for instance, this analysis is not a quantitative look at the frequency of topics, for example, but a qualitative examination of how topics related to food systems are treated in the materials, and the likely implications for readers' thinking. The analysis looks at such factors as the types of topics that are and aren't mentioned in a given article, the ways in which topics within a story are treated as either related or unrelated, the causal stories conveyed or implied by the articles, the metaphors used to talk about food-related topics, and so forth. The analysis is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials. The analysis also focuses on the relationship between the stories told in newspapers and the stories people already have in their heads, as established by previous rounds of qualitative research. (See Research Background below.)

Much of the report is devoted to harmful patterns in the coverage of food systems—i.e. ways in which the coverage is likely to create counterproductive understandings in the minds of readers, or to encourage a continuing “cognitive blindness” to the nature of food systems. However, we also discuss pieces that avoid these traps, since these positive examples can help guide advocates (and responsible journalists) identify ways of providing more constructive framing.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This analysis is informed by a substantial body of previous research (much of which was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute) on how Americans think about food and food systems. The previous research includes Cultural Logic's own in-depth interviews with diverse collections of Americans on the topics of food systems and rural life, and conversations with experts participating in the annual Food and Society conference (Landsdowne, VA, April, 2005).<sup>1</sup> Some key findings from this previous research are summarized below, since they play a role in the analysis presented in this report.

### **Americans' patterns of thinking about *food* make it much harder for them to think about food *systems*.**

The experiential domain of food is so cognitively rich that people typically have no sense that there is something more to know. Patterns of thinking based on the lived experience of eating, shopping, cooking, being served, and so forth essentially “crowd out” thinking about a bigger picture.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full reports, please see “The Agrarian Myth Revisited: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations,” October 2003; “Not While I'm Eating: How and Why Americans Don't Think about Food Systems: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations,” June 2005; and “All Trees and No Forest: How Advocacy Paradigms Obscure Public Understanding of the Food System,” July 2005.

Another powerful effect of the default, little-picture patterns is to “translate” new information into confirmation of existing understandings. Warnings about food risks, for instance, are interpreted as confirmation that *individuals* need to make smarter choices, and that *individual foods* should be avoided.

Importantly, the default patterns of understanding also *discourage* critical thinking about where food comes from. The lived experience of food creates close ties in people’s thinking between food and a passive sense of being nurtured. Along with a default Consumer Stance, which prompts people to trust merchants, for example, this Food Receiver stance encourages a trusting complacency, and dampens interest in *any* information about the ultimate sources of food.

Finally, the patterns of thinking about food are mostly unconnected with thinking about how food is produced. The worlds of Food and Agriculture tend to exist separately as unconnected domains of thought.

### **Food systems are just another example of “Modernization.”**

When Americans are induced to think about food production in broader terms, their thinking often reflects a generic sense of how the “modern” world works. People may have fragmentary knowledge about food systems, but this knowledge rarely adds up to a fuller picture that could help them understand the importance of the changes advocated by experts. Instead, people often operate from a generic model of Modernization, into which they add in their smattering of factual knowledge about food and food production. The result is an exaggerated picture of giant conglomerates, completely mechanized food production, extinct family farmers, and a trend towards the reduction of food to powders and pills.

Importantly, the Modernization narrative obscures the existence of specific actors and decision-makers (Modernization is a massive, impersonal trend), implies that changes in food systems are inevitable, and that problems are the price of progress. Furthermore, the Modernization frame filters out various key ideas – e.g. the role of Diversity (of crops or farmers – modernization is largely “about” standardization), and the meaning of Sustainability (modernization is not about the natural world, nor about preserving things as they are).

### **Advocates’ communications generally do not promote an understanding of food systems as a whole.**

Instead their work often focuses on particular sets of ideas that amount, from a cognitive perspective, to *self-contained paradigms*. Issues like ecologically sustainable agriculture, the living wage for farm workers or the return to the traditional pleasures of the table are rich enough to feel like worlds of their own, and are largely insulated from each other.

Furthermore, these paradigms may seem only tenuously connected to the food system. For example, it is easy for average people to think about farm workers’ wages in a way that has little or nothing to do with food – as a matter of greedy employers paying their workers too little (a story that might as well take place in the garment industry).

Finally, the paradigms used by advocates may reinforce the default, “little-picture”

patterns in people's thinking – e.g., given the current lack of understanding of food-related issues, the notion of “food security” probably conjures images of well-sealed cans in the supermarket, stockpiles of food in the basement, or guards posted outside food warehouses.

**Rural America is often thought of in terms of a distorting “Rural Utopia” model.**

A strong default pattern of thinking defines rural people as hard-working, virtuous, simple, and poor. (Note that rural people themselves are not immune from this pattern.) This view may be sentimentally positive, but also leads to serious problems, including the following:

*Rural poverty becomes invisible as a problem.* The fact that rural people may have little money is simply a natural facet of their simpler and more virtuous lives – and their condition is not generally considered “poverty” per se.

*Rural America is system-less and cause-less.* Life there is often seen as qualitatively different in ways that can both obscure understandings of problems, and frame helpful interventions as corruption.

