Media Monitor

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Volume IX Number 6 November/December 1995

Food for Thought

How the Media Cover Food Safety and Nutrition News

Major findings:

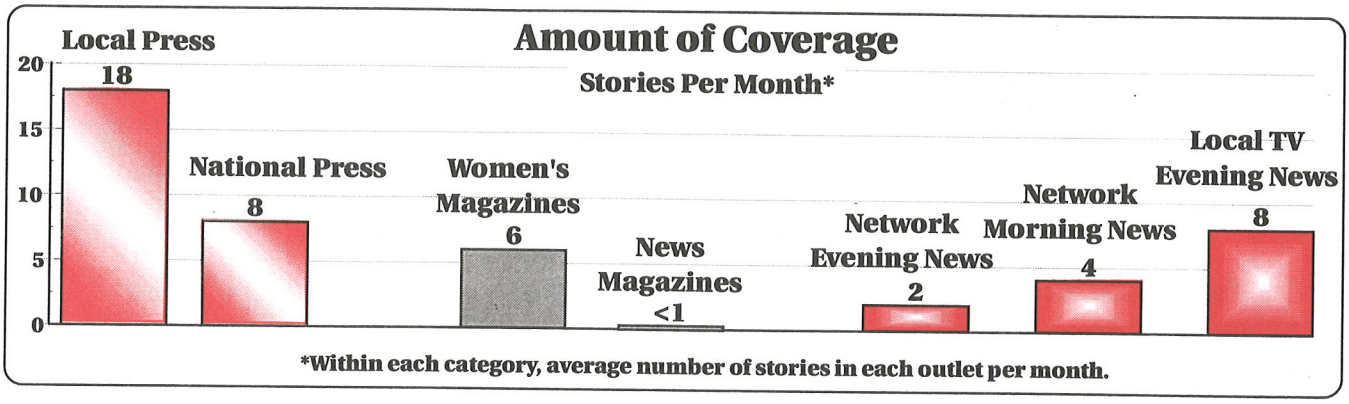
- **Juicy Story** The networks averaged more O.J. Simpson stories in a day than they did on diet and nutrition in a month. *Page 2*
- **Home Cooking** Local papers and TV stations averaged twice as many stories as the national media. *Page 2*
- **Saturated Coverage** Nearly half of all stories mentioned the need to reduce dietary fat. *Page 2*
- **More Is Less** Two out of three sources criticized artificial food additives and contaminants. *Page 4*
- **Missing Ingredients** Most advice on what to eat didn't mention how much, how often, or any cumulative effects. *Page 4*
- **Science Lite** Most stories on new research didn't discuss the study's sample, funding, or statistical significance. *Page 5*

Americans rely heavily on news accounts to learn what foods they should choose, how much they should eat, and how their dietary habits affect their health. This month's *Media Monitor* examines what a wide range of media outlets had to say about diet, nutrition, and food safety issues. This special issue was supported by a grant from the International Food Information Council Foundation.

Surveys show that the American public gets more news about food safety and nutrition from the media than from doctors and dietitians. What kind of information are they getting? To find out, we analyzed three months of news coverage (from May through July 1995) from 37 different local and national news outlets (listed on p. 6) ranging from big-city newspapers to television talk shows. We examined the major topics, sources, themes, and opinions about food and diet in 979 news reports that together made up nearly 10,000 column inches of text and 11 hours of airtime.

There were no cases of saturation coverage that might skew the overall picture, in the manner of past health scares over Alar on apples and cyanide in grapes. Instead, a wide range of newsworthy events spanned the spectrum from research on pesticides in baby food to controversies over meat safety and food labeling regulations to the discovery of a "fat gene" and its implications for dieters. Thus, the overall media profile charted here is probably typical of contemporary food safety and nutrition news.

