Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back
Michele Simon
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Appetite for Profit is an uneven collection of war stories about nutritionists, lawyers, and public health researchers, as told by a lawyer who fought the food industry and lived to tell the tale. I suspect that those who have been targeted by food companies and their mouthpieces—Coca-Cola, Pepsi, McDonald’s, Kraft, General Mills, National Restaurant Association, Center for Consumer Freedom, etc.—will be nodding in agreement, but people like me, whose work does not invite such attention, will be left cold (at least for much of the book). So, to make the best of it, you will have to skip the first sixty-eight pages, as they are unreadable, a tit-for-tat against the Center for Consumer Freedom (ccf), which is funded by big food companies as their virulent mouthpiece. The rhetoric is at the same Orwellian level, the difference being that food companies are much more powerful in terms of lobbying and advertising. Hence, what they pronounce, even their propaganda, appears calmer; what Simon has to say comes across, paradoxically, as both shrill and smug. Like people caught in a fight, she has a difficult time bringing the rest of us into it.

Furthermore, Simon’s use of evidence is rough and choppy. She tends to selectively quote authorities with whom she agrees. Tendentious excerpts often replace facts, where simple presentation of the data might have been more persuasive; and Simon’s self-involved logic is quite irritating. For instance, in May 2006, in a deal with the Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association, soda companies promised not to sell their beverages in elementary and middle schools. In response, Simon writes:

I was particularly incensed by this move because for several months prior, I had been part of a team of ten attorneys and public health groups who were in private negotiation with lawyers from the American Beverage Association, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo. From these meetings… we got close to an agreement that was oddly similar to the one announced with Bill Clinton. Apparently, Coke and Pepsi were shopping around for the best PR opportunity; it looks much better to have a former president at your side than a bunch of lawyers. What a brilliant strategy by the soda companies, telling us they were bargaining in good faith, all the while planning another deal. Do we really need more evidence that food and beverage companies cannot be trusted? (p.18)

Is this evidence of anything but lost business for Ms. Simon? Why should we care? Wouldn’t the public health outcome have been the same in either case?

The book improves once Simon gets past such odd arguments and settles her score with ccf, moving on to point out how McDonald’s has been “nutriwashing” its food and making all those “premium salads” appear so much healthier than they are. It begins to pick up by Chapter 4, and by Chapter 13, the last, it is transformed, surprisingly, into an original, uncompromising, and logical narrative. The volume is no longer a screed but a trenchant critique. The difference lies in Simon’s use of evidence and her tone. Her big point is this: we cannot trust Big Food (her capitals) with the public’s health. Companies exist to make money, and that is their social responsibility. Public health legislation by a democratic government is what should protect us. All this talk about obesity, physical fitness, personal responsibility, and public-private partnership is mostly smoke-and-mirrors that serve the corporate agenda and never the public’s health. The easy sentimentalism of “can’t we all just get along” is hogwash, and do-gooders begging for reconciliation end up as corporate handmaidens. So let us get on with it and pass some laws, preferably federal. However, if we’re stymied by corporate lobbying, then let’s pass local, municipal legislation to ban junk food in schools, abolish ads for sugary cereal on children’s television (by
giving the Federal Trade Commission rule-making power), zone out fast-food restaurants around schools (as we have done with alcohol), ban the use of toys to sell food, clean up the USDA food pyramid, and mandate nutritional information on restaurant menus. As a lawyer, Simon assures us that there are no First Amendment limits here. By now the teacher in me wants to soften the rhetoric, but the father of three children cheers on.

I have seen my older children fall prey to soda at school and Cap’n Crunch on tv, put on too much weight, and then lose it with the help of that other hyper-advertised commodity, cigarettes. It was an unrelenting battle to feed them right against the power of advertising, convenience, and cool. Now I want to protect my six-year-old. Hence I insist on getting those soda machines out of his school. Here my lived experience as a father begins to align with Simon’s role as a crusader.

In the final chapter, she does a remarkable thing. She recognizes what I thought was irremediable—concerns about burgeoning obesity rates and qualms about the moral panic surrounding it. The problem was posed in a recent critique by Julie Guthman.1 After complimenting Pollan for writing a beautiful critique of the American food system,2 Guthman notes that “in evoking obesity, Pollan turns our gaze, perhaps inadvertently, from an ethically suspect farm policy to the fat body. One of the questions I want to raise in this essay is whether it is necessary for fat people to bear the weight of this argument.”3 She then questions the evidentiary basis of the obesity epidemic, resurrects the long-discussed problems with BMI as a measure of obesity, and points to the complexity of metabolic rates that confound simplistic contentions of calorie-in, calorie-out. Most important, she insists that obesity is no longer a mere empirical fact but is entangled in dubious moral and aesthetic discourses, which the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault would have Harryed as the production of a problem that does not exist. All this talk makes fat people appear stupid, ugly, and out of control, and those who are talking, thin, virtuous, sexy, and in control. That raises the question: Can we bring up the issue of obesity—for instance, my concerns as a father—without tripping all over ourselves?

Guthman’s cliché of critical thinking is intoxicating at first blush but eventually appears to be a little too clever, a little too sophisticated, for its own good; often putting too fine a point on the nature of evidence in the relationship between diet, health, and disease (as cigarette companies long did concerning the connection between smoking and illness); perhaps even too skeptical, which leads to more debate-society discourse than policy initiative. I must concede that Guthman does suggest alternatives in her other writings but appears to have gotten carried away by her own rhetoric here. I think she makes a point worth engaging: be cautious about the obesity epidemic and work to transform the food system. In her final chapter Simon sharpens that actionable strategy in a section on “The Obesity Trap.” Her point is well thought through and worth quoting at length:

While I am grateful for the many dedicated public health advocates who have joined the ‘fight against obesity,’ I find this trend problematic on a number of levels. I understand that focusing on obesity makes sense in certain medical contexts—for example, with people who suffer from obesity-related health problems such as diabetes. However, I am concerned that recent efforts to frame nutrition policy around obesity are short-sighted and ultimately best serve the interests of the food industry.

If you think about it, obesity is only one symptom of a much larger, underlying problem: a profit-driven, corporate-controlled food supply. We should devote our energies to fixing the root problem (the food system) rather than squander our precious resources on symptoms like obesity… Like other distractions, the obesity focus diverts attention away from larger policy questions and dumps the task of solving diet-related health problems squarely in the lap of the individual. Framing obesity as a strictly individual or “lifestyle” problem fits perfectly with industry’s “personal responsibility” mantra (pp. 307–308).

Furthermore, Simon writes, “Another problem with the obesity focus is that it serves to reinforce and perpetuate the prejudices that many Americans have against overweight people… We also shouldn’t perpetuate America’s weight-loss obsession—thanks in large part to the $50-billion-a-year industry that caters to this mantra” (p. 308). She concludes: “I prefer to avoid the term obesity altogether” (p. 311). Instead, Simon keeps her focus on a critique of the food system and poses thoughtful questions about the compatibility of public good and the profit motive, a stance that goes further and is much more radical than Guthman’s jab.

I only wish Simon had had a better editor who would have forced her to abandon her early diatribes against CCF. That would have made this book much stronger, as well as shorter by at least sixty-eight pages.

NOTES