*Rural America is self-sufficient.* The Rural Utopia frame obscures the fact that many rural people are not in situations where they can get the help they need from friends and family, and frames “outside help” as unnatural and immoral.

*Development is the main threat.* In the Rural Utopia view, rural areas are a resource to be preserved, rather like water or gold. Sprawl means an overall reduction of rural spaces, which are gradually eroded from the edges in. This understanding obscures the fact that much of the harm to rural ways of life is about *disrupted systems* (social, economic, etc.).

As we discuss in the remainder of this report, these unhelpful patterns are often in play – or are inadvertently reinforced – even in articles that seem to address food-related issues in otherwise positive ways.

## **PROBLEM 1: THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN FOOD AND FOOD SUPPLY SYSTEMS**

Many of the stories in the sample fall into one of two categories – stories about farmers and farming, and stories about consumers and their food.

*For Farmers, Subsidies Are a Matter of What Kind of Row You Hoe*

*Taking root in a new land: Immigrants fill need for farmers by renewing a passion for planting*

*Fresh Spinach Is Growing On Americans*

*Once and for All, It's Not Kerry Ketchup [about the ups and downs of the Heinz brand]*

[Note that the sample excluded the very numerous articles that focus solely on diets, restaurants, and other aspects of eating.] Articles very seldom draw effective bridges between the system of food production on one hand and the lived experiences of the consumer/reader on the other. This common aspect of the journalism reinforces one of the central problems in Americans' thinking, from the perspective of food systems advocates: Food-related models and Farming-related models are largely disconnected in people's minds. While of course journalists are under no obligation to address the two domains in ways that reinforce their interconnection, this is an area where advocates can offer direct or indirect help in crafting stories that tie food and food systems together in a meaningful bigger picture.

## **PROBLEM 2: USING AND REINFORCING RURAL STEREOTYPES.**

When writing about topics related to food systems, journalists regularly invoke images that play on well-established, even stereotyped understandings of rural people and rural living – particularly in an article's opening lines. From advocates' perspective, these models are counterproductive because they emphasize that rural people are essentially different from everyone else – that they live in a world apart, in a kind of timeless, tradition-bound existence. (These cultural models are discussed in more depth in Cultural Logic's report, "The Agrarian Myth Revisited.")

### **Symbols of the Rural: Family Farms and Farmers**

One of the most common leads for an article about food systems is a brief portrait of an individual farm or farmer.

Tom Carpenter picked at a bud on a Granny Smith apple tree, blooming and unpruned. The Central Washington farmer didn't bother to cultivate this particular block of apples after learning his water would be rationed this summer because of drought.

Judging by the laws of nature and the cruel twists of the farming life, Joan Lundquist is doing just fine as she takes another stab at making a living from the rich dirt of the San Joaquin Valley

Like stories on other topics – from child abuse to health insurance – these articles which focus on individuals automatically steer readers' thoughts towards little-picture understandings that make it harder to see the bigger picture of systemic problems and solutions. The problems seem to be those of individuals, and the solutions seem to be the kind that smart, hard-working individuals can create for themselves.

More subtly, but just as damagingly, the familiar image of the Farmer carries along with it a great deal of symbolic baggage that can work powerfully to prevent readers from acquiring new information. When an article about Food Systems begins with an image of a farmer – the central character in American myths about rural life – it almost inevitably evokes models related to tradition, virtue, and nostalgia. What it does not do is cause people to come to a better understanding of food systems.

### *Farmer virtues*

It is the farmer that most epitomizes the rural virtues of hard work, endurance and piety. It is the farmer who is family-oriented, stoical in poverty, connected with nature and her rhythms, and uncorrupted by the modern world. Another of the most powerful of farmer virtues is self-reliance.

Leslie Hendry lives 75 miles from Casper on her family ranch near the tiny community of Lysite in central Wyoming.

Shopping and socializing are an hour-and-a-half drive. The nearest neighbor is five miles away.

Her older son is away at college, and her younger boy, a high-school freshman, has to ride a school bus three hours a day; he doesn't get back until supper time.

During busy seasons, like calving, Hendry works outside with her husband and the hired men. But right now, she's inside, dealing with the piles of paperwork needed to run the business of a ranch.

All day, alone, without even the radio on for company.

That's how she likes it.

"I'm just home, and that would probably drive some people nuts," she said.

A portrait like this one naturally reinforces stereotypical views of rural self-sufficiency, making it seem *unnatural or even wrong* to work against rural problems caused by isolation and dispersion.

Although the following article goes on to discuss numerous reasons for the success of the farm, the reader is very likely to see its success in the particular virtues of the Roney family, who have somehow resisted change.

Marilyn Roney recalls many sweet moments from her farm-kid upbringing that later

helped lead her to join her parents in farming the land tilled by her family for four generations. "I remember when I was little sitting on the tractor with Pa and singing as loud as I could to the tune of the engine," she says of one such happy moment, smiling as she strolls amid crops of corn, bright yellow squash and other vegetables destined for Seattle-area farmers markets. "I want my (future) children to grow up just like I did," says Roney, 31, fresh-faced in jeans and sweatshirt and now the lead decision-maker at the farm, known today as The Farmer's Daughter.

