



Not While I'm Eating; How and Why
Americans Don't Think About Food Systems
Findings from the TalkBack Testing

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BACKGROUND

Experts and advocates have had considerable success in educating certain groups of Americans about the nature of, and problems with, our food system. Various producers, retailers, and consumers are working hard to re-think and re-make food systems into something healthier, more satisfying and more sustainable. Yet most of the U.S. population remains persistently indifferent to the whole question of where their foodstuffs actually come from and whether and how systems might be improved. Without a change in the public's thinking on issues related to food systems, real progress is likely to be very slow.

This research is part of a broader effort, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, to understand why and how Americans manage to remain blind to the real processes of food production and distribution – despite the central role of food in American life. Cultural Logic's cognitive elicitations with Americans were designed to explore the public's default patterns of thought related to food systems because, for better or worse, it is by means of these understandings (cognitive and cultural “models”) that people think, learn and communicate. Even if they are offered information that is critical from an expert perspective, people's thinking on the issue can be derailed by the faulty assumptions, misguided inferences, conflicting values, and gaps in knowledge that characterize their current dominant frames. Communications that are meant to be comprehensible and persuasive to the broader population must be crafted with these default understandings in mind – otherwise, messages are likely to be disregarded, disbelieved or misunderstood. In effect, they cannot make their way into the public consciousness.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It will not surprise readers of this report that Americans think very little about where their food comes from. There are a variety of straightforward reasons why this should be the case: For the majority of living Americans, food has always been available and acceptably healthy. Furthermore, fewer and fewer Americans participate in food production, or even witness it. It is partly due to American exceptionalism in such matters that the U.S. stands in such historical contrast with most other cultures in the world, when it comes to interest in how food is produced.

Besides these most obvious reasons, though, there are other powerful factors that prevent Americans from thinking about and engaging with the topic of food systems. The importance of these factors is that *they have the power to derail productive thinking even when experts try to focus the public's attention on this usually-ignored issue area*. This report focuses on two default modes of thinking about food, both of which obscure and distort the “Big Picture.” The first and more dominant of these modes is based on people’s own Lived Experience – providing “little picture” perspectives, along with emotional incentives *not* to think about food systems. The other is a mode that allows for a “big picture” of a sort, but is too generic (and misleading) to be very helpful.

The Dominance of Lived Experience

Most of the time, for most Americans, thinking about food is dominated by default understandings and emotional stances that are based on the lived experience of eating, shopping, cooking, being served, and so forth. Various aspects of people’s thinking about *food* make it much harder for them to think about food *systems*.

- The big picture is essentially “crowded out.”

The more familiar and natural patterns of thinking associated with the experiential domain of food are so rich, complete and cognitively satisfying that people typically have no sense that there is something more to know, and they are not asking the questions experts want to answer for them. It is difficult for new information to find its way into the established, little-picture ways of thinking.

- New information is translated into new (and less productive) terms by the dominant models.

The default patterns of thinking are so powerful that new information (presented by advocates, for example) can become *confirmation of existing understandings*, rather than helping people achieve new understandings. Warnings about food risks, for instance, are interpreted as confirmation that *individuals* need to make smarter choices, and that *individual foods* should be avoided, since “healthy food” and “healthy eating” are understood in these comfortable, little-picture terms – as opposed to having anything to do with systems of production, marketing or cultural patterns.

- There is emotional pressure to ignore problems in the food system.
The lived experience of food creates close ties in people's thinking between food and nurturance, and various aspects of contemporary culture reinforce people's sense of being passive "receivers" of this food/nurturance. Along with a default Consumer Stance, which prompts people to trust the places where they shop, for example, the Food Receiver stance discourages people from taking responsibility or thinking critically, and encourages a trusting complacency – people are motivated to block out troubling information, and in fact, *any* information about the ultimate sources of food. Importantly, this pattern of denial goes well beyond people's conscious sense that they'd "just as soon not know," and shapes their thinking at a more unconscious level.

Food systems as just another example of "Modernization"

When Americans *are* induced to move outside their comfortable patterns of reasoning about food, and to think about food production in broader terms, their thinking reflects a generic sense of how the "modern" world works – incorporating fragmentary information about food systems, but not adding up to a fuller picture that could help people understand the importance of the changes advocated by experts.

