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Food on British television: multiple messages, multiple meanings

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ABSTRACT

Recent reviews show that the majority of research studies that have investigated the link between television and food choice have concentrated on promotional media and, in particular, on television advertising. Based on a broader conceptualization of the issue designed to shift the focus from a narrow one on food promotion to a broader one on food representation the article reports findings from exploratory research on the role of television in the food choices of British 11 – 18 year olds. Results indicate that there are key differences between programme and advertising content. Different ‘food frames’ can also be detected. Qualitative audience research indicates that there is little evidence of television’s influence of the kind implied in orthodox critiques of its contribution to food choice but suggests instead a more complex picture. The article concludes by suggesting the findings’ implications for those with the task of designing communication initiatives to promote healthy eating practices.
This article is inspired by the recent debate in Britain about the role of television in food choice and reports on findings from some exploratory research on the topic. The project was prompted by concerns among British government health policy makers, health educators and the nutrition and health lobby over the factors preventing the uptake of healthier diets and patterns of eating in the population at large, and among young people in particular. Commercial food promotion, especially promotion via the mass media, is thought to be one of the most significant of these factors. In Britain in recent years the part that television advertising plays in food promotion has been the focus of vigorous policy debate between the consumer health lobby, the British government Food Standards Agency, the advertising industry and Ofcom, the media regulator. Successive reviews of research on the topic have drawn contrasting conclusions as to the strength of the evidence of a link between television advertising and food choice (Young et al, 1996; Young, 2003; Hastings et al, 2003), but a commentary by Livingstone (2004) commissioned to help settle the controversy concluded that:

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

(Livingstone, 2004, p 28)

The majority of research studies on the relationship between television advertising and children’s behaviour have used experimental or quasi-experimental designs, for these are most suited to a search for evidence of a direct, causal link between the two. However, as Livingstone points out, it is likely that the effects of food promotion may be more indirect than direct. One of the main difficulties in this area is that the likely indirect effect of food promotion:

cannot be demonstrated easily, if at all, using the experimental designs required for causal claims. For many, the pervasive nature of promotional
culture is obvious, yet for social scientists it remains a challenge to produce rigorous evidence for such a claim. (Livingstone, 2004, p 28)

The reason for this, Livingstone points out, is that the multiple channels of promotion and their mutual interactions are very difficult to investigate simultaneously.

The research on which the present article is based makes a modest contribution towards meeting this challenge and draws attention to an important and somewhat neglected issue – that of the relationship between food promotion and food representation on television. From successive reviews of research on food and television it is clear that the majority of research has been concerned with food promotion (i.e. advertising) and has neglected the broader question of the way food is presented on television as a whole and television’s overall effect on audience preferences and choices. The research findings discussed later in this article emerged from a project designed to remedy this. It explored the relationship between television’s portrayal of food and eating behaviours and its reception by members of the younger audience by examining both in context: television advertisements in the context of television programming, and young people’s reception of television in the context of the household. It used a combination of quantitative and interpretive methods to a) chart the extent and nature of food on British television; and b) explore the way in which this is mediated and interpreted in the household.

**Previous Research on Food and Television**

Livingstone’s conclusion about previous research on the role of television advertising suggests that most work on this topic has been too narrowly focused. As she notes, nearly all published research on the media and food is concerned with television advertising (Livingstone, 2004, p13), and there is very little that has explored the
broader context of food promotion. But rarely too has research attempted to take into account the food-related content of television programmes. Where non-advertising output has been looked at this has been limited to analyses of selected programmes or genres rather than television output as a whole (e.g. Kaufman, 1980; Storey & Faulkner, 1990; see Signorielli, 1993, for a review). Despite the narrowness of this research it is not uncommon for findings to be generalised and taken as evidence of ‘television’s portrayal of food and nutrition’ (Signorielli & Staples, 1997 p291). This is misleading because it ignores the depictions and discussions of food choice, purchase, preparation and consumption that appear on television in a variety of programme settings and formats, and are spread widely across television’s output. In programmes where food is the main object of focus – consumer ‘infotainment’ programmes, cookery programmes or science documentaries, for example – food can become either the subject of practical recommendation and advice or a topic of debate and discussion. Food and nutrition also appear frequently as topics in television news and current affairs programmes. They are regularly presented as causes for concern: childhood obesity; famine resulting from war or environmental degradation; eating disorders; food contamination; the links between diet, nutrition and disease; genetically modified foods and modern methods of food production are just a few of the topics that get food into the news. The spate of food scares and scandals in Britain in the 1990s was vividly reflected in television news and current affairs programmes (Macintyre, et al, 1998; Reilly and Miller, 1997). Because of its central role in daily life food will always be a newsworthy subject.

