



All Trees and No Forest: How Advocacy  
Paradigms Obscure Public Understanding of the Food System

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute  
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## **Introduction**

As part of its ongoing effort to bring about meaningful improvements in the United States food system, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has commissioned a variety of types of research into how Americans think and talk about the topic. Earlier research by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute investigated the patterns of reasoning that the general public brings to the subject of food and food systems, and how these can prevent learning, diminish engagement and derail productive thinking (“Not While I’m Eating: How and Why Americans Don’t Think About Food Systems,” 2005).

In this supplementary memo, we consider the understandings that expert advocates bring to the subject, how those understandings shape their communications, and the likely impacts of these communications among the public. In principle, advocates are well positioned to move public opinion forward on the topic. They disseminate ideas through campaigns, public appearances and discussions with policymakers. In other issue areas, however, we have found that patterns in expert reasoning and discourse can create obstacles to public understanding and engagement, and that it is worth looking closely at those patterns and their possible effects.

The memo is based largely on ten formal interviews with expert advocates involved in a wide variety of issues related to food systems. Each interview was a one-on-one conversation lasting roughly twenty minutes, recorded for later analysis. (All participants were assured that their commentary would be anonymous, so no identifying information or direct quotations are offered in the report.) The conversations took place during the Food and Society Conference in Landsdowne, Virginia in April, 2005. During the course of the conference, a Cultural Logic researcher also had numerous informal conversations with additional attendees, as well as leading a discussion session focused on advocates’ experiences with communicating about issues related to food and food systems. All of these conversations – in addition to a review of materials produced by advocates – have provided input to this memo.

## **The Forest and the Trees**

Advocates on food-related issues recognize that they face a serious challenge: Problems with the American food system, and that system itself, are hardly on the radar screen of average Americans. Yet if there is to be meaningful progress on various important issues related to the food supply chain, it is critically important that this topic become part of the public conversation between average Americans, the media and policymakers. One of the natural goals for advocacy on issues related to the food supply system, then, is simply to put the subject itself “on the table.”

For very natural reasons, food advocates focus on a wide variety of particular issues as they go about the work of raising public awareness. After all, food systems are connected to virtually all aspects of human life, and of the biosphere itself. Ideally, though, the collective product of all these efforts would be that Americans become more conscious of where their

food comes from, and of food systems as a problematic area deserving individual and national attention.

But the research presented in “Not While I’m Eating” (along with the experience of any number of advocates and other researchers) demonstrates clearly that food systems have not emerged as a topic in the public mind – or that that emergence is happening at a frustratingly slow pace. In this memo, we consider one of the key reasons this is so: *Americans have no working conceptual model of the food system as a whole, and advocates are not helping them acquire one.*

Of course, advocates consistently offer explanations of various important problems related to food – the harmful effects of pesticides, the low wages paid to agricultural workers here and abroad, the disregard of large food distribution companies for dietary health, and for the needs of people in particular neighborhoods, and so forth. But the key ideas around which advocates’ thinking and communications are organized often work against, rather than for, the crystallization of Food System as a coherent concept.

- *Self-Contained Paradigms*

Advocates’ work is often anchored by a set of ideas that amount, from a cognitive perspective, to self-contained *paradigms* that are largely insulated from other issues, and therefore do not effectively contribute to a bigger picture of the food system and its meaning. For example, advocates’ work may focus on a particular *issue*, such as a Living Wage For Farm Workers – along with a motivating *value*, such as Fairness. This combination of issue and value is sufficiently rich to guide reasoning and feel like a world unto itself, in a way that connects little if at all to a paradigm focusing on environmentally sustainable agriculture, for example. (Even if the topics *can* in principle be connected, this is not a cognitively natural move.)