In another typical article, about two entrepreneurs returning to the Midwest, a journalist writes:

Here was a farm-raised, self-reliant work force made to order for expanding businesses like theirs, old neighbors who possessed a traditional work ethic, openness and loyalty – hallmarks of rural life, but traits sometimes hard to find in urban America.

Stories that are ostensibly about food systems have a way of becoming fables about the power of rural virtues. And because virtues are housed in people rather than systems, these fables fail to suggest solutions other than individual ones. Worse, the virtues themselves are typically compatible only with a traditional world, the stories subtly imply that our modern interventions would themselves be destructive and unwelcome.

#### *Farming as a "Calling" rather than a Living*

People do not see small-scale farming as economically sensible (anymore), and newspaper reporting tends to reinforce the understanding that farmers don't farm for money.

"My idea of paradise was helping my grandma and grampa on their farm in Nebraska," Ms. Manix said. "And here, we got to have all the animals, the calves and the chickens and the goats."

...

But there was no money in it. So Mr. Manix worked as a carpenter and tilled gardens and cut hay for other people. Ms. Manix used to pick a whole field of Lincoln peas by herself. "We worked for 20 years, making about \$15 a day on our vegetables," Ms. Manix said.

Instead, farming is a calling or vocation, pursued for personal and idiosyncratic reasons. This Calling model has a number of destructive implications:

- Farms are not linked to the "real" economy. Money is only necessary in order to allow farmers to continue doing what they love, or to continue a family tradition.
- Farms are not linked to the real world of our food supply.
- Farmers who seem too concerned with making money are "greedy." Ironically, entrepreneurship – on which the continuing existence of small farmers depends – is incompatible with this common understanding of farmers – as well as with the "rural virtues" of poverty and modesty, for example.

Given these understandings, it is inevitable that readers will regard farming as a subject that does not concern them directly. It may be sad when someone has to stop doing something they love, but it is hardly unusual or a cause for public concern.

*Farming as “out of time”*

Articles like those already cited also promote the perception that farmers are somehow “of another time.” As most Americans see it, farming epitomizes the traditions of the country’s rural past. It is an admirable and virtuous (and arduous) way of life, but a poor fit with the contemporary world – as a result, it is inexorably passing away. In fact, when people think about where the world is going, farms often provide a central image that represents what we are “leaving behind.”

*“The Fall”*

When people are operating within the Rural Utopia frame, the actual *problems* of rural areas are typically understood in terms of a familiar “next chapter” in the story of Rural Utopia, its “Fall” in the face of modernization. The article about entrepreneurs cited earlier describes the fallen state of the rural towns:

Across the Great Plains, farm towns are dying, their downtown shops going dark, their young people forsaking failing family farms and sputtering local economies to make a living elsewhere.

The story of the decline of rural areas has become so ingrained that a common way of introducing good news from rural areas is by reminding people that rural areas are a place where “bad news” usually comes from. For example:

Across the Great Plains, the story is as familiar and as mournful as the unremitting prairie wind. Rural schools are closing, small towns are dying and young people are in ruinously short supply, having run off to cities rather than stay home to take over daddy’s cow farm.

This article goes on to explain an effort on the part of rural officials to take advantage of new market opportunities. However, everything about the story that is hopeful or solution-oriented has to fight against the prevailing direction established by the Fall model – a story of steady decline of a traditional rural way of life, and the plight of people and places that are now old-fashioned and outmoded. Even if the journalist does ultimately suggest an optimistic message, the story has inadvertently confirmed the stereotype that rural areas are “usually” in terrible shape these days. The exception ends up proving the rule.

**Rural Dystopia: still an easy model to trigger**

Another of the cultural models that all Americans hold somewhere in their minds frames rural areas as blighted backwaters. People are familiar with the image of rural areas as

places of illiteracy, ignorance, poor health, poor housing, inadequate education and violence. Appalachian shacks, run-down Indian reservations, “redneck” trailer parks, and other similar stereotypes are specific instances of this Rural Dystopia model that people sometimes use to think about the problems of rural areas. In the following example a journalist criticizes a politically well-connected farm by playing on the Rural Dystopia model.

PISCATAWAY, N.J. There are no cows at the Cornell Dairy Farm. A few shaggy ponies graze in its overgrown pasture, behind a hand-painted sign announcing "pony rides." A goat wanders among the trash containers, rusted construction equipment and ramshackle outbuildings. A few roosters scratch in the driveway outside the farm store, which sells one item: eggs that are trucked in from Pennsylvania.

While writers rarely use the stereotypes of Rural Dystopia in their articles to mock or denigrate people, journalists may sometime trigger this model incidentally, especially when they are trying to shed light on problems in rural areas. One story of a man returning to a family farm begins:

When Jack Manix showed up at his grandfather's farm here 31 years ago, the 200-year-old homestead was headed for ruin. "The roofs leaked, the fences needed fixing, the cider shed had broken down," Mr. Manix recalled. "Grampa had to give up his cows because he couldn't take care of them."

The image of run-down buildings and poverty-stricken farmers can trigger negative stereotypes about ramshackle country lives, and confirm people’s ideas that rural areas and rural people are best ignored or left behind.