Members of the public can, when pressed, offer simple sketches of some of the basic elements of the American food system, including large, corporate farms (which may be relatively high-tech); distribution to restaurants and stores (especially including supermarkets); extensive processing of basic foodstuffs into ready-made products; and government guarantees of food quality. At first glance, this sketch seems to correspond well (if very incompletely) to expert models. Upon closer examination, though, it is clear that rather than a simplified food system model, people are operating from a generic model of Modernization, and plugging in their smattering of factual knowledge about food and food production. While this public model overlaps with expert understandings, it also entails significant distortions, unfortunate assumptions and cognitive "blind spots" such as the following:

- The degree of modernization is exaggerated.
Applying the generic narrative of modernization to food, people may believe that family farms are extinct, or else entirely irrelevant to the actual food supply; that all food production is in the hands of multifaceted conglomerates; and that farms are almost indistinguishable from factories.
- Modernization is seen as unstoppable.
Since modernization as a general trend is seen as an inevitable, impersonal progression, Americans often believe the same about food systems. There is nothing people do to "cause" modernization, and nothing they can do to stop it or substantially guide its progress.

- Problems are the “price of progress.”
The most natural way of understanding problems within a Modernization frame are as *costs* of the benefits we all want. Attempted “solutions” to the problems may be seen as misguided interference which threatens the benefits.
- Certain kinds of information have no place and are filtered out.
If people’s thinking about food is shaped by a Modernization schema – rather than by a (missing) Food System model – then information that doesn’t fit that schema is harder to focus on and remember. This helps explain why people don’t understand Sustainability (preserving things as they are sounds like a contradiction of modernization), Diversity (of crops or of farmers – modernization is largely “about” standardization), Agricultural Subsidies (which can seem like Quixotic bulwarks against modernization), or Organic farming (which can seem like an irrelevant side current, or another attempt to resist modernization).

More generally, the lack of a specific model of Food Systems means that certain kinds of information has no place to “stick” in people’s minds. (It is a well-established principle in the cognitive sciences that facts are not stored like isolated objects in the mind, but as parts of broader organizing “schemas,” “models,” or “frames.”)

The Limited Educational Value of Food Scores

Food scores have some power to raise awareness about larger issues related to food production, but their effects are severely limited by the powerful default patterns of thinking described above.

- Food scores may serve simply to confirm the generic Modernization narrative.
Rather than adding new understandings to people’s repertoire, food scores are just as likely to simply confirm familiar ideas about the inevitable costs and risks of progress. Since people are generally passive and complacent about progress, a particular food score is not likely to lead them in productive directions.
- Familiar little-picture models reassert themselves quickly in people’s thinking.
Even if people catch a brief glimpse of a systems perspective on food, they are likely to return to a more natural mode of reasoning focused on lived experience and the “little picture.” Food safety issues become questions about smart *individual choices* at the store, or disappear altogether as people’s Consumer and Food Receiver models take over, allowing them to forget the uncomfortable information and resume their enjoyment of the products of the food system. The news media’s brief, episodic discussion of food safety “incidents” makes it especially easy for people to take in information without learning anything of substance.

RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis presented here is based on interviews conducted by Cultural Logic in 2005 with a diverse group of thirty individuals in Indiana, North Carolina, California and Rhode Island.

Subjects

Subjects were recruited by various means, including postings on Web sites and through a process of ethnographic networking – researchers began with “seed contacts” in each of the target communities, and developed a pool of subjects from which a diverse range was selected for interviewing.¹ The sample included 15 women and 15 men. Subjects’ ages ranged widely – 10 subjects were in their teens or 20s, 9 in their 30s, 5 in their 40s, and 6 were 60 or older. 20 of the subjects were European-American, 4 were African-American, 3 were Asian-American and 3 were Hispanic-American. The sample also included a mix of political orientations (11 conservatives, 1 independent, and 18 liberals), and of people who live and grew up in urban, suburban and rural areas. Educational backgrounds also ranged widely (high-school only to graduate degree) as did occupations.²

Elicitations

Subjects participated in one-on-one, semi-structured, recorded interviews (“cognitive elicitations”), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging.

Cognitive Analysis

This type of data-gathering – and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more established and long-standing, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences,

¹ See discussion of “snowball sampling” as a key technique of ethnographic research in H. Russell Bernard’s *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 2nd Edition. 1995. (pp.97ff).