(continued on page 2)



Local Heroes

Both print and broadcast media gave considerable attention to diet and nutrition news. But local media outlets gave these topics more play than did national outlets. For example, the *Rocky Mountain News* carried four times as many articles and almost twice as many column inches of text as the *New York Times*. Local television stations averaged four times as many stories on their evening news shows as the networks did. The nightly newscasts on the major broadcast networks aired as many stories on O.J. Simpson every two days as they did on diet and nutrition during the entire three months of our study.

Fat City

Fat consumption attracted twice as much coverage as any other nutritional topic. Nearly half of all media reports mentioned some aspect of the need to reduce dietary fat intake. In addition, dietary fat figured prominently in the media's description of food content and the health risks and benefits associated with dietary choices.

The media accurately reflect scientific consensus on dietary fats as an important risk factor in chronic disease. But such massive coverage seems disproportionate to the role any one factor plays in diet and health. For example, a 1993 CMPA survey found that scientists rate the lack of fiber just behind dietary fat as a risk factor of cancer in America (*Media Monitor*, Nov/Dec 1993). Yet the media cited dietary fat as a cancer risk factor 47 times without ever mentioning the cancer risk associated with a low fiber diet.

Moreover, these totals do not include the substantial coverage of obesity, except when news stories attributed this problem to fat consumption (as opposed, say, to calorie intake or lack of exercise). Eating fat and getting fat were separate -- but sometimes overlapping -- topics of news coverage. However, the media warned against fat consumption four times as often as the overconsumption of calories. And most discussions of the causes of obesity targeted neither food intake nor exercise but genetic predisposition -- the result of heavy media coverage of the "fat gene."

Leading Topics

	Mentions	Discussions
Fat Consumption	429	232
Disease Prevention	176	123
Vitamin/Mineral Intake	169	74
Calorie Intake	166	54
Cause/Irritate Disease	125	66
Anti-oxidant Intake	95	38
Cholesterol Intake	95	25
Foodborne Bacteria	94	81
Sugar Intake	90	16
Fiber Intake	71	7

Note: Discussions occupied at least 20 seconds of airtime or two paragraphs of text.

Magic Bullets

Disease prevention finished second only to dietary fat on the list of leading media topics. Preventing illness through proper diet was a major theme of the coverage, especially in the women's magazines. But many articles treated individual foods as magic bullets rather than components of a balanced diet that is conducive to good health. Still, pieces like *Better Homes and Gardens'* "7 Cancer Fighters That Really Work" and *Good Housekeeping's* "Garlic: Food or Medicine?" conveyed considerable

nutritional information packaged as advice to ward off disease.

The amount of media coverage of various foods was inversely related to the number of food group servings recommended in the USDA's Food Guide Pyramid. The most media attention went to the meat group, which is found in the middle to top of the pyramid. The least attention was given to breads and cereals, which are found at the base of the pyramid, and therefore should make up the largest part of a balanced diet.

The attributes of foods that attracted the most comments were their fat, vitamin, and mineral content. Fruits and vegetables and meat, poultry, and fish all won frequent praise as good sources of vitamins. But red meat and dairy products were often criticized for being high in fat.

Leading Attributes of Foods

	Number of Mentions
Fat Content	204
Vitamins	132
Flavor	106
Fiber	53
Nutrients	55
Calcium	49
Vitamin C	39
Calorie Levels	38
Protein	37
Anti-oxidants	34

Dos and Don'ts

Beyond providing information about food content, the media offered frequent advice on food choices and their health effects. News reports featured nearly 2,500 assertions about the harms and benefits of particular foods and dietary choices. These claims and suggestions made up a kind of informal risk-benefit calculus associated with diet and health.

