



Calories, Not Communities
A Media Content Analysis of Food and Fitness News

A FrameWorks Research Report

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INTRODUCTION

Recognizing that healthy children, youth and families rely upon an environment in which locally grown, healthy foods are available, and where opportunities for physical activity are routine and plentiful, The W. K. Kellogg Foundation seeks to bring the country closer to its vision of: “Vibrant communities that support families and their children by promoting a way of life focused on healthy food and play, which is in harmony with their environment.” This study is part of the Frameworks Institute’s investigation of various ways that public perceptions support or hinder the goals of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation’s new Initiative on Food and Fitness.

In undertaking this study of media coverage of related issues, the Center for Media and Public Affairs and the FrameWorks Institute defined these issues more broadly, to examine how Americans perceive and understand the “social determinants of health.” These social determinants reach beyond our individual actions and genetic inheritance to examine how everything from our food systems to the built environments to school systems affect our health. It is in this broader context that the Frameworks Institute commissioned the Center for Media and Public Affairs to analyze news media coverage of food and fitness related stories. We identified many issues that related in one way or another to the concept of food and fitness. These issues can be loosely grouped into five areas:

- (1) food systems and access to food;
- (2) physical activity and the necessary infrastructure;
- (3) school programs and policies;
- (4) workplace conditions; and finally
- (5) discussions of the causes, solutions and consequences of excess weight.

Coverage of food systems and food access issues included discussions of food distribution systems particular to underserved areas (including the zoning, tax and other economic factors that may affect food supplies in underserved areas). This group of issues also included discussions of the food choices available to consumers, the viability of farmer’s markets, and any proposed changes to food programs like the Women, Infants & Children (WIC) program.

In examining coverage of physical activity and exercise, we looked for both the commonplace stories on how to exercise and why we need exercise as well as stories about the infrastructure needed to be physically active. This included access to playgrounds and recreational facilities, community designs that create “walkable” communities, and the creation of greenspace including biking and walking trails.

To analyze coverage of the school system's role in promoting fitness and health, we searched for stories on physical education and school lunch programs as well as discussions of vending machines in schools. Beyond the obvious food and education programs, we also looked for discussions of how access to school could be improved for bike riders and pedestrians.

When it came to the work environment, we looked for stories that addressed issues like corporate wellness programs, exercise programs, on-site exercise facilities and possible changes in work environments to encourage more physical activity. We also looked for stories on employer support for alternative transportation (bicycling, etc) and the necessary infrastructure to make such alternatives feasible.

The final area included in our analysis were stories that explored aspects of obesity, including its causes and solutions as well as the economic and other consequences of excess weight. This group of issues included new reports on the prevalence of obesity in America as well as the expected pieces offering advice on weight management. We did not examine broader questions of how nutrition might affect chronic and acute illnesses or physical and mental development.

This small study was not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to serve as an initial examination of media messages on this vital public health question. For that reason, we chose three nationally influential newspapers -- the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *USA Today* -- as indicators of newspaper treatment of the topic. The three major news magazines -- *Newsweek*, *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report*-- were added to provide insight into how longer formats might be used in covering obesity. Finally, we included the evening newscasts of ABC, CBS and NBC to get a glimpse into how network television dealt with the issue. Our analysis examined coverage from July 17, 2006 through August 31, 2006 in these nine major media outlets.

AMOUNT OF COVERAGE

This report is based on an analysis of 95 relevant news and opinion pieces. The coverage of food and fitness issues was dominated by the newspapers, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1		
Amount of Coverage		
<i>Outlet</i>	<i>Number of Stories</i>	<i>% of Coverage</i>
New York Times	24	25%
USA Today	22	23%
Washington Post	36	38%
Newsweek	4	4%
Time	3	3%
U.S. News & World Report	1	1%
ABC "World News Tonight"	1	1%
CBS "Evening News"	1	1%
NBC "Nightly News"	3	3%
TOTAL	95	100%

This sample period contained no single event or story that dominated coverage, suggesting that these results are fairly typical. During this time, there was the normal release of new research on the effects of diet and exercise on health as well as pieces on how to lead a healthier life.