- *Minimal Reference to the Food System*

In fact, these individual paradigms may make only minimal or indirect reference to the food system itself, at least as they are likely to be understood by the public. The issue of the living wage for farm workers, for example, is one that is probably easy for average people to think about, *in a way that has little or nothing to do with food* – as a matter of greedy companies paying their workers too little (a story that might as well take place in the garment industry). The public’s thinking can quite naturally move between the *issue* and the *value*, leaving the larger food *system* out of the picture.

- *Promoting Little-Picture Thinking*

Some of the paradigms used by advocates may actually have the effect of leading people towards “little-picture” thinking, in which they focus on aspects of individual experience (shopping, cooking, eating, working a farm, etc.), rather than any bigger picture, including a grasp of food systems. This is often because the story that

advocates are telling is easily co-opted by the very powerful Consumer paradigm (see, e.g., our discussion of Organics later in the memo).

Ironically, from a cognitive and cultural perspective, the paradigms that are central to the work of advocates are currently at risk of making the food system *harder* to see, rather than easier.

Yet the advantages of Americans sharing a working conceptual model of the food supply system as a whole would be tremendous, and are worth exploring in some detail.

## **Why a Unified Conceptual Model for Food Systems?**

### **1. Engagement and Salience**

Advocates often feel intuitively, and are often advised by communications consultants, that emotionally charged appeals are critical to engaging people on an issue. And, to an extent, such appeals can obviously be effective. But one of the key elements that is often omitted from communications as a result is an effective *explanation* that allows people to grasp a problem in a concrete way, including the cause-and-effect relationships that are central to an issue. Experience on a variety of issues, as well as robust findings from the cognitive sciences, make clear that when people are able to focus on a problem in a concrete and practical way, they become more engaged than when they only have access to troubling information and images related to “symptoms.” This has been true in the area of child abuse, for example – where advocates now realize that tragic images and statistics have “plateau-ed” in their ability to arouse public support, and must be complemented by additional explanations of risk factors and the mechanisms by which community intervention can help. It is also true in the case of global warming, where the public is well aware of potentially catastrophic impacts but remains relatively disengaged due to a lack of understanding of how the phenomenon works.

In short, one of the more effective tools for raising the salience of an issue is to crystallize it as a clear conceptual model in people’s minds, so that people can reason about it in a practical way. Currently, there is no such shared model for the food system as a whole, and providing one has not been high on the priority list of (many) advocates.

### **2. Making sense of advocates’ communications**

Many of the arguments advocates make, and the facts they present, would make more sense to people if they had a broader sense of the food supply chain. In some cases, such a model is probably even an *indispensable precursor to understanding*. Without such a model, people are unlikely to be able to see the answers to basic questions:

- What's the link between food and social justice?
- What's the connection between food and the environment?
- What's the connection between food (production) and community?
- What does “sustainability” refer to? – Sustain what or who?
- What is “food security” about? Who or what is insecure, and why?

- What exactly is organic food?
- What is the relevance of family farm viability, beyond protecting the livelihood of individuals?

(See the next section for further discussion of some representative paradigms and how their impact would be strengthened by an underlying conceptual model.)

### 3. Unification and Diversity of the Field

It is clear that the food and food systems “field” (if such a disparate collection of perspectives and goals can be called a field) would benefit from some degree of unity – if for no other reason than that communications could, in principle, reinforce each other rather than competing for society’s attention and energy. Yet this unity is and will continue to be difficult to achieve. The ends that advocates are interested in pursuing will continue to remain very heterogeneous – activists in the area of environmental sustainability are not likely to abandon their mission in favor of pursuing better wages for farm workers, or vice versa, and neither group is likely to switch to a focus on revitalization of urban neighborhoods, or on the traditional pleasures of the table.

More subtly, experience in communications on a wide variety of issues establishes clearly that a field cannot be united around a large and mixed set of *values*. Even when they are complementary in principle, different values take thinking in different directions. A given communications piece – including the mission statement for an organization, for example – needs an organizing idea, and a single underlying value is often the best way to give a piece coherence and strength. (E.g. an environmental organization might organize the presentation of all its disparate activities around the idea that we *owe it to our children and grandchildren* to be good *stewards* of their natural *legacy*.)