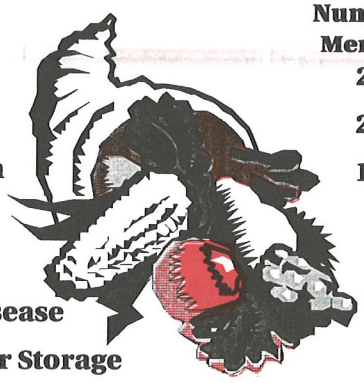
Fruits and vegetables were the foods most often linked to health benefits, while high fat intake was the most frequently reported source of harm. The benefits most commonly associated with good food choices were reductions in heart disease and cancer risk. The most frequently mentioned harm was foodborne illness resulting from bacteria. News stories warned about the danger of foodborne illness more often than heart disease and cancer combined. A Congressional debate over meat inspection regulations contributed to the appearance of nearly 100 stories mentioning the E. coli 0157:H7 bacteria alone.

Overall, the media provided far more advice on foods to seek out than on those to avoid. But the positive association of food choices with good health was balanced against frequent warnings about the dangers of foodborne illnesses and, to a lesser extent, manmade food additives and contaminants.

Nationally-oriented news outlets were more "positive" about food choices (i.e. more likely to stress benefits over harms) than were local news outlets. The most upbeat news appeared in magazines, which mostly bypassed transient health scares and focused on how readers could improve and extend their lives through proper diet.

Among newspapers, the nationally-oriented "prestige press" accentuated the positive, while strictly local papers focused more on the downside of diet and nutrition. This difference reflects the relatively lengthy, balanced and analytic reports found in news sources like Jane Brody's *New York Times* column and the *Washington Post's* weekly "Health" section. All television formats stressed harms over benefits, but network news was slightly less likely to do so than was local news.

Leading Benefits of Food



	Number of Mentions
Reduced Heart Disease	285
*Reduced Cancer Risk	203
General -- Improved Health	157
Weight Loss/Control	98
Improved Fetal Health	64
*Increased Resistance to Disease	57
Improved Freshness/Longer Storage	37
Increased Energy/Vitality	36
Reduced Foodborne Illness	31
Longer Life	23

***Note: At least 40% of these mentions indicated that the benefit was a possibility rather than a certainty.**

Food Fights

The media covered several controversies involving food safety

and government nutrition policy. Among the debates that made news were the health effects of manmade additives and contaminants, the causes of foodborne illnesses, and the efficacy of food labeling regulations.

The food industry drew frequent criticism for the dangers of artificial food additives and contaminants. News sources were nearly twice as likely to criticize the harmful effects of these substances as they were to acknowledge their benefits. Notably, environmental and health activists were quoted five times as often as food industry sources on this issue.

This imbalance reflects the ability of activist groups to drive the news agenda on food safety issues with highly visible reports, such as a study on pesticide residues in baby food released by the Environmental Working Group. More generally, the two most visible activist groups -- the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) and the Natural Resources Defense Council -- were quoted more frequently than all food industry trade associations combined.