² Note that, rather than looking for differences between groups as some research methods do, cognitive elicitations are designed to identify common patterns across groups of Americans.

think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.

Cognitive research works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world (cognitive and cultural *models*) can guide people's understanding of an issue in ways they do not even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default models is that they often lead people to understandings that they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. For example, average Americans recognize on an intellectual level that their food comes from a complex process of production and distribution that is very important to their quality of life, yet habitual ways of thinking about food create cognitive "blind spots." People who *know better on some level*, still are easily derailed from thinking about Food Systems because of well-established, default understandings of the world. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.

FINDINGS 1: INTERFERENCE FROM DOMINANT MODELS

One of the chief obstacles to engaging the public on issues related to food systems is people's powerful tendency to think in modes that exclude the knowledge that expert messages are based on: *People rarely think about Food Systems, because their thinking is dominated and guided by "Little Picture" understandings of Food, based on their own lived experience.*

The experience of food

The natural and default understandings that guide people's thinking about food most of the time are rooted in their direct experiences of Shopping, Cooking, Serving, Being Served and Eating. When asked what was important to them about food, people inevitably answered with models rooted in their direct, everyday experience of food.

I think good food is enjoyable, something that tastes good. I like to cook, so for me, good food is something that I know I cooked, . . . I like trying new things. You know you're getting pleasure out of eating something that you haven't had before.

Suburban female, age 29

If you've ever taken your time and you had no obligations, just chilling, eating food with your family and just hanging out, it's like the greatest thing. Yeah. At family get-togethers. Definitely food. Food's awesome. ... No, to tell you honestly, I really don't care where the food comes from. I'd rather like to think that it came from somewhere and somebody got paid for it and everybody's happy but I'm sure it's not the case all the time.

Rural male, age 25

People's thinking about each of these experiential domains is dominated by rich sets of familiar, cognitively satisfying models. Food is variously construed as:

- nutrients for a body;
- a matter of individual pleasure and aesthetics;
- a source of comfort or opportunity for exploration;
- a way through which people construct and live a particular "style" of life (individual, regional, ethnic, and so on);
- a matter of personal health and self-discipline;
- a daily chore;
- a significant expense.

Unfortunately, and to a striking degree, these understandings do not require any “Big Picture” grasp at all of where food comes from.

The significance of the dominance of these lived-experience models is that they can actively interfere with and derail attempts to communicate about broader issues.

Crowding out other models

To some extent, little-picture models of food simply “occupy the space” in people’s minds where experts would like to introduce new information and patterns of understanding. Because their current understandings feel so complete, people typically don’t seek out information about food systems – *they are not asking the questions that experts would like to answer.*

More insidiously, these default models guide people’s thinking in ways that distort the kinds of information provided by advocates and experts.

Example: A Model for Production and Distribution: the Store and the Cook

Cognitive models already exist that explain where food comes from, but these are decidedly not the models that experts would like people to think in terms of. Models based on lived experience only follow the chain of production and distribution back one or two steps – to the cook and to the store. This Little Picture reflects people’s familiar patterns of giving and receiving food, and so, from a cognitive perspective, it “explains” food production, distribution and consumption, blinding people to broader understanding. When people are questioned about the food they eat, they find it hard to think beyond the retail outlet.

Q: When you think about the food that you eat, what are the steps that get it to your table, whether it’s bread or produce or whatever?

A: Oh, you mean like the steps -- in other words shopping, or microwave?

Q: More like, How was it produced? How did it end up in the grocery store?

A: That, I’m not as familiar with.

Urban female, age 33

A: Fish? Where does it come from? Well, it comes from the ocean.

Q: Sure. But so how does it get here?

A: Oh um, I never really thought of that. I guess they fish for it.

Q: OK. Who do you picture fishing?

A: I don’t know, kind of I guess just fishermen. I don’t know exactly.

Q: What’s the picture in your head if there is one?

A: Well when I do buy fish, I normally buy it at a Chinese market. It’s like an indoor market. It’s a supermarket or like a grocery store. But it’s just for

Chinese food... and if I'm going to buy shrimp or fish or anything I'll buy it there. Because it's fresh.

Urban female, age 37

Information “translated” by dominant models

When experts offer information about some aspect of food systems, this information often ends up reinforcing people’s current understandings rather than introducing new ones. This is because the public’s dominant, pre-existing models already seem to “explain” the facts experts want to talk about, so that “new information” in fact confirms and strengthens the established understandings that are based on the lived-experience, little-picture perspective.