With daily coverage of newly released studies as well as local angles on fitness and health, it is not surprising that newspapers were so dominant. Both the *Times* and the *Post* print special weekly sections on health, science and food, and much of the coverage appeared in these specialized sections. For *USA Today*, the health news is a regular part of its lifestyle reporting, so coverage is more evenly distributed throughout the week.

News magazine coverage did not contain any of the very long, detailed stories the genre is known for. Several of the pieces were short reports on obesity related statistics or research. Television coverage was also very light, consisting of reports on the most high profile research results. At least in the case of television, Israel's military action in southern Lebanon might have pushed some health news off the newscast.

While our analysis looked at all relevant news and opinion coverage, we found only four true opinion pieces. There were dedicated health and nutrition columns (especially in the *Washington Post*), but these columns are not typical opinion columns. Rather, they serve as a way to deliver some expert advice or information on specific questions and issues. Because the opinion pieces were so similar to regular news stories, we will discuss news and opinion together.

THE FOCUS OF NEWS

After identifying the relevant stories, the next step in our analysis was to determine the dominant focus of each. This project cast a wide net for relevant stories, but ultimately found that media coverage of food and fitness is more narrowly focused. In determining the focus, the analysis differentiated between stories that spotlight individuals or their families and stories that took a more systemic or societal view of food and fitness. The causes or effects of obesity at the individual level comprised the most common focal point, accounting for over half of the stories (53%) as can be seen in Table 2. *It is important to note that this focal area excluded discussions of possible systemic causes of obesity.* Most stories dealing with the causes of obesity focused on the perennial culprits – eating too much and exercising too little. Reports on the effects of excess weight were often linked to research released during the sample period. For instance, one study found that being overweight was closely linked to early death. Other research indicated that obesity interfered with medical tests.

The stories that focused on obesity statistics or trends (20%) included renewed debates over what standards and measures should be used to identify the overweight and obese. These included discussions of how to categorize excess weight in children and whether the Body Mass Index (BMI) is really a sound measure of excess weight. There were also reports on which states had the greatest obesity problem, along with general trends in obesity over time. Including these two categories that focused on the individual, almost three out of four stories (73%) focused on individual aspects of obesity or excess weight.

Table 2		
Focus of Coverage		
<i>Focus</i>	<i>Number of stories</i>	<i>% of stories</i>
Obesity Causes/Effects	50	53%
Obesity statistics & trends	19	20%
Access to healthy foods	13	14%
Access to physical activity	8	8%
School food policies	4	4%
School physical education programs	1	1%
TOTAL	95	100%

By contrast, only 27 percent of stories addressed systemic or institutional factors that might impinge on health or weight. Foremost among these systemic aspects was access to healthier foods (14%). The most widely covered story in this category concerned proposed changes to the Women’s Infants and Children’s (WIC) food program, which would allow WIC dollars to be used to purchase fresh produce. These stories were

typically short news briefs rather than extensive analyses of why such changes were necessary. Another report dealt with efforts to expand the number of farmer's markets in New York City. This story focused on the business and logistical issues involved, rather than the health benefits of farmer's markets. A different story dealt with corporate efforts to market fruits and vegetables using popular children's entertainment characters. There was also a short interview with Fast Food Nation author Eric Schlosser on the problems with America's food systems.

Access to physical activity or exercise (8%) was most often discussed in health columns and news stories about how people should exercise for best results. These stories were neither entirely systemic nor individual, since they often emphasized how individual action was needed in the context of contemporary lifestyles. Such stories included advice on how to make or find inexpensive exercise gear, how to exercise in your car or at your desk, and even how to walk your dog for maximum health effect. Although no stories focused on the need for better access to recreational facilities, the need for increasing physical activity was often repeated.

Discussions of school food policies comprised the only other significant systemic focus in the coverage, accounting for four percent of all stories. This included a report card on school system lunches in the Washington, DC area, a report on how college meal plans may affect the "freshman 15" weight gain and advice on making lunches healthier.