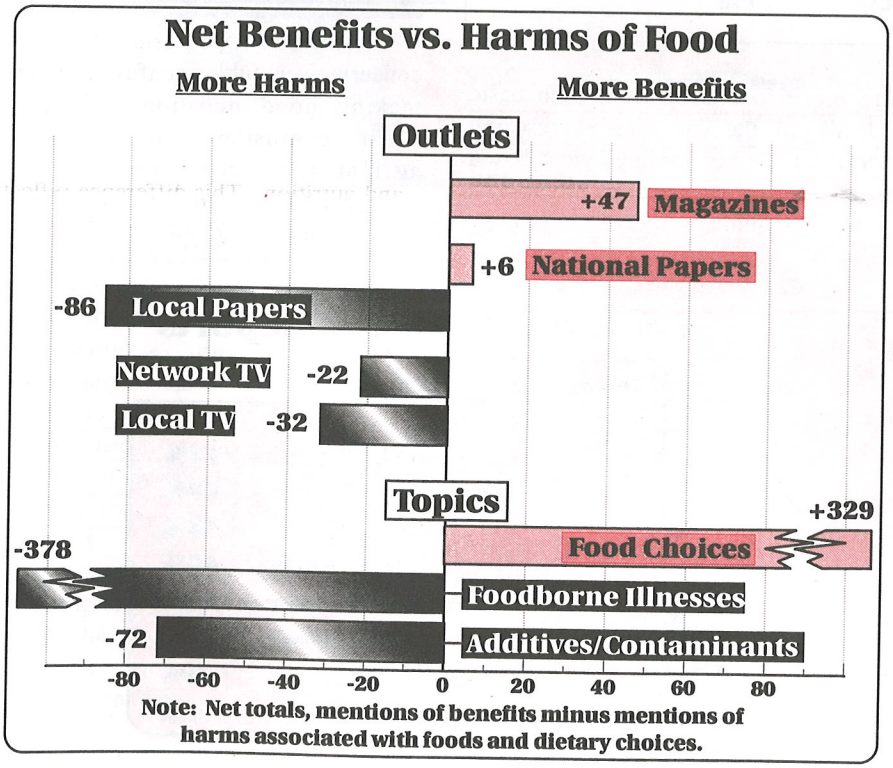
Leading Harms of Food

	Number of Mentions
Foodborne Illness	386
General Damage to Health	197
*Heart Disease	181
Cancer	133
Allergic Reactions	58
Weight Gain	53
Digestive Ills	50
*Fertility/Reproductive Problems	37
*Developmental Problems	22

*Note: At least 40% of these mentions indicated that the harm was a possibility rather than a certainty.

A majority of sources blamed industry for outbreaks of foodborne illness, and a plurality argued that it was primarily industry's job to solve the problem. For example, an activist with the Safe Food Coalition complained in the *Kansas City Star*, "What these guys really don't want to do is acknowledge that they really have pathogens in their products." (5/30) Only a minority of sources acknowledged responsibility across the food chain for foodborne illness prevention, including consumer responsibility and inadequate government oversight. Example: "Home cooking causes at least half the 80 million cases of food-caused illnesses across the country ... [because] we don't handle, store, or cook meat correctly." (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 5/3)

The first anniversary of new federal standards for food labels provoked debate over their impact. Although opinion was split over whether the new labels improved eating habits, most sources praised the current standards and endorsed further changes to include additional information. For example, the *New York Times* quoted the CSPI's Bruce Silverglade, "The fact that Uncle Sam has forced the industry to spill the beans has forced the industry to make healthier products." (5/10)



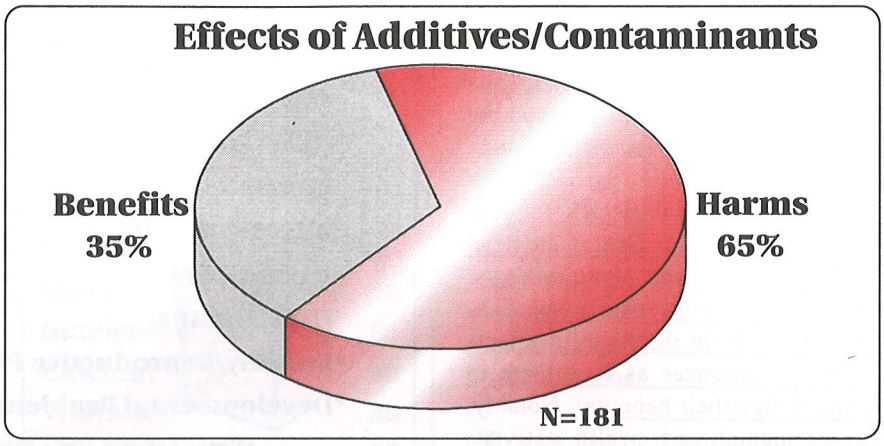
Missing the Big Picture

A lack of context was the greatest failing of food safety and nutrition news. Stories frequently featured advice on what to eat or avoid. But they rarely specified how much, how often, or to whom the advice applied.

Fewer than one out of three assertions about the risks and benefits of dietary choices made any mention of the amount consumed, and only one out

of 14 discussed the frequency of consumption. Only one story in six identified any group (such as children or pregnant women) as especially susceptible to the effects being discussed. Finally, only one story in 100 dealt with the question of cumulative effects.