Example: Personal Health as Good Individual Food Choices

From an expert perspective, there are important health effects that emerge from properties of Food Systems. From the perspective of the public’s little-picture models, though, health effects arise from *individual food choices* and the characteristics of *individual foods*.

The average person makes food choices first and foremost based upon availability, aesthetics, price, and convenience. But Healthfulness is one area where many Americans do a considerable amount of cognitive work. Their cognitive models of healthy eating give them ways of thinking about the repercussions of food choices, taking in complex and changing information, making calculations, and making partly moral judgments about success (i.e. being “good” and disciplined) and failure (i.e. being “bad” or undisciplined). However, people remain relatively blind to the health effects of Food Systems. Instead their thinking takes place entirely within a Little Picture.

- “Individuals can and should choose healthy options.”

This stance is fundamentally about individuals and not about Food Systems, and it incorporates ideas of morality, maturity and self-discipline. It is a person’s bad choices that lead to ill-health.

Look around you. Everybody who weighs 300 pounds has made an unwise choice. Health stuff is in the media. Nobody doesn’t know that a stick of butter is too much for one day. And a lot of people probably use a stick of butter in a day.

Rural female, age 65

It takes a certain amount of discipline to [eat healthy], and I don’t think the general public has that. Not to eat unhealthy. To incorporate more vegetables into a diet. And why would I think that? Because I see it on the news about obesity running rampant.

Suburban male, age 30

This Little Picture model that focuses upon individuals, their knowledge, their personal discipline, and their “moral fiber” pre-empts any explanation that tries to take the effects of Food Systems into account. It is a powerful item of “common sense” that is very difficult to contradict.

And viewed through this powerful cognitive lens, a Systems View (e.g. “corporations are irresponsibly marketing unhealthy food”) sounds like an “excuse” for people who lack the wisdom or strength of character to choose wisely.

- “Healthfulness is in the Ingredients, not the System.”

In the cultural models that link food with health, food is assembled from ingredients (like fat, or preservatives, or whole grains), each of which has some impact on an individual body’s health. This limited view offers no help in understanding systems-related health issues, which can include epidemiological effects across populations, environmental impacts, and the effects of corporate ownership on food quality.

Ultimately, the models imply that the response to most problems with food is not to intervene in the systems that create the food, but rather to use different ingredients, and for individuals to make better choices. If people are to learn to associate human health with healthy food systems, they will need a great deal of help in seeing these connections and adopting a broader perspective than the ones they are comfortable with.

Emotional resistance created by dominant models

Not only do the public’s default models “occupy the cognitive space” and “answer the questions” people have about food, they also involve emotionally important stances toward food, many of which are counterproductive from the perspective of experts and advocates. These stances can act powerfully against people’s ability to think critically (or at all) about food systems.

Case 1: Food is about “Being Nurtured”

Importantly, many of our most intimate associations with the lived experience of food (and our sense of where it comes from) involve nurturance of one kind or another. Eating, sharing food, taking part in meals and gatherings, being treated to a night out are all examples of this lived experience. There is also a basic and universal set of associations that relate parenting to giving food, and childhood to receiving food. These comfortable and well-entrenched ways of thinking about food actually *discourage* thinking about the bigger picture, and food systems in the expert sense.

- Passive Gratitude

Part of the pleasure and appreciation of food is accepting the role of receiver, of being nurtured. Being fed, looked after, cared for, tended to, treated, and so on, involves a

passive stance of acceptance that calls for gratitude, not analysis. This also clearly places the source of food at the nurturer, especially the parent and the cook. This Little Picture is self-contained, familiar and powerful and the Big Picture has no role to play here.

Good food reminds me of something. Whether it be a holiday, or something my mom cooks. Often to me good food is comforting. It satisfies a desire or craving a lot of times. For me food is a memory thing.