If television presents a very wide range of images of food, it can be argued that the context of daily programming into which food advertising is placed is at least as important an object of study as the advertising itself. It is arguable then that a narrow focus on television advertising has diverted attention from the broader picture.
If we are to begin to understand the indirect influence of food promotion in a wider sense, as Livingstone suggests we should, we need research that is more broadly conceived than this.

A further shortcoming in previous research can be detected. A good deal of research in the past has been based on what, it can be argued, are rather dubious theoretical foundations. In many cases it has been based on an inadequate theory of television’s role as a bearer of messages and meanings. To illustrate this point, two pieces of research can be mentioned. These can be taken to represent the orthodox view of television’s role in shaping public perceptions about food and eating and the way television affects eating behaviour. One of these is an academic study and the other comes from the food and health lobby.

In a well-known study of American peak time US television, Kaufman (1980) analysed the nutritional content of all foods shown in a sample of fiction programmes and food advertisements and categorised the characters appearing in programmes according to their body size and attractiveness. Kaufman’s results showed a predominance of low nutrition, sugary and fatty foods on television, both in advertisements and in programmes, both of which were populated, in the main, by slim, energetic and good-looking people.

The implications seemed obvious: television offers a set of images about food consumption and its consequences that health educators and nutritionists would see as dangerously contradictory. In the television world: the food viewers see being advertised, cooked and eaten is ‘unhealthy’ but the people they see are overwhelmingly fit and healthy. There appears then to be no relationship between food and health as they are depicted on television; the message seems to be ‘You can eat as much low nutrition food as you want and it won’t affect your looks or your health and fitness.’ These results have supported health and consumer groups in their
campaign for a more ‘responsible’ approach to television drama, and for tighter controls over food advertising.

Until the study reported on here began, no academic research in Britain had examined television’s portrayal of food in detail. The nearest to it was the regular and quite meticulous monitoring of food advertising on British commercial television carried out by the London-based consumer lobbying organisation Sustain and, its forerunner, the National Food Alliance (NFA)\(^3\) (Dibb, 1993; Dibb & Castell, 1995; Sustain (2001)). This research has been very effective in showing that advertisements for branded foods dominate the television commercial breaks, especially at times when children and young people are most likely to be watching television, and that the foods most heavily advertised are of low nutritional value. Again, the findings have been used to lobby for tighter regulation.

But research of this sort is limited in what it can tell us about television’s role in food choice. Apart from the restricted view both these studies have of television output the concentration on advertising is a major shortcoming in the British context for around one third of all viewing in Britain is devoted to non-commercial television (i.e. the BBC)\(^4\)

Instead of such a fragmentary approach one must look at the whole of television’s output. Cultivation research, which explores the relationship between television viewing and viewers’ beliefs at the societal rather than the individual level, has provided strong evidence to suggest that television is viewed largely by the clock rather than by the programme. Cultivation researchers argue that it is television’s total system of messages that shape and help to develop viewer beliefs (see Shanahan & Morgan, 1999, for a discussion and summary of this view). Although there is evidence that viewers actively zig-zag their way through the schedules rather than passively experience television as an uninterrupted flow of images (Ridell, 1996),
cultivation researchers have argued persuasively that such selection is marginal to the overall mix of programmes and the blending of content to which they are exposed. A glance at the television programme schedules tells us that viewers are routinely exposed to a variety of programme formats: factual as well as fictional; a variety of styles of information giving: discussions, demonstrations, and various examples and models of human behaviour and social practices.

Other research has shown, moreover, that the different formats and genres of television in turn demand varying degrees of audience involvement and audience identification which seem to result in varying audience interpretations (Leibes & Katz, 1986). Audience involvement in advertising, for example, seems to be at a low level compared with, say, audience involvement in television soap opera. Advertising is just one component of the sum total of television output, made up of non-fiction as well as fiction programme formats, most of which may not carry such clear or overt persuasive messages as advertisements, but which none the less contain messages which audiences will decode and interpret according to their own specific views and social contexts.

