

Swallowing secrets

By Peter Senker, University of East London

Joanna Blythman, *Swallow This: Serving up the food industry's darkest secrets*, Fourth Estate, London. 2015

Food quality includes taste and texture which both involve individual tastes and preferences; and also nutritional qualities which can be assessed more objectively. The science of nutrition is developing continually, and assessments of the nutritional value or damage caused by various food ingredients change. For example, there have been important changes in scientific knowledge about the relative damage to human health caused by eating various types of fats; and about the extent of damage caused by ingesting various type of sugar.

The companies which dominate the packaged food industry are typical of companies which control an increasing proportion of the world's economic output: their principal motivation is to increase the profits which accrue to their shareholders. These companies want us to believe that what goes on in food factories is essentially the same as home cooking. But the evidence in this book demonstrates conclusively that this is thoroughly misleading. To increase their profits, processed food companies use production methods which enable them to produce vast quantities of packaged food at very low cost per unit. Their production processes put extreme stress on the ingredients they use, so the companies make enormous efforts continuously to find and use new ingredients which will tolerate extreme stresses without breaking down. They combine sugar, processed fat and salt in their most quickly digested forms, and this combination may be addictive. These foods contain chemicals with known toxic properties, and the industry has a long history of defending its use of controversial ingredients such as partially hydrogenated oils. Food deteriorates the longer the time from when it is picked or harvested and the time when the consumer eats it. Lengthening shelf life is a major goal of packaged food companies because it can take time to sell large quantities of packaged foods to consumers spread over wide geographical areas.

The drive to make and sell large quantities of products quickly and cheaply and to keep these products "fresh" for a long time are only some of the factors which make packaged food producers continue to use new cheap ingredients which can help them to fulfil such objectives. They are aided in these endeavours by numerous suppliers of a wide variety of ingredients, few of which are used in domestic cookery. Changes in ingredients affect the taste, nutritional and health qualities of food and its texture. Through their own testing procedures, and from outside advice and sometimes legislation, food manufacturers often understand that many of these changes could have adverse consequences. They respond by continually take some ingredients out of the food they manufacture, and adding or substituting further new ingredients. The rate of

innovation (if it could be measured) is indeed most impressive. But in this book Blythman suggests that the net result of these innovations is to ensure that the quality of the food which is ingested by its consumers is generally poor in terms of taste, texture, nutritional qualities, health and safety. There is substantial evidence that consumption of processed food could be a significant cause of obesity, chronic disease and the rise in reported food allergies worldwide.

To secure large profits, the companies need to have a large quantity of products to sell, each item having cost them the minimum amount to produce, package and distribute to customers. Cost minimisation involves processes such as frying at high temperatures using oils which will cope with such temperatures and which can be used as many times as possible without breaking down. Various sorts of additives are used to economise on oil use. The extreme heat and length of time needed to fry some popular foods creates health hazards.

Food manufacturers have linked strategies for marketing the vast quantities of food they produce. They spend vast quantities of money promoting the taste and nutritional benefits of the food they produce through advertising in television, in the press, and through promotion in supermarkets, and in social media. The principal influence of scientific knowledge is exerted through regulatory bodies set up by governments and international organisations.

Food manufacturers and the organisations which represent them devote a lot of effort to securing representation on such bodies. They dominate the deliberations and findings of such bodies worldwide. For example, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was established in 2002 to ensure that foodstuffs regulations were harmonized throughout the European Union to ensure “free and unhindered competition”. EFSA’s President was also a member of the Board of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). ILSI’s 62 corporate members include Danone, Kellogg, Nestlé’s McDonald’s Europe, and Unilever. ILSI is entirely funded and operated by corporations and carries out numerous scientific studies for the EU on consumer exposure to contaminants. (George 2015: 40-45) Governments and international organisations welcome food industry representatives’ domination of regulatory bodies to prevent their states’ acquisition of reputations for strict regulation. Such a reputation could impair a state’s ability to retain the operations of food companies which would risk loss of the employment and contribution to economic output which food processing companies provide. For most so-called democratic states, ensuring that their populations benefit from a healthy diet is a relatively minor consideration.

To secure the profits that companies work hard for, they have to produce many millions of packets of processed food at very low cost per unit, and they need to persuade customers to buy them. This is facilitated by the availability of mass media of communications –such as newspapers, television and social media –whose profitability is dependent on them conveying advertising messages to consumers at low cost. The British government’s current policies of reducing the BBC’s activities can be seen as part of a strategy of encouraging communications

media to concentrate on stimulating economic growth, as opposed to wasting public money on entertaining and informing the public.

Blythman has shown conclusively that food companies' products are generally not very nutritious – and are often harmful to consumers' health and/or toxic. The companies which dominate the packaged food industry are typical of companies which control an increasing proportion of the world's economic output: their principal motivation is to increase the profits which accrue to their shareholders.

In the present dominant world economic environment, the behaviour of food processing companies is rational. In Britain, companies' goals coincide closely with the British government's goals for the industry. The government Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs wants to “promote a British brand, grow exports, improve skills, attract high-flyers and harness data and technology so that the industry can innovate and create jobs.” The British Government is “hugely ambitious for the future of food and farming and its potential to drive growth– that's why we are bringing together industry to set out a vision for the future with a long-term plan to grow more, buy more and sell more British food”. (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs 2015)

It is a higher priority for most governments to attract and retain employment and increase economic growth through the operations of corporations, than to seek to ensure that their populations eat healthy nutritious foods. Despite the thoroughly researched findings of this excellent book, food companies' priorities are unlikely to change any time soon.

References

George, S. 2015. *Shadow Sovereigns: How Global Corporations are Seizing Power*. Cambridge: Polity.

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. 2015. “Industry kick-starts work on Great British Food and Farming Plan”. 16 July. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/industry-kick-starts-work-on-great-british-food-and-farming-plan>