The single report focusing on school physical education programs was a piece critical of the quality of physical education classes. The story highlighted the weaknesses in training gym teachers. It was linked to new research suggesting that increasing the amount of time kids spend in gym class has a minimal affect on how much time they actually spend being physically active.

Because the dominant messages in food and fitness are about individual actions aimed at managing excess weight and obesity, much of the remainder of this report will address specific details of the advice offered on managing excess weight and obesity.

WHAT MADE NEWS

We next turned our attention to identifying the topics of news coverage within the broader issue of food and fitness. Table 3 shows the amount of attention paid to various topics or issues. Since there could be more than one topic extensively discussed in a story, there are more topics than stories.

The most common topic was the need for exercise or physical activity, which accounted for 14 percent of issue discussions. These discussions did not typically address the availability of parks, gyms and other recreational facilities in communities. Instead, they focused on the individual need to exercise to either lose weight or maintain a healthy weight. Discussions of the need for exercise were often embedded in pieces that focused on the causes of excess weight and potential solutions to this problem.

Following close behind were discussions of calorie consumption linked to excess weight (11%). These discussions were driven by what is now a commonplace assertion that American obesity is a result of our excessive consumption. This idea is echoed in several other aspects of the coverage that will be addressed later.

The two sides of weight management occupy the next two slots in the topical agenda. Discussions of weight loss accounted for 10 percent of discussions, while nine percent addressed weight gain. Some of these discussions were specifically linked to obesity, while others were focused on the general problems of managing weight at less than obese levels. Again, these topics were the result of the heavy focus on the causes of excess weight and how to deal with it.

Topics in the News		
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>% of Mentions</i>
Exercise & Physical Activity	18	14%
Calorie Consumption	14	11%
Weight Loss	13	10%
Weight Gain	12	9%
Increased Risk of Specific Disease	11	9%
Shorter Life span	8	6%
Diet in Relation to Advertising	8	6%
Compromised Health	7	6%
Sugar Intake in Diet	6	5%
Fat Intake in Diet	5	4%

Quality of Food Choices	3	2%
Differential Effects of Diet & Race or Culture	3	2%
Portion Control	3	2%
Reduce Risk of Disease	3	2%
Improved health	3	2%
Food Availability	2	2%
Synergistic Effects of Diet and Other Factors	2	2%
All other topics	8	5%
TOTAL	129	99%*
* Does not sum to 100% due to rounding error		

Rounding out the top five story topics were discussions of how excess weight increases the risk of contracting certain illnesses or conditions. These accounted for nine percent of all discussions. Most of the attention went to Type 2 diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

Coverage of the next five topical areas fell off sharply. Tied for sixth place were discussions of how excess weight can shorten a person's life span and the effects of food advertising on our diets (six percent apiece). Both of these topics were boosted by the release of new research. An AARP-sponsored study pointed out how carrying even a little extra weight could significantly shorten one's life, while a Kaiser Family Foundation study raised new concerns about how food producers advertise products to kids in the guise of games on their websites.

Suggestions that excess weight could result in deteriorating health in general were also found in six percent of topical discussions. Unlike concerns of excess weight increasing the risk of specific illnesses discussed above, these claims were non-specific. Completing the top ten topics were discussions of sugar intake (5%) and fat intake (4%) in the diet. Discussions of sugar intake were tied to research on the impact of soft drinks on weight. The research found that consuming one extra sugar sweetened soft drink a day could add 15 pounds to a person in the course of a year. Discussions of fat intake were often presented as another part of what is wrong with American dietary choices.

EXCESS WEIGHT: CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

Understanding the news agenda about obesity is only a first step in examining media coverage of this broad set of issues. Of even greater interest are the causes and solutions put forward to explain excess weight and obesity. It is these debates that most reflect how the media understand the problem and determine, in large part, what avenues news accounts will present to deal with excess weight.