### **Overwhelming power of stereotypes**

The counterproductive “traditional” images described in this section typically appear before an article moves on to its actual point – often the description of a situation that actually *contradicts* the default models. By beginning a piece with an emotionally resonant and familiar image, reporters are often successful in “hooking” readers into a story. The “news” of the article becomes the *difference* between what people expect to hear and what the journalist is actually reporting.

A large body of research suggests, however, that once a dominant model has been evoked, it is *reinforced* rather than *undermined* by what follows. Once dominant cognitive models are triggered, they are very difficult to contradict. This is true even when the journalist spends the rest of the article trying to change people’s minds about rural areas. The new information tends to confirm the model or to be “filtered out” by people’s pre-existing understandings. As a result, rather than displacing old models, articles like these tend to entrench them further, taking readers further from where advocates would like them to be.

### PROBLEM 3: FEEDING THE MODERNIZATION MYTH

Cultural Logic's research has shown that people tend to "toggle" between two contradictory models of the food system. On one hand is the model of traditional farms and farmers discussed in the previous section. On the other hand, people often speak as though those small farms are purely a thing of the past and as though agriculture has been entirely transformed into something unrecognizably "Modern." Americans may know very little about the actual food supply system, but they do have a familiar cultural model about Modernization and tend to plug their fragmentary knowledge into this model, producing an extreme picture of high-tech, unnatural, corporate-run agribusiness.

Because people think of modernization as a one-way, un-stoppable, uncontrolled movement toward greater size, complexity, centralization, and technological sophistication, they unconsciously conclude that this is the direction in which agriculture (if it can even be called that anymore) is moving as well. Trends in agriculture that don't fit this model are very hard for people to appreciate or take seriously. In many of the articles that we surveyed, journalists reinforced this hyper-modernization model.

#### *High-tech answers to agricultural problems*

Some reporting simply plays up the benefits of scientific and technological developments. For instance, in "One-Billionth Acre of Biotech Seed Planted" (*Washington Post*, 5/10/05) the journalist portrays a system that is embracing high-tech solutions.

Tom West, vice president of biotechnology affairs for Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., said in a statement Monday [that] biotech crops are one of the greatest technological advances in the history of agriculture. Such crops have been at the center of heated debate between environmentalists, who worry they're not safe for the land or human consumption, and industry organizations, that say biotech crops reduce the use of pesticides and other farm chemicals.

Despite a brief reference to the environmentalists who "worry," the article goes on to convey the industry's stance that the rapidly increasing use of biotech is an established fact.

#### *The hyper-modern food system*

Other articles make more creative use of people's ambivalence about the benefits and the dangers of Modernization. In some cases, agriculture is described in terms that exaggerate the industrial and high-tech aspects of food systems. An article promoting the benefits of mechanization opens with a vivid description of a futuristic, monstrous, (and still imaginary) orange-picking robot.

A hulking, nameless creature lumbers among the citrus trees, its eight arms and eyes in constant motion, searching for its prey: oranges. Part robot, part tractor, the contraption is an unusual combination of one internal-combustion engine, four rubber tires, eight digital cameras, eight electronic arms and an excruciating number of computer algorithms that

choreograph every movement. Its metal arms maneuver among the branches, where "eyes" spot the fruit and suction-cup "hands" grasp them even more gently than human hands, which is what they are designed to replace ("How to pick an orange," *Los Angeles Times*, p. I18, 1/2/05).

The article goes on to argue that technology will solve the problems that have plagued the citrus industry, including the persistent injustices of the migrant labor system and the US's lagging competitiveness.

*One-Way Modernization: from farms to factories*

Journalists contribute to people's idea that agriculture has become more akin to manufacturing than farming. Even when articles are critical of trends in agriculture, they tend to use language that emphasizes an industrialized system, which is "modern," and an alternative system that is "traditional" and therefore of the past. In the article below about the intensification of dairying in Ohio, the journalist writes:

Where Mr. De Haan envisions bovine splendor, some of his neighbors see the farming equivalent of a smoke-belching chemical plant. "These are not farms, they are factories," said Mary Pierce, 44, who lives down the road from Mr. De Haan. "And they should be regulated as such."

Critics say the farms, which typically have several hundred and sometimes thousands of cows, are an insult to another tradition: the small farm where herds of 60 to 150 cows graze on open grassland. The large farms, known as confined animal feeding operations, have too little acreage to allow grazing, produce more manure than they can handle and threaten to pollute aquifers, critics contend ("Seeking, and Seeking to Preserve, Greener Pastures," *New York Times*, 3/26/05).

Articles like these, while accurate and worthwhile, also reinforce the tendency for Americans to believe that the food industry is progressing in lock-step with other changes in their society. To the extent that problems in agriculture are understood as symptoms of the general process of modernization, readers are likely to conclude that these changes are inevitable, that there are no particular actors responsible, and that their own role is simply to make the best of the situation.

## PROBLEM 4: CONSUMER-CENTERED REPORTING

Not surprisingly, most reporting on food and food systems assumes that the reader is primarily a consumer. This is a problem from advocates' point of view, first because the "Consumer Stance" is basically passive, and incompatible with the systems-oriented, critical approach that most experts would like to promote. Secondly, consumer-oriented portrayals of the food supply system tend to exaggerate the influence of consumers on the nature of food production, and to obscure the active and important roles of producers, advertisers, distributors and retailers in shaping consumption.

