

Foreword to the Special Issue: Sins of Commission (and Omission)

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It is all so very obvious.

We are getting fatter; day by day, year by year, country by country. In the UK two-thirds of us are now overweight or obese, and these doleful statistics are reinforced by everyday observation: so many of us are no longer walking, but waddling; bellies everywhere bulging out between trouser and top; train seats, hospital beds, coffins no longer able to accommodate our ballooning bodies. The cause of this malaise is as obvious as is the corpulence: we are over-eating – most particularly we are gulping down far too much processed food laden with fat, salt and sugar. Our sedentary lifestyles surely don't help, but it's our diets that so blatantly put on the pounds: you can't walk off junk food; you just have to stop eating it. The awful collateral is also staring us in the face: devastating and unaffordable epidemics of diabetes, CHD and other chronic diseases. And most obvious of all is the moral bankruptcy that leaves our children unprotected in the face of this existential threat.

For the shameful reality is, as this special issue shows again and again, we are doing next to nothing to avert this crisis. Our leaders at a national and international level are behaving like rabbits caught in the headlights: bewildered, paralysed and doomed to be bulldozed by the oncoming unstoppable force. We the people, meanwhile, carry on swallowing the fat, salt and sugar and grow ever fatter.

This self-destructive tableau can be explained in just three words: profitability, palatability and promotion. Our food system, like the rest of our economy, is dominated by multinational corporations whose *raison d'être*, codified in the fiduciary imperative, is to maximise shareholder returns. Profits, therefore, are all. Consequently marketers seek to 'add value' to their products so that they can sell them at a higher price and optimise their earnings. In the case of food products, adding value typically means processing basic foods into more complex ones. A simple potato will sell for a few pence per pound, but when sliced, fried and salted into crisps or chips the price multiplies. Similarly, milk is a supermarket loss-leader but becomes a premium product when converted into creamy fruit yoghurt.

Unfortunately, although processing increases the monetary value of basic foodstuffs, all too often it vitiates their nutritional value. This is because, as in the case of potatoes and milk, processing involves adding some combination of fat, salt and sugar – each of which is a key marker of an unhealthy diet. At the same time nutritious constituents are

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removed, as with wholegrain in the manufacture of white bread. The problems with this systematic debasement of our food are again entirely self-evident.

The unswerving pursuit of profit has two other unfortunate and grimly familiar repercussions. First the addition of fat, salt and sugar makes foods extremely palatable and moreish. We are drawn to them and love to consume them to excess. Again, this we all know; who hasn't wrestled with the allure of another chip or chunk of chocolate? Second, the difference in price between the basic and the processed product furnishes promotional budgets. If fresh milk sells for €1 a litre, but when converted into yoghurt sells for €3 a litre, much of the €2 difference can be spent on marketing. Furthermore, the yoghurt keeps better and is easier to transport, making it even more profitable and generating additional marketing spend. This is why crisps and yoghurt are supported by extensive promotion and evocative branding, whilst potatoes and milk are neglected orphans. Decades of research – reviewed again in this issue – attest to the power of this promotional activity, particularly over our children. Again, it is all so very obvious; if a multinational like Coca Cola is able to spend \$3bn a year buying the best marketing brains and deploying their most persuasive campaigns in every conceivable real and virtual space, children, in their trusting naivety, will fall at their feet.

The truth of all this is as unpalatable as junk food is tasty. Our children are being put in clear and present danger by food marketing, yet our leaders prevaricate and dissemble. A combination of neoliberal prejudice and fear of corporate power means they are not taking the robust regulatory action that is needed – despite pleas from WHO, backed by irrefutable evidence, for them to do so. A hundred years ago, when factories were putting workers at risk, strict laws were passed to make the workplace safe; today when cars threaten to poison us, statutory protections are enacted. But our children get no such consideration. Instead, as the junk food sharks circle, our leaders distribute voluntary guidelines and ask politely that they mind their table-manners.

Civilised societies pride themselves on protecting their citizens from harm – especially the young and vulnerable. This special issue, documenting Europe's failure to protect children from the obvious threat of junk food driven obesity, shows it is failing this test.

Sadly, it is all so very, very obvious.