A final, perhaps most important limitation of many of the studies on television’s food content is that they commit what the British communication theorist John Thompson refers to as the fallacy of internalism – the attempt to draw conclusions about the consequences of television viewing on the basis of an analysis of television content (Thompson, 1990). Knowledge of the content of television alone, however detailed, cannot reveal a great deal about the processes of influence, or the ways television’s content is used or consumed by viewers. As already indicated, not all studies fall prey to the fallacy. Some do involve the audience, correlating, for example, concepts of viewer self-image with liking for or memory of food commercials (Lewis & Hill, 1998), but here there is also an implicit (and
questionable) theory of media influence which is one dimensional – a view that there
is a direct, linear relationship between media messages and audience behaviour,
implying a vulnerable audience at the mercy of a powerful and penetrating medium.
As was noted earlier, any influence that the media may have in its contribution to
food choice is most likely to be indirect.

It was with these problems in mind that the present study was designed. The
aim was first to study television images of food: a) to analyse food content in
television programmes as well as in advertisements in order to determine how much
food there is on British television. And b) to analyse the circumstances in which food
– related to its production, acquisition, preparation or consumption – appears on
television in factual as well as fictional programming and advertisements and to
determine who is eating and under which circumstances.

The second aim of the research was to study the household mediations of
these images through family and parental controls and other, non-media influences in
order to explore the ways in which viewers make sense of them in the home context.
This involved qualitative research with a sample of 11-18 year olds and their families,
examining household decision-making about food.

Analysing Television Images: Sampling and Method

Two weeks of children’s and prime time television were sampled from the autumn
British television schedules in 1995. ‘Prime time’ was defined as weekdays: 4–11pm;
weekends: 6am–1pm; 4pm-12am; three hours of weekday breakfast television was
also included. A three-stage coding system was devised to identify, time, and analyse
all appearances of and references to food and eating. At Stage 1 all output containing
visual or verbal references to food was coded for the appearance and nature of the
food depicted. At Stage 2 scenes in fiction programmes and advertisements in which
eating was portrayed were coded for length, characters present, food consumed and meal type. At Stage 3 eating characters were coded for their physical and demographic characteristics. Detailed examination of the full range of data is beyond the scope of this article. However, for the purposes of the present discussion a number of selected findings will be presented and discussed.

**Selected Findings 1: Contrasts in Television Content**

In all, 872 programmes were analysed (a total of 527 hours of output). The results of the analysis show that food appears on television very frequently indeed:

- Two-thirds of British television’s total programme output contains some visual and/or verbal reference to food.
- There are, on average, around 10 references to food in every broadcast hour.
- There are, on average, more than four food advertisements per hour of commercial television.
- More than half the references to food appear in programmes. Around one third of all references appear in (non-commercial) BBC programmes.

Table 1 gives detailed figures on the quantity of food on television:

**Table 1: References, Eating Scenes and Eating Characters by Type of Output**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TV Output</th>
<th>No. of verbal or visual references</th>
<th>Eating scenes</th>
<th>Eating characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC1</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BBC2</td>
<td>870</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITV</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food ads</td>
<td>2372</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>-(^a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Not applicable.
Advertisements were analysed as parts of commercial (ITV and Channel 4) programmes.

These figures seem to lend quite strong support to the argument that if there is a concern about food on television, television programmes as well as advertisements cannot be ignored. The data was analysed further to determine whether there were differences between advertisements and programmes in the types of foods depicted. To facilitate this comparison the foods appearing in the sample were categorised into the five food groups used in the British National Food Guide for balanced healthy eating (published by the government Department of Health in 1994 and used to help promote improved standards of nutrition in the British population)\(^5\). The analysis then compared advertisements and programmes in terms of the number of references to different foods they contained. Tables 2 and 3 summarise the findings.

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>4997</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1049</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1785</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Advertisements were analysed as parts of commercial (ITV and Channel 4) programmes.
Table 2: Types of food advertised on television

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread, other cereals and potatoes</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit &amp; vegetables</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk &amp; dairy foods</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, fish &amp; alternatives</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatty &amp; sugary foods</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\* The discrepancy between the number of advertisements indicated in tables 1 and 2 is accounted for by the fact that not all food advertisements in the sample could be coded reliably using the Food Guide categories.