Interestingly, reporting on food and food systems contributes to a particular kind of "togglng," between two equally damaging views. On one hand, it can encourage the passive Consumer Stance in which people don't imagine or create, but merely wait to see what the market offers. On the other hand, the articles can promote a model of a Consumer-Driven market – in which consumers are in the driver's seat when it comes to setting the food-production agenda. In this model, all the institutions and actors of the food supply system revolve around the desires of the consumer, like planets orbiting around the sun. Importantly, however, this model asks nothing of consumers other than that they buy what they want.

In short, each of these stances encourages complacency toward the food supply system.

### The Free-Choice paradigm

According to the logic of this simple organizing model, consumers choose what they eat, unconstrained by any other factor.

Every year, more than 30,000 new products squeeze onto grocery store shelves. Every year, somewhere between 60 percent and 80 percent of them flop.

The battle to win consumers' tastes can drive food and drink makers to the edge of reason. Some new foods fail because they taste bad. Some fail because they look funny. Some might never get a second look because they are too similar to other products. Some products also fall victim to bad business planning or inadequate distribution. Toss in the fact that consumers are becoming more educated and more demanding while stubbornly sticking to brands and formulas they know. In response, food marketers are trying to become more clever -- and in some cases more daring -- according to the Food Marketing Institute ("Strange but New," *Detroit Free Press*, p. 3F, 12/28/04).

In this model, the driving force is Demand. For example, the article below reports on the end of the long-standing U.S. trade surplus in foodstuffs. Despite the complexity of this historic change, it is framed as a simple outcome of consumer preferences:

The ever-increasing appetite for foreign foods and beverages in the United States is among the reasons the nation is expected to pay as much for imported farm products in fiscal 2005 as it earns by selling wheat, soybeans and other products abroad, according to a Department of Agriculture report released this week.

The article goes on to mention several other reasons for the change – ranging from currency rates to patterns of global trade to the conservatism of US commodity farming – but the article’s opening establishes the powerful Consumer-Driven frame, making it less likely readers will take in the other causal forces that are mentioned.

*“Untapped Markets”: Counter-examples that don’t undermine the model*

Many groups of people are poorly served by the food system, yet reporting on the topic emphasizes only that the system hasn’t yet noticed them, or that retailers have finally noticed an “untapped market.” A typical instance would be the following article on a historically-underserved population, U.S. Hispanics.

At Minyard's Carnival stores, the bakery has plenty of cakes, but it also has a tortilleria capable of making 4,800 corn tortillas an hour. The seafood department's live tanks hold swimming catfish instead of pincher-taped lobsters.

The grocery business along the Mexican border in Texas and California is ahead on this trend," said Michelle Del Toro, research manager at the Food Marketing Institute in Washington. Ms. Del Toro is the author of a 55-page report that bears out what Dallas-area grocers have known for some time: that Hispanics make up a lucrative market just waiting to be tapped.

Rather than reporting on decades of neglect by a highly centralized supermarket system, the report highlights the fact that Hispanics have grown so numerous that they are now being catered to by the food retail industry. Given a choice between portraying a system successfully driven by consumers or one structured and limited by corporate practices, the journalist has exaggerated the power of the consumer.

Even articles that report on the industry’s more questionable practices of marketing and product design reinforce the “common-sense” idea that things exist on menus and on shelves because consumers want them there.

In November, Hardee's debuted the double-patty, four-strips-of-bacon Monster Thickburger--a 1,420-calorie, 107-grams-of-fat behemoth that got plenty of notice from late-night talk-show hosts and critics. One health-and-nutrition advocacy group dubbed Thickburgers "food porn."

Frazer and others at Hardee's flick off such criticism, saying they're only giving consumers, namely "young hungry guys" ages 18 to 34, what they want.

In the article, “Fast Food goes beyond Supersize” (*Detroit Free Press*, 7/19/05), the journalist begins the article with the claim that the larger (and much more profitable) portions being promoted at fast food restaurants are just giving consumers what they want:

What health-food trend? Turns out there's still a large chunk of diners looking for big slabs of burger basics like cheese, bacon and layers of beef patties. In an about-face to the flurry of low-carbohydrate items introduced over the past two years, fast-food chains have been out-supersizing each other with new menu items. Hardee's, Burger King and Wendy's are

promoting hefty sandwiches with names like the Monster Thickburger and the Enormous Omelet. Even Starbucks is tapping into the pleasure-seeking sect with the launch of Chantico Drinking Chocolate, which it calls a "drinkable dessert."

"It's a backlash by the American people against the food police," said Dean Haskell, an analyst at JMP Securities. "And operators are catering to it. We try to eat healthy at home, but when we go out we want to splurge."

The model of consumer responsibility is so engrained that the same article offers no remark upon counterevidence showing that consumers, when given both information and choice, chose healthier (but less profitable) options than the ones the restaurants are promoting.