Suburban Female, age 24

If people associate eating with being nurtured, they are motivated *not* to think hard about where the food is actually coming from, beyond the immediate offerer. And given the current American system of food production and distribution, average Americans find themselves more and more often in the passive role of receiver/child:

- With the growing reliance upon processed foods and convenience foods, people cook less and rely upon professionalized food systems more for preparation and presentation.
- Because of an individualistic social system, we are eager for nurturance in our lives, and food is a common resource. The desire for “comfort foods,” regardless of who actually prepared them, is a case in point.
- The consumer industry caters to this need. Advertising focuses on the nurturing dimension of food, commonly portraying food as love, and often supplying iconic nurturant figures as spokespeople. People speak about commercial food providers in much the same way as they would family members.

I love McDonalds. I've had it ever since I was a little girl. I used to call it "Donald's." That was practically my first word.

Urban female, age 19

If I was still married, my wife would be cooking the food and whatever she decided, whether we're going to be watching our weight or eating a lot of protein . . . Now, for breakfast I go up to McDonalds and I get a McGriddle, which keeps me going through the morning. And then I'll get a wrap or a salad or something for lunchtime. I'm mostly in the hands of what, whoever prepares food.

Urban male, age 62

For all these reasons, food regularly appears in front of us without our needing to understand much about it, as we rely upon others to think about it for us. The passive

stance towards food – which discourages critical engagement with food systems – is perpetually reinforced from all sides.

At some level, no one wants to think ill of their nurturers. The experience of feeling nurtured depends on trusting the “nurturer” – whether a parent, a small farmer, or Archer Daniels Midland. The nurturing role is morally good by default, and not compatible with the troubling truths about food systems. The appropriate response to being nurtured is gratitude, deference and acceptance. To respond otherwise is ingratitude, an attitude most people try to avoid.

Efforts to get people to dwell on problems of the (nurturing) Food System can violate people’s deep desire to be secure, to be nurtured and to successfully nurture others. Ultimately, the Food Receiver stance promotes denial about the problematic nature of food and food systems. When people are asked to start with their familiar, lived experience of food and “think outwards” about the larger food system, they will often be only reluctantly critical.

Case 2: The Consumer Stance

Like “Being Nurtured”, the “Consumer Stance” is an extremely powerful default model that interferes with people’s ability to understand and critique the big picture of food systems. The Consumer Stance is a general, little-picture orientation for Americans that limits and distorts thinking on many different issues (including health insurance and energy, to name two others), and in a variety of different ways:

- It implies a hierarchical relationship between provider and buyer, and a child-like passivity on the part of the consumer. □
- It makes the idea of a “system” (which is broken, dysfunctional, or in need of improvement) hard to focus on. □
- It narrows an individual’s scope of action to merely choosing from pre-existing alternatives. □ (A consumer does not typically imagine or create alternative products, but merely chooses to buy, not buy, or search further.)

Like the model of Healthy Eating, for instance, the Consumer Stance – towards food or anything else – is a little-picture perspective that is perfectly self-contained and “good to think.” It seems to explain how the world works, and limits the kinds of questions people ask.

People’s thinking about food fits very naturally within the Consumer Stance perspective. Understandings that focus upon the table and the point of sale are perfectly coherent, and feel complete, without any reference to the broader picture of where food comes from.

Following this model, even if people do notice problems with food, they act only through consumer choice. For instance, if they want to reject factory farming, they opt out by purchasing free-range meats or organic produce – they do not seek to reform the Food System. In the Consumer Model, appeals to reform the food system seem at best superfluous and at worst an infringement on people’s freedom of choice.

Even when challenged to think abstractly about the implications of Food Systems, people tend to fall back to understandings based on consumer choice.

For the most part I think the food [at the farmer's market] is more expensive because it's grown more carefully and it's cared for. I guess I see myself as being able to make some choices. I do not make a lot of money but I can make some choices. I think so many people don't have choices. And I think that's too bad . . . Or they don't have the knowledge, or they see the coupons at the supermarket and go for the frozen food that's half-off that week.

Rural female, age 53

If you know it's local, then you might know who's growing it. And what they're doing to it. Then you have an easier time picking and choosing the kinds of things you're willing to ingest. Whether it's chemicals or genetically altered foods or whatever.

Rural female, age 19

- The myth of Consumer Demand

The Consumer stance includes a specific view of how products “come to be.” There is a well-established and widespread presumption that consumer choice creates “demand,” which is then met by suppliers – things are there on the shelves because consumers want them there. While this is partly true, the model exaggerates the degree to which consumer choice shapes the system. It almost completely obscures the ways in which consumer behavior *is created, shaped and constrained by* the Food System.