In Table 3 the figures refer to the number of scenes (in fiction programmes) or items (in non-fiction programmes) appearing in programmes where food is depicted.

Table 3: Types of Food Appearing in Television Programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Adj. %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bread, other cereals and potatoes</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit &amp; vegetables</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk &amp; dairy foods</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, fish &amp; alternatives</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatty &amp; sugary foods</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentifiable</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considered in terms of foods referred to or depicted, television programmes seem to offer a healthier or more balanced diet than advertisements: programmes are more likely to contain depictions of fruit and vegetables and less likely to contain depictions of fatty and sugary foods than advertisements. This is perhaps not surprising because advertising is of course dominated by the promotion of branded food products – foods such as fruit and vegetables (which tend by and large not to be sold as branded goods) are highly likely to be under-represented in advertising.
compared with other foods. To some extent then this is a predictable and, perhaps, unremarkable finding. However, comparisons were also possible between the food content in non-fiction programmes with that in fiction programmes and there were differences here too:

Table 4: Types of Food Appearing in Non-fiction and Fiction Television Programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food group</th>
<th>Non-fiction programmes</th>
<th>Fiction programmes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread, other cereals and potatoes</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit &amp; vegetables</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk &amp; dairy foods</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, fish &amp; alternatives</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatty &amp; sugary foods</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentifiable</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contrast here is similar if rather less pronounced than before, but it is evident that if we ignore non-fiction programmes in our consideration of television then we are overlooking another source of contrasting (healthier) eating images.

The nature of food and eating on British television

Having established that references to and scenes of food and eating appear frequently across the spectrum of television advertisements and different programme types, the analysis went on to explore the nature of food portrayals on British television and examine the circumstances in which food appears.

Thematic analysis showed that when food features in television programmes its appearance tends to be incidental to the plot or main theme of the programme. In 83% of programmes in the sample as a whole, food is an incidental theme, and a generally minor one in terms of the time and attention devoted to it. There are,
however, differences between fiction and non-fiction programmes: food is more likely to be a significant element or the main theme in non-fiction programmes (more than a quarter of cases – nearly 27%) than in fiction programmes (nearly 8%). The majority of these are the food and cookery programmes which have increased in number over the past five years or so, their capacity to attract large audiences making them a fixture of British television’s evening schedules throughout the year. The remainder of these food-focused programmes in the sample were science or current affairs documentary programmes.

Apart from the balance of food types in television’s overall output, the content analysis was also able to reveal details of the kind of messages conveyed by programmes containing references to or appearances of food. Some programmes and advertisements contained overt messages about the nutritional content of the foods being shown, but these were in the minority. For example, only 6% of non-fiction programmes (less than 2% of all programmes) made any reference to the nutritional content of the food depicted and only 3% (less than 1% overall) to the consequences of ‘unhealthy’ eating. In fact food advertisements were far more likely than programmes to contain overt messages of this sort: 116 programmes (30% of the 383 programmes on commercial television that were analysed) contained advertisements that made claims about the weight control or health benefits of the foods being advertised.

Further analysis of fiction programmes and advertisements revealed more about the less overt, or perhaps, latent messages that television conveys about food. Eating scenes were analysed to discover who, typically, is eating and in what context. The data show that meals on television are, in more than 50% of cases, not something to be shared, but most commonly involve a lone eater. Most eating takes place in domestic settings: nearly 80% of the eating scenes where this variable could be coded
reliably (in about 40% of cases it could not) took place in a character’s home; about 12% of eating scenes were located in public eating places such as restaurants, cafes, or pubs.

The analysis also categorised the type of meals being depicted in eating scenes and found that more than half the total could be described as ‘snacks’ rather than formal meals. Snacks outnumbered formal meals by about 2:1. Whatever the meal type, however, meals are very rarely completed on screen. In just over 90% of all eating scenes analysed the meal being shown was abandoned before completion.