The diverse values that motivate the various advocates around the food systems table – from *community* (e.g. revitalizing Native American groups), to *health* (e.g. improving the American diet), to *social justice* (e.g. for minority farm workers), and so forth – are each important, and none of them is going to go away. In short, the field is not likely to choose a single values message that unifies the perspectives of all the active participants.

Instead, if there is an opportunity for unity among food and food system advocates, it is on the Conceptual level. If there were such an agreed-upon model, then advocates in a variety of areas could refer to it as a touchstone in all their communications, if only in passing – *thereby reinforcing each other’s communications*.

Importantly, this conceptual platform would also allow advocates to pursue their own independent agendas, while contributing to the overall effort of raising the salience of The Food System as a whole. (Even if a particular group is only interested in Part X of the overall system, their references to Part X could do more than they currently do to make it clear that it is part of an overall system that matters.)

### 4. Creating Broader Constituencies

The food supply system as whole is clearly something that everyone in the public should be concerned with, as opposed to any particular issue such as herbicide use or neighborhood redlining, which will always engage some members of the public more than others.

## **5. Making advocates' jobs easier**

Currently, a great deal of advocates' effort goes into trying to open people's eyes to some particular corner of American food systems. Communicators in each issue area must construct their own explanations "from scratch." If there were a shared understanding of the food system that advocates could refer to and tap into, their work would clearly be easier and more efficient.

## **6. Inoculating the Paradigms Against "Consumer Thinking"**

One of the dangers that faces many of the individual paradigms discussed below is that they are susceptible to being "co-opted" by powerful advertising lobbies that tend to reduce the issue to a matter of "consumer choice" – a cognitive move that discourages people from seeing the big picture. Providing a clear and direct sense of the Food System itself, makes people more resistant to falling into "consumer thinking."

In the next section we consider a number of representative paradigms that currently organize advocates' thinking and communications, and how these are made less effective by the lack of a shared conceptual model – and/or how they would be strengthened and made more effective if such a model were part of the culture.

## **Example Paradigms**

The paradigms discussed in this section are not only used internally among colleagues at the Food and Society conference. They also appear on web sites, in interviews, and in other public forums. These ideas act as de facto, and sometimes deliberate and explicit, anchors of communications about food systems. It is therefore important to think through their likely impact in the current cognitive/cultural context – and how they might be made more effective.

### *Food security*

Like most of the paradigms considered here, this one is not understood by average people. Based on our conversations with a diverse group of thirty Americans from different regions and backgrounds, we are confident not only that the phrase is unfamiliar, but that it would strike people as puzzling, since they tend to feel little or no insecurity related to food. Moreover, as the example of global warming makes clear, even if a major food security-related crisis were to emerge, this would not necessarily promote a deeper understanding of the larger system.

In order to understand the idea of food security, in something like the way it is understood by experts, people would need to have more of a sense of the ownership of food production, who decides where and how to distribute food for sale, and how prices are set, for example. These are not areas they currently are able to think about.

For lack of a conceptual understanding of food systems, members of the public are also unlikely to appreciate values messages offered by advocates which relate the food supply to *democracy*, *community empowerment* and *social justice* (related to redlining, for instance).

Instead, given their current dominant patterns of thinking, people are likely to associate this term with safety against terrorism, food tampering or shortages – i.e. vivid, concrete and *immediate* types of danger that can easily be associated with food. The term is likely to be associated with little-picture rather than big-picture thinking, and a Consumer stance rather than a Citizen stance. Likely “solutions” would include heightened law enforcement, food surpluses stored in warehouses, and stacks of canned goods in the basement.

The level one values that the term is likely to evoke include Safety and Protection – which are just as likely to lead to “hunkering down” as to increased cooperation and management.