To the extent that people stay within the Little Picture of the Consumer Stance, they find it difficult to understand the power that systems of production and distribution have over their daily lives.

A: They've engineered the tougher skin so the apple can travel.

Q: So what do you think about that?

A: I guess it's ok. I don't see any harm in the apple. It just doesn't taste as good. It's not as comforting as an apple that you can bite into easily. But as long as people put up with it and go on buying it, I don't think a tougher skin hurts the apple.

Rural female, age 65

Following this model, the only appropriate way that people shape the system is to “vote with their pocketbooks.”

- The “Decent Merchant”

It is difficult for people to think of products that enter their homes as having morally problematic origins. The fact that the clothes we wear are often produced in sweatshops (and even by slave labor) has proved shocking to consumers; yet it is easy for most of us to quickly return to our usual way of thinking. Food is particularly intimate – it enters not just our homes but our bodies – and thus is hard to associate with bad origins.

- The “Fantasy Food System”

In many ways, direct and indirect, American food marketing creates a parallel, imaginary food system that encourages people not to think about the real system. This system is partly based on nostalgic, traditional images and partly on pure fantasy. Marketers display images of sunny kitchens instead of factories; happy, flower-eating cows donate their milk for the children; and the magic of cartoon elves stands in for the work of cookie-making chemists. The bucolic farm scene that is still central in American stereotyped understandings of rural life is often pictured. These images are more attractive and in many ways a better fit with default thinking than are the real systems.

Q: Would you have any sense of where the milk that you would buy would come from?

A: Local dairy, local cows I would guess.

Q: If you picture where those cows are what comes to mind?

A: They're in a nice green pasture somewhere.

Q: Do you figure that's probably the truth or is that how you would like to picture it?

A: That's the way I'd like to picture it. They probably eat out of a trough and don't wander around very much.

Urban male, age 62

Ads or campaigns that address the bigger picture (health, environmentalism, social justice, etc.) face a tough uphill battle against the fantasies reinforced by marketers.

A Cumulative “Gravitational Effect”

While members of the public are capable of critiquing aspects of the American food system, the unconscious patterns we have described in this section exert a powerful pull that bring people's thinking back again and again into line with comfortable models. It is hard to “keep people on track” in a critical discussion about food systems, and even though people can sometimes *talk* critically about the topic, they may *act* with the trust and complacency consistent with the models described here.

In the next section we consider more carefully what happens as people are able to maintain attention on (relatively) realistic understandings of the American food system.

FINDINGS 2: FOOD SYSTEMS AND MODERNIZATION

When pressed, average Americans are able to provide a reasonably coherent, if very impoverished, description of a larger food production and distribution system. The account they offer includes some of the basic elements of what experts would like Americans to consider as they think about food and where it comes from. It is clear, however, that people are essentially *making this account up as they go along* – they have no established understanding that they can easily call to mind, and instead they must scratch their heads and imagine what the “real story” is, or must be. Their method for doing this appears to involve taking fragmentary pieces of knowledge about food production that they have absorbed and “plugging them in” to a very familiar, pre-existing cultural model – their understanding of Modernization. The resulting account includes many gaps and distortions, and can be thought of as a simplified caricature of actual U.S. Food Systems – one that is probably as counterproductive as it is helpful, from the perspective of advocates.

An Educated Guess: Modernized Food Systems

Because modernization is related to changing food systems in the understandings of experts as well, the average person’s systems view, such as it is, does overlap with an expert model.

Agricultural System

People surmise that food is produced primarily by large-scale agricultural operations, relying upon machine technology and scientifically-developed inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They don’t assume that the food system is dominated by owner-operated family farmers who sell directly to retailers. Instead, people often sketch a system more characterized by corporate-client, manager-employee, and buyer-seller relationships.

Economic System

People have a sense that farming success is not just dependent upon weather, soil and pests, but also upon market forces, competition and government policies. They see “economic forces” as a primary cause of changes in the food system.

Distribution, Retail & Marketing System

They can more or less visualize a complex and modern distribution system, where large companies buy up, process and truck products to supermarkets, food “factories”, and restaurants.

As far as the US goes I'm sure they probably raise [cows] on large cattle farms and, you know, slaughter them and probably pack them up, put them on trucks. Maybe they send them to factories to package them, but I'm not sure about that. Then they probably send their trucks from there and go to each individual place.