As ongoing debates among experts illustrate, it is often difficult to draw a clear line between people carrying excess weight and people who are truly obese. Media coverage often exacerbates this difficulty by using the terms interchangeably. Because there is a real distinction between excess weight and obesity underlying some imprecise language, our system divided claims based on the specific language used. First, we examine broader claims about excess weight that did not specifically address obesity. Then we examine discussions that were specifically tied to obesity. In this way, we can examine any differences between the general and the specific that emerge.

Media coverage of health-related issues often offers competing claims on the causes of harm or possible solutions. Coverage of excess weight proved no different. It makes sense to begin with the purported causes of excess weight commonly found in the media, before moving on to the possible solutions. Overall, we found 34 claims about the causes of excess weight (see Table 4).

Table 4		
Causes of Excess Weight		
<i>Claim</i>	<i>Number of Opinions</i>	<i>% of Opinions</i>
Eating too much	10	29%
Too little physical activity	9	27%
Too much sugar	8	24%
Failure to eat nutritious meals	3	9%
High fat intake	2	6%
Oversized portions	1	3%
Easy to prepare foods	1	3%
TOTAL	34	101%*
* Does not equal 100% due to rounding error.		

More than half of all coverage was indisputably addressed to individual behavior. The top three categories together accounted for over three-fourths of all discussions about the causes of weight gain. The linkage between excess weight and a failure to eat nutritious

meals (9%) represents a generalized critique of diets that are high in fats and sugars and low in nutritional density. Americans' high fat diet is a frequent target in discussions of the causes of various health problems, but accounted for only six percent of the claims about excess weight. Claims that excess weight is the result of easy to prepare foods or oversized portions each appeared only once.

Given the small number of stories and relatively short time period covered in this study, we might ask whether these results are typical of media coverage more generally. Over the past several years, CMPA has been conducting a biennial analysis of food and nutrition reporting for the International Food Information Council Foundation. As a part of that *Food for Thought* research project, we have looked at arguments about excess weight and obesity using some of the same measures used in this study. This allows us to place the current findings in the context of some earlier time periods. While the 2003 and 2005 *Food for Thought* studies covered three month periods, the claims about the causes of excess weight are very similar when we restrict the comparisons to the same nine outlets examined in the present study.

In the 2003 edition of *Food for Thought*¹, we found 27 claims about the causes of excess weight. The lack of physical activity ranked number one that year, followed by eating too much. Failing to eat nutritious meals and the high fat intake in our diets tied for third place. Oversized portions were only mentioned once in that study as well. *Food for Thought* 2005 reveals a similar reordering of the major causes². Of the 26 claims on the causes of excess weight, too little exercise again ranked number one. Eating too much placed second, while high fat intake ranked third. Failing to eat nutritious meals fell into fourth place. These comparisons suggest that, although there may be some reordering of these causes over time, the focus remains on three major topics – too little exercise, eating too much and eating the wrong types of foods. Note that these topics are all conceptualized in terms of individual behaviors.

As can be seen in Table 5, the proposed solutions targeted many of the same areas mentioned in the claims of harm. The most frequently proposed solution was to get more exercise or physical activity (43%). Suggestions to eat less accounted for 32 percent of claims.

¹ *Food for Thought V: Reporting of Diet, Nutrition and Food Safety 1995 - 2003*, International Food Information Council Foundation and Center for Media & Public Affairs, 2003

² *Food for Thought VI: Reporting of Diet, Nutrition and Food Safety 1995 - 2005*, International Food Information Council Foundation and Center for Media & Public Affairs, 2005

Table 5		
Solutions to Excess Weight		
<i>Solution</i>	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Exercise more	20	43
Eat less	15	32
Eat nutritious meals	8	17
Eat less sugar	2	4
Drink more milk	1	2
Lower fat intake	1	1
TOTAL	47	99%

Rounding out the top three solutions was advice to eat nutritious meals (17%). While eating too much sugar was a frequently cited cause of harm, eating less sugar accounted for only four percent of proposed solutions. Drinking more milk and lowering fat intake were each seen only once in the sample.