### *Sustainability*

We have direct evidence from the elicitations that this term/concept is not understood by the public. This is not because people do not understand the word, but because they have trouble thinking about aspects of our food system that might be hard to sustain. The (vivid and little-picture) guesses that some relatively knowledgeable lay people are able to take usually focus on soil depletion over time, or the possibility of keeping a farm in the family from one generation to the next.

In order to understand this concept, Americans would need to understand more about the environmental impacts of farming, the idea that farm products contain hidden costs that need to be paid later, and on the highest level, the idea that no-one is currently managing the food system with a long-term view.

Since these ideas are not part of average people’s conceptual repertoire, the values that are important to advocates –including Stewardship and Responsible Management of resources, for example – are also not evoked by the idea of Sustainability.

In principle, this concept certainly pulls people towards big-picture thinking, since it focuses by definition on broad systems. Unfortunately, as people currently speculate about its meaning, it is (not surprisingly) associated with little-picture images of individual farmers tilling their soil or trying to pass along their property to their children.

### *Social justice for farm workers*

This is certainly an idea people can understand, but as mentioned earlier, not necessarily in a way that is connected with food systems or even food. There is very little difference in cognitive terms between this case and the plight of Nike workers or hotel workers. That is to say, this paradigm can very easily elide the whole business of food systems.

### *Farmland preservation and family farm viability*

Average people do understand that farmland and family farms are disappearing, but they understand this in terms of suburban sprawl – i.e. in terms of the beauty and freedom of open spaces, and in terms of the passing away of traditional ways of life. For experts, these topics are pieces of a larger picture such as food security, where farmland is preserved in every region so that communities can grow their own local food and maintain control over their food supply. But for lay people, once again, the issues are associated with different (little-picture) understandings and values, none of them self-evidently practical in nature, having little to do with food, much less food systems.

### *Slow Food*

While this is a growing movement, it is not one with which many average Americans are familiar at this point. Certain aspects of the concept – including the rejection of fast food in favor of more carefully prepared meals – are easily grasped, without any reference to food systems. Others, such as the idea of preserving the diversity of crops (and other ingredients), are certainly less graspable, given people’s current lack of awareness of various aspects of the food supply system.

It is worth noting that this concept certainly exerts a cognitive pull towards a little-picture focus on the individual, to the extent it focuses on pleasure (an inherently individual concept). On the other hand, it can be connected with a bigger picture if it is framed in terms of either (A) a generally accepted “right” to delicious, diverse food, or (B) an understanding that in order to really have good, healthy food you need diverse crops, diverse ways of growing them, close attention to them, more craft and less commodification. The first approach, though (along with the movement’s central value of “protecting the pleasures of the table”), is not one that resonates well with mainstream American culture.

### *Local Food*

While this is a concept that is currently unfamiliar to many Americans, it is easily understood and has the conceptual advantage of concreteness. The benefits of local food are easily grasped once the concept is presented (including reduced fossil fuel consumption, fresher food, and satisfying connections with local community and traditions), and can appeal to a diverse group with different priorities. And while the paradigm is defined, in a sense, by a focus on a “smaller picture,” it also provides a conceptual “scale model” of the larger systems that it would be helpful for Americans to understand.

The broader public may most naturally perceive local food as a form of “resistance” to the “real,” mainstream, modernized system of food production and supply in the country – i.e. a minority movement by definition, associated with niche supermarket sections, special menu items and scattered farm stands. But even so, this positioning can serve as a tool for opening people’s eyes to that broader system and its flaws.



Interestingly, this concept seems to be highly resistant to being co-opted by conventional producers.

### *Organic Food*

The strength and weakness of the organic paradigm is that it is rooted in a critique of the contemporary food supply system. Because it is defined in terms of the materials and practices used in farming, organic food makes the most sense in the context of an understanding that a food system exists, and that there may be something wrong with it. The presence of organic food at the supermarket (despite its higher price tag) is a reminder that the food system is being contested.