Foods were frequently termed "good" or "bad" without considering their role in the overall diet. Snack foods got a consistently bad press, with frequent criticism of their fat and sodium content. For instance, the *Chicago Tribune* quoted a health activist's criticism of theater popcorn: "The food everybody thought was good was in fact unbelievably bad...." (7/9)



Context of Dietary Choice

Advice on Food Includes...

Amount Consumed	**31%**
Risk/Benefit Group	**17%**
Frequency of Consumption	**7%**
Cumulative Effect	**1%**

Once again, such articles rarely qualified their judgements by discussing the amount consumed or frequency of consumption. Few even mentioned the importance of moderation.

Simplifying the Science

Just as discussions of food choices often lacked context, stories on new research findings frequently omitted details that would let audiences judge the relevance of the results to their own diets and nutritional needs.

Only a minority of the reports on new studies described the samples on which research conclusions were based (such as whether a sample was randomly selected). Questions of statistical significance and causal inference were almost never addressed. One out of four news reports failed to mention such basic details of the study as its research design (whether findings were based on laboratory experiments or surveys, animal or human subjects, etc.).

Such omissions are important, because many dietary recommendations were pegged to the appearance of new studies. For example, it would be difficult for readers of the May issue of *Self* to know what to make of research findings described in their entirety as follows: "Pregnant women who don't eat enough protein early in their pregnancies may be limiting the development of the placenta and, eventually, fetal growth, according to research from Baylor College of Medicine."

Public Confusion

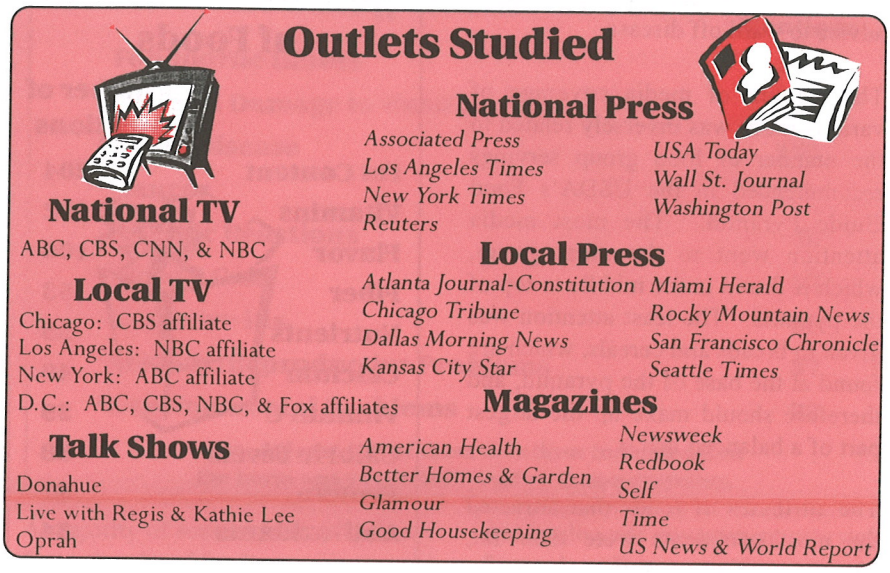
Numerous news stories expressed concern over public confusion about making good nutritional choices. Their confusion was variously attributed to conflicting advice, research, and advertising claims. But a 1995 survey, conducted by The

Context of Research Reports

Report on Study Mentions...

Research Design	**74%**
Dosage	**68%**
Sample Size	**43%**
Publication of Results	**40%**
Sample Selection	**22%**
Funding	**11%**
Casual Inference	**4%**
Statistical Significance	**1%**

American Dietetic Association and the International Food Information Council, found that half the American public blames a culprit that was never cited in these news stories -- confusing media accounts.



Media Monitor (Copyright 1995) is published bi-monthly by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a non-partisan and non-profit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly individual and organizational subscriptions are available.

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