As the previous section details, physical activity played a prominent role in weight management discussions. There was, however, more to discussions of physical activity than weight management. A small number of discussions linked physical activity to other aspects of health. The perils of too little exercise (other than weight gain) were few. Two claims linked inactivity to heart disease and one tied inactivity to unspecified damage to human health. The other benefits of exercise and physical activity were more frequently discussed with eight mentions. Half of these (4 claims) presented physical activity as a way to increase resistance to disease. The remaining four discussions were evenly split between improving fetal health, improving health in old age, prolonging life and improving health in general.

THE OBESITY DEBATE

When we turn to discussions that specifically addressed obesity, we find many of the same claims made that we saw in discussion of excess weight, as well as some new angles on the debate. Looking first at the causes of obesity (see Table 6), we find the discourse dominated by the same trinity of excessive weight causes, although not to the same degree: failure to eat nutritious meals (26%), too little physical activity (16%), and eating too much (16%).

Causes of Obesity		
<i>Cause</i>	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Failure to eat nutritious meals	19	26%
Too little physical activity	12	16%
Eating too much	12	16%
Infectious agent	8	11%
Genetic predisposition	6	8%
TV or media consumption	5	7%
High calorie beverage consumption	4	5%
Air conditioning use	2	3%
Medical side effect	2	3%
Smoking cessation	1	1%
Too little sleep	1	1%
Other cause	2	3%
TOTAL	74	100%

These three causes combined account for the majority (58%) of obesity causes presented. Discussions of obesity begin to differ from the broader discussions of excess weight once we go beyond these top three.

The idea that obesity could be caused by an infectious agent was mentioned in 11 percent of claims. However, this claim was unique in that all of the discussion was contained in one *New York Times* magazine story on new research. This lengthy story examined the origins of this theory as well as the intriguing, albeit inconclusive, current research efforts.

Claims that obesity might be caused by a genetic predisposition showed up in eight percent of discussions. These claims often point out that people may inherit some propensity to add pounds, but individual eating and exercise habits determine how our genetic inheritance is expressed. Following close behind were claims that TV and other electronic media consumption was to blame (7%). The causal chain that links media consumption to obesity can take one of two directions: either it causes extra caloric consumption or it limits exercise. In previous research, we have seen television viewing presented as a cause of snacking. Those extra calories were seen as the real culprit in obesity. In this study, opinions were more likely to suggest media consumption caused obesity by reducing the amount of physical activity in which viewers engaged.

High calorie beverages like soft drinks and sweetened fruit drinks were identified as a cause of obesity in five percent of discussions. These claims were a variation on the idea that people eat too much, with the focus on the extra calories provided by sugary beverages. This particular claim received a boost from the release of research suggesting that consumption of one extra soft drink per day could add 15 pounds over the course of a year.

Discussions of obesity treatments or solutions followed what is by now a well recognizable pattern. As can be seen Table 7, advice to eat less, make better food choices and exercise more dominated the news.

Table 7		
Solutions to Obesity		
<i>Solution</i>	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Eat more nutritious meals	15	21%
Eat Less	15	21%
Exercise more	14	19%
Surgical interventions	11	15%
Improve school physical education programs	4	5%
Diet medications	3	4%
Other interventions	3	4%
Government anti-obesity efforts	2	3%
Improve school nutrition standards	2	3%
Breast feed infants	2	3%
Corporate wellness plans/activities	1	1%
Specific diet plan	1	1%
TOTAL	73	100%

These three pieces of advice combined accounted for 61 percent of all proposed solutions. Advice to eat less and to eat more wisely each represent 21 percent of solutions. Suggestions to get more exercise or be more physically active accounted for 19 percent of solutions. While some of these discussions specifically advised formal exercise, many continued an idea we have seen in previous research: any form of physical activity is beneficial. Bolstered by recent studies, consumers were urged to take such simple measures as walk further in the parking lot, take the stairs rather than the elevator, and walk the dog to combat obesity.