Once the extent and nature of food and eating on television at a broad level had been determined, it was then important to analyse the characters shown eating in programmes and advertisements. Fictional television characters and the settings they are placed in are the key points of audience identification. It was felt that if more is known about the models and human reference points that television provides its viewers this would open the way to explore their significance in the perceptions, beliefs and behaviour of audience members. Previous research on the impact of television has shown that the process of influence is most likely to operate through the characters television presents to viewers – their main physical and social attributes, their level of attractiveness, their similarities to or differences compared to viewers – and the portrayal of the situations that provide a context for the characters’ behaviour. The extent to which viewers identify with characters and the situations they are in thus provide an indication of the magnitude of television’s likely influence on a given social issue (Signorielli, 1990).

Eating characters in fiction programmes and advertisements (those who appeared on screen and were shown to be consuming food or taking part in meals) were analysed for their social and physical characteristics, their body image, their level of attractiveness, and the type of food they were shown eating. This was the
most intensive and difficult aspect of the coding process and it involved the application of some of the less reliable coding categories used in this research. A very low level of agreement between coders was obtained on the measure of attractiveness, for example and in more than 85% of cases this variable was coded as being ‘unclear’. Estimates of characters’ social class were also coded ‘unclear’ in the majority of cases (nearly 75%), but estimates of their age, race, sex, and an assessment of their body image were less problematic.

These data on eating characters can be briefly summarised. Those characters taking part in eating scenes in programmes and advertisements are more likely to be male than female (56.5% compared with 43.5%) and the young outnumber the elderly by a wide margin: nearly half the eating characters in the sample were under 25 years old. Most were young adults. More than 90% of eating characters were categorised as white; Black and Asian characters totalled less than 6% of all characters in the sample. Where social class could be coded, 55% were categorised as middle class and 36% as working class. The analysis of eating characters’ body image showed that the overwhelming majority were around the mid-point of a scale ranging from clinically overweight to clinically underweight.

Frameworks of interpretation: ‘food frames’

In addition to the quantitative analysis of food and eating portrayals, qualitative analysis of the ways television handles food was also carried out. This entailed employing the concept of ‘framing’ to identify of the range of typical narrative structures through which food features on British television.

Studies of news have used the concept of framing to analyse meaning in story selection and presentation. The concept offers a way of explaining how journalists and news editors create news output. In processing the world of events and
happenings for wider public dissemination journalists fashion the raw material of news and information into manageable, accessible and intelligible segments (news items, documentary themes, programme ‘packages’) by identifying news ‘angles’ or interpretive ‘frames’ through which stories can be told, events can be described and concepts and principles explained and discussed (see Entman, 1993, for a discussion of the concept’s utility). Frames offer media producers, and hence audiences, convenient ways of thinking about and interpreting information on given topics. They may be used in the news to make sense of particular occurrences or they may be adopted in, say, documentary and current affairs television in the construction of entire programmes. Once established, frames can have a lasting effect on the way one issue or another is made sense of in other programmes (in fiction and entertainment as well as in non-fiction programmes), in advertisements, and indeed, in other media. Frames themselves are not the conscious creations of journalists or other media producers but circulate in and arise from the culture of which the media themselves are part. They represent ways of selecting some aspects of an event or issue and using those aspects to present a certain way of defining the terms in which a topic can be considered, the significance of related issues, and potential consequences of related public or private actions. Because it is the result of a judgement of an event’s or an issue’s most significant features, a frame will represent a particular way of thinking about and making sense of an event, issue or topic. Implied here is the important idea that as a method and consequence of media selection processes, in as much as frames prioritise certain interpretations and ways of thinking about something, they must also, by definition, exclude others. Qualitative studies of media content have shown that it is possible to identify patterns in media output that suggest which frameworks are in circulation in the media and which in turn are prevalent. This will have implications for the ways in which audiences perceive certain issues: frames that
dominate media output will dominate the interpretations of certain audiences or
audience segments. Framing is therefore an important concept because it offers a way
to explore the extent to which the ways of thinking about certain topics present in
media content are exhibited by audiences. An example will serve to illustrate.