Rural female, age 23

Regulatory System

They are aware of regulatory agencies like the FDA and USDA, which are entrusted with inspecting and ensuring the safety of the food supply.

Dynamic Systems

They believe that all of these systems have been evolving in tandem with other changes in society as a whole.

Yet despite these apparent parallels between expert and lay thinking, there are very significant problems in the public's understanding, as it is shaped by the Modernization narrative.

Distorting Effect 1: Exaggerating the Degree of Modernization

While it does bear seeds of truth, the public's model of modernization is much more rigid and extreme than the experts'.

Pretty soon I don't think they'll even have to have land. I mean I guess they're probably going to be able to just do something in a laboratory or something.

Urban female, age 37

The modernization story “takes over” in Americans’ minds, and the resulting caricature of modernized agriculture, food processing and distribution actually interferes with people’s ability to become more knowledgeable and sophisticated about existing Food Systems. One important problem is that because people tend to hold such an extreme view of how agriculture has changed, alarming facts presented by advocates might actually strike people as good news (!) by comparison with what they already believed.

Small, owner-operated, family farms gone or irrelevant

While in some modes of thinking, Americans picture a rural landscape filled with bucolic family farms, Americans also “toggle”³ to a view in which family farms are basically a

³ We use the term “toggling” to refer to switching between simultaneously held yet contradictory beliefs about the world. People toggle in response to different situations or contextual cues.

thing of the past. In this understanding, most of the food found in the supermarket comes from a system almost entirely dominated by corporations and large-scale operations.

I think we probably tend to think of the classic farm, like a small family-owned farm, but I think in reality they're all pretty large factories nowadays, sprawling complexes with warehouses, and lines and rows and rows of chickens and livestock and all that. . . I would imagine it's run by some corporate interest, I just don't think it's Ma and Pa Kettle anymore.

Suburban male, age 35.

They're gone. The small farmer's gone.

Rural female, age 65

A variant of the understanding that family farms are (nearly) extinct is the idea that they are on the landscape – and help form part of the idyllic Rural Utopia people hope still exists – but have little or nothing to do with the “real” food system. In other words, people may hold a model of the Bucolic Family Farm that is unconnected to their understandings of the food they buy and eat, or with the whole of the Modern Food System. In effect, words like *farm*, *farmer*, *crops*, *cows*, and so on can actually divert people from thinking about the food system altogether.

I live by a bunch of farms but they aren't really that full scale, ship to ten different supermarkets type farms, just your little stands. I actually go to the farm and buy stuff from the farm itself. . . It's not like they really give it anywhere else.

Rural male, age 25

The small family farms are almost nonexistent anymore. You have a lot of large corporation farms. . . Those constitute the majority of the volume of food that's produced. . . I've seen a lot of people with small tracts of land, who I don't think farm so much for production or profit. I think they farm for their own consumption.

Urban male, age 34

I think [family farming] is just fading. It's like the blacksmith. It's going to get to the point where it's not a career so much as almost a calling.

Suburban male, age 40

In this common way of thinking, family farms – along with farm stands, farmers markets, and “subsistence farming” – represent a sort of parallel universe to the Modern Food System. The farmer’s market is an old fashioned, inefficient (inconvenient), quaint place

populated by idealists or poor entrepreneurs. It is not really integral either to an individual's shopping needs or to the "real" economy as a whole.

Smaller food processors and distributors gone

People visualize a complex and modern distribution system, where large companies buy up, process and truck products to supermarkets, food "factories", and restaurants. Again, this image mirrors what people believe has happened to business sectors across the spectrum.

A: Wheat's grown, it's harvested...

Q: What's the place where it's grown?

A: A field, I don't know. On a large corporate wheat farm owned probably by Beatrice or one of those companies. It's harvested, brought to a mill, ground. [The mill] is probably owned by the same people. Kind of like the McDonald's model – from coming up out of the ground 'til it gets on the shelf. The bread's baked in one of their bakeries and shipped by their trucking company.

Suburban male, age 40

"Farmers" replaced by "Managers and Laborers"

The concept of "farmer" doesn't fit well with the Modernized food system that people are trying to describe. Experts should note that the term means different things to different people. When questioned about food systems, people often translate the farmer into a kind of manager, or they drop the term altogether and describe a system of corporate owners, managers and worker-laborers.