On the other hand, because the vast majority of people do not have a picture of the food system, their cognitive models regularly lead them to other, less helpful understandings of what organic food is all about. Some of the positive interpretations focus on better taste, benefits to individual health, and individual environmental consciousness. (Organic marketers typically focus on these aspects, for obvious reasons.) Worse, all of these concepts are subject to “dilution” in the marketplace, so that the term Organic itself is perpetually threatened with being so vague as to become meaningless.

Moreover, competitors and many consumers discount organics as evidence of health extremism, environmental idealism, class elitism or fraud; or simply as a clever marketing ploy. All these interpretations focus on the relationships between individuals and food, rather than on the broader systems that produce that food.

Elicitations with the public clearly show that, although organic food is one most well-known of contemporary food movements and the most visible of food system critiques, the absence of a model of food supply has encouraged understandings to fragment in unproductive ways.

### *Diversity*

Diversity is a paradigm with several distinct types of relevance in the world of food systems advocacy. For experts, minority participation in the food system, the effects of monoculture on sustainability, food security, supermarket consolidation and so on are all areas where a lack of diversity weakens the capacity of the food supply system to truly meet the needs of the general population. These understandings of the meaning and importance of diversity all depend on a grasp of the big picture of food systems.

From the perspective of laypeople who do not see the larger systems, though, the broad benefits of diversity don't make sense – if anything, the idea of diversity runs counter to the public's sense of a prevailing current of modernization and standardization. As it stands, each type of diversity being advocated for has to be justified as important in and of itself. Rather than arguing that diverse systems are stronger, more flexible, and better designed for a changing world, advocates disperse into isolated issue areas, each with their own constellation of values. Family farms are important for Tradition or Local Community. Minority participation is important for Social Justice. Monoculture is bad for the soil (therefore, Irresponsible farming, and bad for the Environment).

Once again, despite a paradigm with considerable potential to unify the field, the discourse falls apart because the conceptual models that make sense of the paradigm are missing.

### *Traditional foodways*

Though they may not use exactly this language, many advocates work within a paradigm that focuses on restoring the traditions that sustained people and communities in the past, both nutritionally and culturally. Unless people have a broad conceptual understanding of what a food system encompasses, though, messages along these lines are likely to sound like other appeals to reject the modern world and return to a nostalgic past (i.e. attractive, impractical, and subject to “solutions” based on *images* of that past). Specifically, arguments based on tradition and community are not likely to compete successfully with Americans’ powerful cultural model of Modernization, which entails the inevitability of change and “progress.” A shared conceptual model of food supply systems would allow them to grasp the practical value of the kinds of foodways that have been lost.

## **Conclusion**

Current communications strategies for bringing the general idea of a Food System into the public discourse can be described as indirect, with advocates focusing on a broad variety of self-contained paradigms that each focus on one piece of the Food System. The cognitive analysis of expert concepts discussed in this memo suggests that this indirect approach is unlikely to be effective both because the individual paradigms pull thinking in different directions, and because for many of them the Food System concept is not central. Rather than radically changing the current “modular” approach, we suggest complementing it with an effort to provide the public with a clear conceptual model of the larger Food System. Introducing such a model into the public discourse would provide an alternative, and more direct, approach to solving the problem of the “missing big picture” of where food comes from. It would also strengthen each paradigm, while increasing the collective efficacy of advocates’ efforts to bring the Food System into public awareness.

Of course, introducing such a model into public consciousness and discourse is no easy matter. In the short run it will entail investing significant energy into developing and testing effective ways of explaining food systems, identifying ways that fit naturally into advocates’ communications on a variety of particular issues. Ultimately, it will also involve exploring other conduits for introducing those explanations to a broad audience, from ads to changes in school curricula. But while the challenge is great, the rewards for a successful effort will be even greater.