In April, casual-dining chain Ruby Tuesday's reversed a bold move it made last September to prominently post nutritional data on its menus and at tables to help customers make informed food choices. Customers did just that, choosing not to eat Colossal Burgers or signature rib dishes.

Articles that report on efforts to create new consumer "demands" do not offer any analysis about the forces behind the push to market new products nor the cumulative affect of all of this marketing. The overall effect is to distill the portrayal to the simple clarity of the Consumer-Driven model.

### **Missing Mechanisms: Factors other than Consumer Choice**

The defining characteristic of the Free-Choice model is that forces that might affect or constrain consumer choices seem to have no clear mechanism. By contrast, the Consumer-Driven model of food systems offers a very clear mechanism of how consumer purchases influence supplier decisions.

#### *Nutrition Guidelines: Who reads them?*

For example, an article looking at the new national nutrition guidelines conveys the anxiety they have created in the food industry: "*A single word or phrase can mean millions of dollars in additional – or lost – sales for food companies.*" Yet, because the article does not explain how such guidelines might affect the food consumers choose from the shelves, the argument is much weaker than the clear and powerful Consumer Choice model. In fact, one authority cited in the article downplays the power of the guidelines.

Harry Balzer, who tracks American eating habits as vice president of the NPD Group in Rosemont, said he didn't expect the guidelines to have a huge impact on consumption.

#### *Diet Gurus, Product Marketers and Media Outlets: Who heeds them?*

The integrated and "synergistic" relationships between marketers, dietary experts, government, and media outlets are described in several articles, but again, with no compelling explanation of the forces acting on consumers. As a result, such reports don't encourage the reader to think beyond the Consumer-Driven model.

In 2004 food companies increased the number of low-carb offerings more than fivefold, to 2,378 products, just as Heath and more than 16 million others appeared to have lost their appetite for low-carb diets. Atkins Nutritionals Inc., the products company behind the popular diet of the same name, and other firms such as Northfield-based Kraft Foods Inc. and Chicago's Sara Lee Corp. flooded the market with products, many of which failed to stick.

In only two years [Atkins] has gone from producing almost all its products in-house to licensing the power of its brand to other food producers who have put Atkins goods in the dairy, refrigerated and freezer aisles as well as in the rest of the supermarket. It's that potential and the power of the Atkins name that prompted Parthenon Capital and Goldman Sachs to pay a reported \$533 million for an 80 percent stake in the privately held Atkins in October 2003 ("Low-carb audience, full of other food choices, thins out," *Chicago Tribune*, p. 1, 1/16/05).

Ironically, the plethora of product lines, the huge monetary stakes involved, and the massive efforts on the part of food suppliers to create and maintain inertia of fad diets or health crazes, only serve to confirm how central the (fickle) consumer really is. Ultimately, the model insists that it is the individual consumer that makes his or her free choice.

### **Weak Mechanisms: Advertising and Misinformation.**

The paradigm of freedom of consumer choice is so well-engrained that there were no articles in the samples that questioned it. There were a few articles that mentioned influences on the consumer – one discussed the power of advertising, for instance – but for each of these there were many that offered quotes like, "That's the bottom line for any company. If it doesn't sell, it'll go off the menu."

The end result is that the whole question of food industry responsibility disappears entirely, because in this model all that the food industry does is sell people what they want. Even when a story focuses on safeguards to prevent schoolchildren from eating unhealthy food, the measures are framed in language that is about limiting the children's freedom (i.e. the use of words like "limit" and "ban"):

National statistics on childhood obesity and on the low consumption of fruit and vegetables among youth have prompted school districts around the country to limit the amount of junk food available to students. The Seattle School District earlier this month adopted policies that banned the sale of pop and foods high in sugar and fat.

...

Ask students at Everett High School what they think of the district's new policy banning pop, candy, chips and french fries in favor of healthier food, and you'll hear yelps of protest.

In the rare cases where advertising goes so far as to be fraudulent, the Consumer-Driven model is "saved" because a compatible model is evoked to explain the undue influence on consumers: Sometimes people can be tricked.

In what has become a near free-for-all marketplace for health claims on food products, consumers are often convinced that the more they eat of these products, the healthier, or thinner, they are likely to be. ... [T]hink again. Congress has made it extremely difficult for the Food and Drug Administration to closely regulate health-related claims for foods and supplements (“Beware Food Companies’ Health Claims,” *New York Times*, 9/21/04).

Taken together, these Consumer-centered patterns constitute a very challenging obstacle for effective communications about food systems, and allow producers to position themselves on the high ground of freedom.

## CONSTRUCTIVE PATTERNS OF COVERAGE

The counterproductive patterns discussed above describe the bulk of the stories sampled in this research, and it might be natural to conclude that more constructive stories are simply not compatible with the parameters of the mainstream press. This is in fact not the case. A number of stories actually do succeed in framing the issue of food in ways that are conducive to a better understanding of the food system. In this section, we show that more productive coverage of food is possible, and that this coverage is characterized by a number of specific patterns. While a few articles are models of coverage that do much to provide the reader with a “big picture,” many others simply contain productive elements – examples of which are discussed here.