Karpf (1988), in her study of the health and medical reporting in the British
media, identified four ‘approaches’ to understanding health and well being that were
in circulation: the medical approach, which emphasises the power and legitimacy of
science and curative medicine for the public good; the consumer approach, which
adopts a critical stance against the medical profession and its institutions; the look-
after-yourself approach, which places the onus for health maintenance and
improvement on the individual; and the environmental approach, which has as its
focus the material and socio-historical causes of ill-health, and emphasises the
importance of preventative measures in the promotion of health (Karpf, 1988, p9).
Karpf found that these different approaches to health and medicine could be found in
various combinations throughout the British media, but, and this is born out by other
studies of British media (Best et al 1977; Garland, 1984; Kristiansen & Harding,
1988), the medical approach is dominant. Karpf suggests that this accounts for the
failure of supporters of preventative health measures to shift attention and a policy
and resources emphasis away from a medically dominated, curative model of health
care, despite the manifest benefits of a preventative, community-based, public health
approach.

In the present study three different frames were identified in the media
coverage of food: a science/health frame, which emphasises nutritional aspects of
food and the link between eating and health (predominant in news and current affairs
programmes which focus on food); a consumer frame, which coincides broadly with
Karpf’s consumer and environmental approaches to health and medicine, pitting the
interests of the consumer against those of the food and agriculture industry, and emphasising the difference between individual and corporate responsibility for safe and health-promoting food provisioning (predominant in consumer and lifestyle programmes and documentaries); and an instructional/craft frame (manifest in cookery programmes). Although different food frames are predominant in certain kinds of programme, they make their appearance to a greater or lesser extent across the entire spectrum of television output. Food advertising, for example, incorporates elements of all three frames in the process of promoting certain foods, food products or food related services. An important finding was that, in contrast to Karpf’s analysis, none of these frames could be said to be dominant in the television output analysed in this study.

**Impacts and Influences**

In the second part of the study, designed to explore audience understandings of these portrayals empirically, attention turned to the way viewers make sense of and resolve contrasting images in television content. If television carries several layered and sometimes contradictory messages about food and promotes different frameworks for understanding food and its significance, how do young viewers and their families make sense of and resolve the contradictions and weigh the differences they encounter? To what extent do the different food frames evident in television content contribute to and circulate within daily family conversations and discussions about food and eating and, if they do, do they play a significant role in the food choices that are made?
Exploring Household Mediations: Sampling and Method

The findings discussed in this section are the result of a series of in-depth interviews conducted during 1996, 1997, and 1998 in twelve British households each containing at least one child aged between 11 and 18 years. Households were selected by following a three-stage sampling procedure starting with questionnaire surveys in four urban schools located in the British East Midlands, followed up with group interviews with sub-samples of school year groups, and closing with approaches to households fulfilling the sampling criterion already mentioned.

The interviews entailed the collection of qualitative data. This required a method of data collection which was sensitive to the social context in which young people are located and which would assist in the attempt to understand the complexity of young people’s eating and viewing habits.

The principal method of data collection was the semi-structured interview. Each household in the study was visited on five occasions. Interviews lasted between one and two hours each. At the first interview parents were questioned about routines in eating and media use. The remaining four interviews involved the whole household in viewing and discussing a total of 21 videotaped extracts from television programmes and 18 television advertisements.

The interviews were guided by an aide mémoire to explore the interplay between television, household interactions, and young people’s food choices. Television’s significance was thought likely to vary according to household composition, age of children, and changing circumstances (e.g. changing patterns of work or household membership).

The programme extracts and advertisements were selected to exemplify the different frameworks of understanding or ways of representing food, eating and health that had been identified in the television content analysis described earlier.
They also depicted contrasting types of eating behaviour – overtly ‘healthy’ or overtly ‘unhealthy’, snacking or formal dining, for example. All fieldwork was conducted in respondents’ homes, interviews being recorded on audiotapes that were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

It is important to emphasise that this study was designed to collect qualitative rather than quantitative data about young people in the household. That is, it was felt that the most effective way to address the research questions identified at the outset was to conduct in-depth interviews with household members. It was also thought to be the most efficient way to generate data and enable theory to develop regarding the complex relationships between television, the household and the food choices of young people. The logic of the analysis here is in developing an understanding of social processes. In qualitative research this logic does not depend on representativeness; it is not concerned with the generation of statistics that can support generalisations about causal or other relationships between variables. Here, complexity in the relationships between viewing, eating and domesticity is taken to be axiomatic; simple causal explanations of the behaviour of young people in this area are very unlikely to be found. This complexity, it is argued, is best unravelled through an approach that involves the purposive selection of small numbers of cases. Studying those cases in depth it was felt would help to illuminate the social processes of food choice that the project was seeking to understand.