Support for surgical interventions in obesity -- such as gastric bypass and lap banding -- comprised 15% of coverage and was boosted by discussions of a study on the side effects of such surgeries. Even though the study painted a less than rosy picture of surgical outcomes, the procedure was defended as highly effective for the seriously obese. Defenders also pointed out that recently developed procedures had improved surgical outcomes since the time that the data used in the study was collected. Celebrity endorsements by the likes of Al Roker and Carnie Wilson also help to keep this solution in the news.

Beyond these four solutions, attention dropped off sharply. For example, the need to improve school physical education programs accounted for just five percent of discussions. The use of diet drugs and other individual based solutions each appeared in four percent of discussions.

Although there were only two discussions (3%) of government anti-obesity efforts, this idea merits brief discussion. Even this limited level of coverage would probably not have occurred had it not been for actions by the Chicago City Council. The City Council had passed an ordinance banning the sale of *foie gras* on the grounds of animal cruelty, which went into effect during our sample period. In covering protests against this action, there was limited discussion of another proposal in Chicago to ban the use of trans-fats in restaurants and the voluntary effort already underway in New York City to eliminate trans-fats from restaurant menus. While there are too few comments to make any clear conclusions about such efforts, the vehement negative reaction to the *foie gras* ban suggests that government prohibitions will not have wide public acceptance.

Our examination of obesity coverage went beyond the discussions of causes and solutions to look at questions of who or what institutions have some responsibility for obesity. In examining questions of responsibility, we differentiated between the individual level and more systemic or institutional responsibility. Because issues of responsibility are open to debate, our analysis includes statements that assess responsibility as well as those that reject it. As can be seen in Table 8, only suggestions of institutional responsibility received any debate. Put another way, individual responsibility was uncontested.

Reflecting the strong focus on the individual level throughout coverage of excess weight and obesity, responsibility was most often laid upon individual adults. In fact, almost half (48%) of all discussions focused on individual adults. Parents and families were cited as responsible in an additional nine percent of mentions, as were individual children. These three categories of individual responsibility account for two-thirds (66%) of all discussions.

Table 8			
Responsibility for Obesity			
<i>Responsible Party</i>	<i>Percent Endorsed</i>	<i>Percent Rejected</i>	<i>Number of Claims</i>
Individual adult	100	0	21
Parents or families	100	0	4
Individual child	100	0	4
Food marketers/advertisers	50	50	4
Fast food companies	33	67	3
Society at large	100	0	3
Other food providers	50	50	2
Food industry in general	100	0	2
Schools	100	0	1
TOTAL	88%	11%	44

By contrast, discussions of institutional level responsibility involve genuine debate. Particular institutions were offered the opportunity to defend themselves against allegations that they bore some responsibility for obesity. Excluding general statements about society as a whole, claims that social institutions were responsible were supported only 58% of the time (seven times out of twelve).

Among the comments that cited an institutional actor, food marketers and advertisers were most prominent (9%). Assessing responsibility on food marketers was sharply debated and views were evenly balanced. A *USA Today* article on a Kaiser Family Foundation study of food company websites accounted for most of these comments. For example, Kelly Brownell of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale spoke for the critics, “Something needs to be done about advertising to kids, which is incredibly pernicious. Our government won’t even admit it is a problem.” The story then turned to Daniel Jaffe of the Association of National Advertisers for a rebuttal, “We do not believe that stopping all advertising of foods to kids or putting massive government restrictions

on it is going to solve the childhood obesity crisis. That hasn't worked anywhere." (*USA Today* 7/20/06 p. D6)

The responsibility that fast food companies bear for obesity is hardly a new subject of debate. The first fast food lawsuit is now four years old and there have been other litigious efforts since then. As with discussions of food marketers, fast food purveyors were given an opportunity to rebut claims that they were in some way responsible for obesity. In our sample, the debate took place entirely within one NBC story (8/18/06). That story, which appeared on NBC *Nightly News*, was a preview of a longer piece that appeared on *Dateline* that evening. The following extended exchange with McDonald's Chief Operating Officer Don Thompson represents the debate over fast food restaurant responsibility:

Campbell Brown (anchor): Whose fault is it if you're fat? The CDC says two thirds of all Americans are overweight and that 30 percent of us are obese. But can we really blame the fast food industry? Well, some are trying. ...