### **Avoiding the Rural Stereotypes trap by reporting on real interactions between farmers and non-farmers.**

Not all articles use models like Rural Utopia as the “hook” in order to involve readers. Some stories instead make an attempt to describe the actual relationships that Rhode Islanders, for instance, are likely to have with farms and rural areas, including

Ever take a quick trip to the local farm for some good deals on fresh produce? Do your children like to play in the autumn mazes or take field trips to farms? Or do you just enjoy the quiet scenery and beauty of having farmland so close to the city? “*Many R.I. farms are cultivating the tourist crop,*” (Providence Journal, p. 1C, 12/19/04),

This brief article explains the ways in which farmers and non-farmers interact in Rhode Island (through direct sales at farms stands and markets, “agritourism,” and through the shared landscape and economy). It goes on to show how each affects the other, and how both are part of a shared system. In regions other than New England, the nature of the interactions are different, of course, and journalists would presumably need to work to discover just what people’s real connections to farmers and rural areas actually are. But in any case, these story lines of interconnectedness deserve creative adaptation.

### **Using the Farmer as Illustration not Icon**

Sometimes journalists successfully use individual farms and farmers as illustrations of larger issues. However, the symbolic baggage that farming images carry means that this requires careful, meticulous effort on the part of the journalist. The stories must emphasize again and again that this is not about farmer-myths, but about contemporary people engaged in agriculture in the contemporary system. In “Sell in Bulk, Lose Farm. Sell Locally, and Watch Revenues Grow,” (*New York Times*, 9/21/04), journalist Keith Schneider chooses a particular farm as an illustration, but in nearly every sentence he makes it clear that this farm and these happenings are merely specific instances of larger trends. The images of tradition and rural virtue are minimized in order to emphasize that this family of farmers is making its way in the modern world. It is worth quoting at length to demonstrate the consistency of his approach.

ONE of the truly good-news stories in American agriculture, and one with meaning for small businesses of all kinds, is what's happening on Tyler Road here at the Shetler Family Dairy.

Not that long ago, George and Sally Shetler were small fry in an industry dominated by big players, producers of a bulk commodity in which prices essentially had not budged for 20 years. Continuing to supply the conventional fluid milk market, the Shetlers concluded, would take them down the same bankruptcy path that the Department of Agriculture says claimed almost 400 farms a week from 1974 to the mid-1990's, most of them small.

So in 1995, the Shetlers decided to try a more entrepreneurial approach. If the markets they could reach through conventional channels were unsatisfactory, what new market could they tap? The one right around them, as it turned out? bottling and delivering their milk directly to stores in Traverse City, 25 miles away, the center of a five-county region with 165,000 residents and growing faster than almost any place in the Midwest.

This kind of article does more than describe the plight of a family farm or spin the story of a scrappy farmer whose skill and hard work finds success where others find failure. Instead, it helps give people a more accurate understanding of how agriculture of various types fits within our food supply system, and more specifically it lays out the mechanism through which something like direct sales and producer processing can allow smaller operators to make a living.

### **Spanning the gap from seed to table: showing readers the system at work**

In a detailed article about strawberry growing ("Strawberries and Dreams," *New York Times*, 4/13/05), journalist David Karp carefully lays out all of the factors that go into the selection and design of commercial varieties of this fruit. While the article is critical of the food industry in suggesting that the taste of strawberries suffers in some of the compromises, it does not adopt a kind of "food scare" tone. Rather, it shows that the actual strawberry on the shelf is the result of a complicated system where consumers' desires are only part of the equation. Grower's needs (for hardiness and ease of harvesting), distributor's needs (for durability and consistency of shape and size) and retailers needs (for attractiveness and flavor) all factor in, often at the expense of flavor and variety.

This level of detail can also give readers a mechanism to understand that the particular compromises that are being made aren't the only imaginable ones. For instance, the article gives enough information to make it clear that a choice is being made between a system based upon long-distance shipping, versus one anchored in local growers.

Because they don't sweeten after harvest, strawberries must be picked fully ripe for best flavor. But to ship berries cross-country commercial growers have to compromise and harvest before full maturity.

Local vendors can do much better. Harry's Berries, a farm in Oxnard, grows Seascape and Gaviota, two University of California varieties with good flavor that are a bit too soft and low-yielding for commercial growers. The owners pick the berries fully red and sell them at a premium, \$4 a pint, at 24 Southern California farmers' markets. When everything goes right, the berries are quite sweet and richly flavored.

But most growers would sooner raise wombats than highly flavored but perishable strawberries. In contrast with the marketing of industrially grown tomatoes, whose insipidity inspired a small revival of heirloom varieties, almost all California strawberry shippers focus on mainstream markets, assuming that Americans look for price more than quality.

The article also works to counteract the problems of the passive consumer discussed above. On the one hand, it shows just how the consumer isn't entirely in the driver's seat. On the other hand, it shows the real and potential power of consumers not only to make more informed and satisfying choices, but also ultimately to have some effect upon the produce that they find upon the shelves.

### **Showing the citizen making changes to the food system.**

Many articles show the food supply system as an evolving system, but the engines of change are always distant and outside the influence of the average citizen. Distant producers, distributors or marketers come up with new strategies. Government regulators and nutrition experts make obscure changes from within distant bureaucracies. Consumers, in their vague, aggregate way, alter their shopping habits. Of the hundred plus articles surveyed for this research, only two gave a positive portrayal of citizen-consumers making intentional changes to the nature of the food system. The absence of this type of story is all the more striking, given that grass-roots activism is an important goal of advocates.