The objective in the interviews was to discover how familiar young people and their families were with the different ways in which television represents food, to uncover the frameworks family members use to interpret television content and to see how these relate to household food and eating practices. Previous studies of family and household food use (e.g. Brannen et al, 1994; Murcott, 1982) indicate that there may be conflict about food in some households over gender roles, over food
preferences, over meal times, and so on. Interviews explored the extent to which television representations contribute to household food conflicts, reflect them, or offer the means to resolve them, by example or by the information they impart.

**Selected findings 2: Household Mediations**

The data from these interviews suggest that television’s contribution to young people’s food choices in the households in this study is made through the specific context of household routines, patterns of living and family relationships. In other words it is the social context of the home that has the most powerful influence on food choice in the household cases examined in this study. Television is only one of the many sources of food information in the home and just one of the many factors contributing to household choices. There is no question, however, that television’s messages about food had penetrated for it is evident that viewers of all ages in these households were extremely familiar with the different ways of thinking about food that were discernible in television content. Children were sometimes more skilled at this than their parents, but all those in the study displayed a high level of television literacy – a facility with the language of television which enabled them to interpret content readily and converse confidently about meanings and the intentions of programme producers. For example, most of the young people in the study were well aware that documentary programmes have an instructional aim and they showed in discussion that they are used to questioning and negotiating with the instruction being offered. They invoked ‘evidence’ from school (lessons in Food Technology, for example) in discussion about the overt messages of documentaries such as *Fat* (a series of programmes on commercial network television exploring the links between obesity and ill-health) and evidently used their own experience as well as local knowledge in forming their views about food and health issues. Television, not only
through programmes like *Fat* but also through less overtly instructional programmes such as *Ready Steady Cook* (a ‘celebrity chef’ cookery game shown on BBC1) appeared to contribute to the stock of knowledge, but its messages had to find their place alongside these other sources and be measured against them.

The language of advertising was also well understood. For example, viewing advertisements for snack foods, household members recognised the low nutrition, high salt and high additive features of the foods depicted, but accepted that advertising would, conventionally, conceal these potentially unappealing attributes. However, the advertisers’ promotional messages dominated discussion of the videotaped extracts. The virtues of certain snack foods (tastiness, convenience, low cost) were asserted and discussed with general approval before their nutritional content was remarked upon and when the issue of nutrition emerged such products were seen as offering an alternative to what might be ‘healthier’ but more troublesome, expensive or time-consuming to prepare, or less likely to be appetising to the majority of the household. In this sense then, these advertisements’ persuasive message held sway, despite the audiences’ recognition of these products’ nutritional shortcomings.

Balanced against this, the question of health advice surfaced during the discussions of extracts from programmes exhibiting a science/health frame and it appeared that there was awareness, acceptance and even some support for the fact that television programmes featuring food would frequently contain messages about ‘healthy eating’. The exchange quoted below illustrates this clearly.

Q: Would you associate this programme [*Food and Drink (BBC2)*] with healthy eating?

Mr 05: Oh yes, in a big way. Although some of the recipes they do on it have a fair amount of cream and stuff in, but they always emphasise what's good for you and what you should be doing and what the government think. It
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seems to be bringing the government, or the government agencies, into it
doesn't it?

Messages about healthy eating were well understood, but there was some
evidence of frustration at what was perceived as confusion and conflict between
health messages. This seemed to encourage a fatalistic attitude to eating and health in
several cases. In a discussion of another programme extract using a predominantly
science/health frame, one young person said:

But you eat what you eat, don't you, and I think half the problem is as well that the
different people have got different views completely; somebody will say it's bad
for you and somebody will say it's good for you and you don't know where you
stand anyway.

Nicola (Household 06; aged 16 years)

In a discussion about health advice in another interview, fatalism was especially
evident:

Q: So [...] have you changed your diet in any way as a result of any health
advice?
Mr 04: Not really.
Mrs 04: No we don't tend to take much notice because usually you just feel that
somebody is just jumping on a bandwagon somewhere saying don't eat
eggs, you know, don't eat this, don't eat that. You're going to die one day
anyway, so why worry? You know.
Mr 04: We don't have a lot of anything in particular, do we?
Mrs 04: What will be will be at the end of the day.