Stone Phillips reporting: In the 1990s, lawyers successfully used the courtroom to curb smoking. Now some of the same lawyers want to sue the fast food industry to curb obesity. When somebody says, 'Eating at McDonald's made me fat,' what do you say?

Don Thompson: You know, I couldn't speak to why a person would say that.

Phillips: Don Thompson is McDonald's USA chief operating officer.

Mr. Thompson: As McDonald's, we're not the cause of obesity.

Phillips: But in August 2002, two girls claimed just that in a lawsuit, alleging that McDonald's was the blame for their obesity. When you first heard about that lawsuit, what did you think?

Mr. Thompson: Honestly, I thought it was a hoax. I really did. And as it moved forward and we heard more about it, I really felt like someone was deferring their responsibility.

Phillips: Do companies like McDonald's bear some responsibility at a time when obesity is a major problem in this country?

Mr. Thompson: Well, I think what level of responsibility we do have is to provide menu choice.

Assessing the responsibility of other food providers was a category we used for discussions of other restaurants that were not fast food establishments. One *New York Times* article encompasses this minimal debate. First, Margo Wootan of the Center for Science in the Public Interest spoke for the critics, "People know that a quadruple burger or extreme breakfast is not the healthiest choice, but I don't think they expect to eat a whole day's worth of calories in one sitting. Restaurants are giving customers these choices without telling them anything about what the impact on their diet will be." The rebuttal was somewhat more low key, as the reporter offered this defense, "Restaurants

say offering lumberjack proportions of fat and sodium-laden food is giving customers what they want and providing them with choices.” (7/28/06 pg. C5)

Finally, claims that society at large was responsible for obesity were extremely broad, as seen in this example from *USA Today*: Roland Sturm, an economist at the Rand Corporation, observed, “Maybe we should start by trying to create an environment that prevents obesity in the first place, especially for children” (7/28/06 pg. A5) Notably, no one rebutted the idea of societal responsibility when it was not linked to any particular institution. This suggests that journalists may regard the notion of social responsibility on this issue as non-controversial, until it is linked to a particular target.

The final element of our examination of obesity was to record the linkages made between obesity and various health problems. These linkages are commonplace, even in stories that do not address the causes of obesity. As can be seen in Table 9, a few diseases stand out.

Type 2 diabetes was the most commonly mentioned disease with 22 percent of mentions. The marked increase in the number of patients with type 2 diabetes and the observation that the disease is appearing more frequently in younger people have increased attention to its links with obesity and excess weight.

Diseases and Conditions Linked to Obesity		
<i>Disease or Condition</i>	<i>Number of Mentions</i>	<i>Percent of Mentions</i>
Type 2 Diabetes	25	22%
Shorter life span	23	20%
Heart Disease	20	18%
Cancer (all types)	15	13%
High blood pressure	9	8%
Arthritis or joint problems	8	7%
Mental illness or depression	6	5%
Impaired medical testing	4	4%
Infertility	2	2%
Gall bladder disease	1	1%
TOTAL	113	100%

Claims that obesity can shorten lives accounted for another 20 percent of discussions. As was mentioned earlier, a study sponsored by AARP underscored how carrying excess

weight shortens people's life spans. Without this widely reported study, this particular linkage would have been far less prominent.

Heart disease (18%) and cancer (13%) are perennially linked to obesity. The link between heart disease and obesity is so well established it is usually just restated by reporters as part of an oft repeated list of ills. The connection between obesity and cancer is also casually repeated, although a new study further confirming the negative effects of obesity on breast and ovarian cancer added to the prominence of this disease.