An important counter-example is from the Chicago Sun Times:

When Austin community organizer LaDonna Redmond began addressing her son Wade's food allergies, she found herself traveling all over -- and paying top dollar -- for organically grown produce and other natural foods. Austin, a largely black and relatively poor community on the West Side, didn't have its own supermarket, let alone an organic-foods emporium like Whole Foods.

Redmond, who had developed programs for nonprofit organizations, put her professional skills to work. With her husband, Tracey, Redmond formed the Institute for Community Resource Development, a nonprofit group that works on food systems for "underserved communities." Their first project was the 15-year-old Austin Farmers Market, which had fallen on hard times ("Grass-roots group sows seeds for farmers market harvest," *Chicago Sun Times*, p. 57, 10/6/04).

The article goes on to relate the vitality and economic cohesion of the local community directly to the food system, and to show how the food supply system interacts with other aspects of life.

A second example of successful citizen-consumer action is provided by a well-developed article about community-supported agriculture: "More families get subscriptions to buy veggies from local farms" (Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, 6/18/05). Although this article sometimes portrays the CSA as a fringe movement motivated more by philosophy than practicality and profit (which is off-putting to many people), it nevertheless clearly

explains the multiple advantages of local purchasing, including freshness, healthfulness, variety, and local economic good. It even successfully introduces the idea of food security and shows that mainstream venues like restaurants and supermarkets are getting involved.

### **Combating consumer complacency**

Although getting citizens to understand and act directly upon the food supply is an important goal, for the foreseeable future most people will continue to act primarily as supermarket consumers. Most articles surveyed tend to feed this tendency by taking for granted the passive nature of consumer activity (e.g. buy or don't buy what you're offered), and by portraying the food system as nonetheless driven by consumers and their desires. Very few articles traced consumer choices outward into larger social contexts.

#### *Not just price and convenience: exposing consumers to the implications of their choices*

A first step in getting consumers to make choices that impact the food system in constructive ways, is convincing them that their choices are not just about the quality of their dinners and the state of their weekly budget. For example, in "Doing good by trading fair," (*Providence Journal*, p. 1G, 10/27/04) journalist Gail Ciampa explains how the coffee that consumers buy (i.e. FreeTrade or commercial) affects economic and environmental sustainability as well as fair wages and social justice for farm workers. The article is careful not to preach that consumers *must* let these concerns influence their shopping decisions, it simply makes the case that such decisions have far-reaching effects either way.

It's the right thing to do," said Susan Wood, CEO for Providence's Coffee Exchange. "How can you make a living on the back of someone else? How could you live with yourself?"

And even if you turn a cold heart to her moral argument, consider Wood's roaster's point of view.

"If we don't help the farmer, we're not going to have access to great coffee because farmers aren't going to be able to do their job anymore," she said. "Then we all lose."

So when you see that "Fair Trade Certified" label, understand it's not just food with a cause. The concept blends powerful components of sustainability (growing things that enrich, not drain or pollute the land); artisan products (hand-tended rather than mass-produced); organics (not using chemicals and pesticides); and social responsibility.

The non-accusatory tone and the careful inclusion of other issues dear to the (unenlightened) consumer's heart, including, quality, cost, and convenience, seems well-designed to reach out to shoppers who otherwise would resist calls to join a "social movement" like Fair Trade.

While appeals based on enlightened consumption do not go so far as to encourage a Citizen stance *instead*, they are about as close as anything we found in the sample.

## CONCLUSION

Newspapers are often considered our best source of authoritative journalism – the kind that gives us the most accurate and informative picture of the world. We might therefore expect print coverage – especially the kind provided in in-depth stories – to produce narratives that advance the public’s grasp of the issue of food systems. An analysis of more than one hundred articles suggests, however, that newspaper coverage of food issues is subject to the same unproductive framing tendencies that we might expect from other media<sup>2</sup>. Even if print journalism is generally better than local TV news coverage, for example, newspaper articles often still fall into patterns that prevent readers from deepening or broadening their understanding of food systems.

Moreover, unproductive patterns of the kind discussed in this report don’t necessarily reflect bad intentions, lack of skill or any other easily-identified journalistic flaw. Instead, they reflect common patterns in American reasoning and discourse, or a lack of attention to the ways in which a perfectly reasonable story can interact with the understandings and assumptions of the reading public. Food systems present special challenges to journalists and other communicators – the public’s counterproductive ideas are easily evoked, and ways of framing the issue that seem productive at one level too often cut against the goals of advocates in other ways.

At the same time, as a brief survey of more productive articles demonstrates, careful attention to some basic principles can make a tremendous difference in the impact on an audience's thinking. But there is no reason to expect journalism to move in these directions unless advocates offer journalists very concrete help in reframing their stories. The analysis reported in this report offers one tool in helping advocates work towards reshaping coverage of this critical issue.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of unhelpful tendencies of local TV news, for instance, see Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, University of Chicago Press, 1991.