One woman was clearly exasperated about the contradictory nature of the media’s
health message:

Mrs 10: How come they keep coming out with these different food research, you
know one year it can be “That’s OK for you” and the next year it’s not,
and then it dies down and it’s OK and, you know, balanced?
It must be stressed that conclusions about this can be considered to be no more than provisional and tentative, but these last findings suggest that an albeit rather vague, general message about healthy eating has reached the respondents in this study, it appears that this message is undermined by what is perceived to be its contradictory character, a contradiction that is echoed in the contrasting food portrayals mentioned earlier in this article. On this evidence there seems also to be a process of distancing taking place between the audience and the message.

Summary and Conclusion

Food appears on British television very frequently. More than two thirds of the programmes analysed in the research reported here contained visual or verbal references to food either within the programmes themselves or in commercial breaks. There were around ten references to food in every hour of television in the sample. Advertisements for foods dominated the commercial breaks and in these advertisements low nutrition, fatty and sugary foods outnumbered other foods. The findings also show that television’s message is not the simple, ‘unhealthy’ one that previous studies have claimed: television programmes balance advertisements with fewer images of low nutrition foods and more images of ‘healthy’ foods. Qualitative analysis revealed three interpretive frames in the media coverage of food: a science/health frame, a consumer frame, and an instructional/craft frame. Each represents a distinct way of thinking about the topic of food and eating, emphasising different issues and ideals. None of these is dominant but different frames find expression in particular programme types.

The findings from the research with households suggest that in considering the social influences on food choice it is important to avoid too tight a focus on television viewing, as if this is the key source of food information. Television may be
an important source of images and information about food, but pieces of output seem to be filtered and assessed by viewers a) one with another and b) against other, non-media sources of information. A concern with television content can all too easily lead us to ignore these filtering and balancing processes and jump to conclusions about ‘effects’ and ‘influence’.

The household members in this study were able to decode television’s food frames to provide explanations and justifications for their own or their family’s eating habits – even when they are contradictory. Just as television content about food is far from an ordered message, so audience engagement with food images on television is equally disorderly.

There is little evidence of television’s influence of the kind implied in orthodox critiques of television’s contribution to food choice. Television’s contribution may be better understood in the way it offers a kind of repository of different frameworks of understanding, different meal types, eating patterns, foods, ideas and prescriptions about food use which help to give shape to the patterns of food consumption in the home. Television images of food can be thought of as a kind of resource on which members of the household may draw to help them make, and make sense of, food choices.

This being qualitative, small-scale research, the scope for generalisation is limited. Larger samples selected according to a number of key demographic variables – e.g. household size, income, social class, ethnicity – would be needed before firmer conclusions could be drawn. However, the findings presented here are suggestive of the extent and the ways in which food on television may contribute to household decision-making about food. Those who have the responsibility for the promotion of health in a television-saturated society may find it helpful to reflect on the finding that just as there is no single ‘unhealthy’ message in television’s representation of
food and eating, there are ‘healthy’ as well as ‘unhealthy’ food-related behaviours manifest in households. The filtering of television’s messages that goes on in the households in this study suggests that television can be thought of as a resource that is just as likely to reinforce the ‘good’ as it is the ‘bad’ in today’s eating patterns.

Health and nutrition educationists may also find it instructive when planning health promotion initiatives not only to be aware of the range of messages about and ways of thinking about food that television offers its audience but also to note that audiences at large are likely to exhibit a high level of awareness of these. Perhaps the most important finding from this study is that in several cases the contradictory messages manifest in media output seem to have led to fatalistic attitudes among viewers and a mistrust of authoritative voices on the subject of healthy eating. This represents an important challenge to those concerned with the development of effective information giving in this key health area.
Notes

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2. The research was given financial support by the British government’s Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, Grant Numbers AN0913/AN0931.

3. The NFA merged with the Sustainable Agriculture Food and Environment (SAFE) Alliance to form Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming in 1999.


5. The five food groups are: Fruit and vegetables; meat, fish and alternatives; fatty and sugary foods; bread, other cereals and potatoes; milk and dairy foods.

6. A complete presentation and discussion of the findings from this part of the study lie beyond the scope of the present paper (see Dickinson, 1998, for a wider-ranging account).

7. Households in the sample were anonymized prior to data analysis by numbering them from 01 to 12.
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