The connection between obesity and high blood pressure (8% of claims) closely follows discussions of heart disease and is increasingly seen as a precursor to more serious cardio-vascular conditions. Discussions of how obesity may affect arthritis or joint problems in general accounted for seven percent of all mentions. The increased attention to physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle may have boosted discussion of this linkage. Linking obesity to mental illness and depression (5%) is an emerging area of research and discussion. Several of these discussions pointed out that the exact causal order of these two problems is unknown; others noted that obesity and mental illness may have a mutually reinforcing relationship.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed coverage of obesity, nutrition, and physical activity in America's leading newspapers, news magazines, and broadcast network evening news shows. During a six-week period in July and August 2006, we examined 95 news and opinion pieces in nine national media outlets, an average of two news items per day.

The limited scope of this study argues for caution in generalizing our findings to the broader media environment. However, the patterns of coverage that we observed should serve the heuristic purpose of identifying characteristics of news that must be considered in any effort to better inform the public or to change its behavior.

Most of the coverage – 7 out of every 8 stories – was confined to the three newspapers, with the heaviest concentrations in the health, science, and food sections of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The *Post* led the coverage with 38% of all stories. This reflects the absence of major news events of sufficient importance to dominate all media or penetrate the much smaller news holes of the network evening news and the weekly news magazines.

Instead, we found a diversity of topics in the news, led by stories dealing with physical activity, calorie consumption, and weight loss or gain. No single topic comprised more than 14% of the coverage, and nine different topics accounted for 4% or more. This reflects the extent to which the news focused on a variety of new studies and related consumer advice.

This pattern also attests to the degree to which weight and nutrition matters have found their way into every day public discourse. Consequently, covering these topics has become part of what scholars call the surveillance function of news – simply telling people what goes on in their world that they want or need to know about on a regular basis.

Similarly, the media covered a fairly wide range of diseases and other health problems associated with obesity. Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and a shortened lifespan each accounted for about one-fifth of the coverage. But a significant amount of attention was also given to various types of cancer, high blood pressure, arthritis, and mental illness. Overall, the relationship between obesity and ten different health problems was discussed.

In treating the causes and solutions associated with this problem area, the news media brought different perspectives to covering obesity and excess weight respectively. Excess weight in general was overwhelmingly presented as a behavioral issue, the product of individual bad habits that should be corrected. By contrast, obesity proper was often treated as a disease or health problem, which needs to be properly diagnosed and treated.

Thus, most discussion of the causes of excess weight concerned overeating, eating too much sugar, and not exercising enough, in that order. The solution mentioned most frequently was to exercise more, followed by eating less and eating more nutritious meals. However, the symmetry between problems and solutions was broken by the paucity of admonitions to eat less sugar.

Discussions of obesity were quite different. A failure to eat nutritious meals was presented as its leading cause, followed by too little exercise and, only then, eating too much. Considerable attention was also paid to the role of factors outside the individual's control, such as infectious agents and genetic predisposition. And while the most frequently presented solutions involved advice to improve nutritional habits, reduce caloric consumption, and increase physical activity, the coverage also included such exogenous factors as surgical and other medical interventions and government anti-obesity programs.

A particular concern of this study was to identify the locus of news coverage – whether the media focused on individuals and families, on one hand, or social systems and institutions, on the other. A majority of all stories (53%) focused on the causes and effects of obesity from the standpoint of individual behavior. Another one in five stories aggregated this kind of material into discussions of obesity statistics or trends. Thus, nearly 3 out of every 4 stories focused on individual aspects of weight and nutrition. That left just over 1 in 4 which concerned society's role in providing access to healthy foods and physical activity.

A similar split between the individual and societal level colored the debate over who should be held responsible for obesity. There were nearly three times as many claims of individual responsibility (including the immediate family unit as well as its members) as there were of social responsibility. Further, no assertion that individuals were responsible for obesity was ever rebutted, while opinions that blamed social institutions were rebutted almost half the time.

Thus, the notion that individuals, parents, or families are responsible for obesity was treated as a consensually accepted fact requiring no debate. When social structures (mostly the food industry) were held responsible, journalism's point-counterpoint model for dealing with controversies went into effect, and their representatives were given the opportunity to rebut the charge. In this regard, the media's portrayal of this topic was probably typical of how it addresses public health issues.

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