[The farmer's typical day is] probably not getting out and milking the cows at four in the morning and driving a plow through the fields all day long. It's much more like being a factory worker, or foreman of the factory, going around, making sure things are working as they need to be working.

Suburban male, age 35

Industrialized agriculture

Low-tech, old-fashioned agrarian practices give way to high-tech, industrialized technologies. People believe that modern agriculture relies upon machine technology and automation. The images they call to mind are drawn from factories rather than traditional farms.

My family, my grandfathers and my dad they were all steel workers. Farming is done like that. It's mass production.

Urban male, age 62

When I drive by they're running the tractors and stuff. But then you don't see a huge amount of that. So I'm assuming there's a factory somewhere where they do their thing and they're running machines. I'm assuming there's a lot of automation to it these days.

Suburban female, age 37

Corporate farms are almost run like the Department of Public Works of any city. All the combines, all the equipment is kept in a central location and they have thousands and thousands of acres to tend and crop dust and water and irrigation and all that.

Suburban male, age 40

In sum, people's sense that agriculture has been transformed is somewhat accurate but also exaggerated in ways that are destructive. For instance, the fact that there are still about 2 million family farmers in the U.S. sounds like surprising (good) news to average people.

Distorting Effect 2: Modernization as an unstoppable force

The Modernization Model comes pre-assembled with rather rigid understandings about change – including the ideas that it is irreversible, inevitable and to a great extent outside of direct human control. It also entails a mix of benefits and costs. But, according to the model, like it or not, progress happens.

These in-built prejudices about the general nature of change present particular challenges to advocates wishing to make changes specific to food systems – especially changes that seems to violate the model. People's default assumption is that altering the nature of Food Systems is akin to diverting the course of modernization, a project most people would regard as foolish or hopeless.

I look at corporate farming as sort of a necessary ... evil? Not even evil. It's, uh, neutral. It just is what it is. It's the way food is grown. It's not good or bad.

Suburban male, age 40

According to the logic of the Modernization model, it is essentially impossible to go “backward” – things go from old and pre-modern to new and modern. This creates a strong prejudice that modern things (e.g. chemicals, corporations) are of the future, while more traditional things (e.g. family farms or herbicide-free tilling) are of the past and outmoded. Given the model, some expert messages “make sense” while others don't. For instance, it makes sense that big corporations replace small grocers, but the idea that butchers can out-compete meat-packing multi-nationals violates the “common sense” supplied by the model.

Darwinian change

In the public model of Modernization, there is no active agent – modernization is a process beyond the control of people. In the American understanding, it is driven by a kind of Darwinian competition between old and new ways. For instance, people explain the decline of the family farm and the spread of new technologies as a result of finding “more efficient” or “more competitive” ways of doing things. It requires a very pressing reason to “go against” the natural logic of this process.

Q: It doesn't sound like you see it as an important goal, to try to get more farmers farming.

A: I'm for the small farmer, but I can't see them being real successful against the big corporations.

Q: It's a little bit like they're dinosaurs?

A: Yeah unfortunately. They can't compete with the big corporations.

Suburban female, age 37

We have become a more modern society. I think that fewer people have been able to make a living farming and so they turn to other things. Obviously inventions and technology have changed farming a lot and made it easier to do some things and more difficult to do others. A hundred years ago, most people farmed. And now today most people don't farm.

Urban female, age 24

Passivity in the face of Modernization

The Modernization model frames change as something that happens to you. You can adapt or resist it, but as an individual you are not the one who makes the system change. It is a model of transformation that inspires a passive, or at best a “reactive” stance that stresses accommodation or resistance.

A: You don't have the little farms. They have all been bought up because they haven't been as efficient.

Q: Would you see any cons to that?

A: I suppose the social aspects of not having a lot of people engaged in agriculture, but they can get jobs doing something else. They've had to. There's been that social change that's been forced upon people but that's OK. Farming is a tough way to make a living I think.

Urban male, age 62

Modernization is All-Encompassing.

Institutions across the spectrum in the US have been growing in scale and complexity, and according to the Modernization view, food production, distribution and processing have been changing more or less in lock-step with everything else. Since many traditional characteristics of life seem to be disappearing, like the intimacy and power of local communities, the scope of action and influence for individuals, and so on, the same should go for food systems.

In short, people do not assume that Food Systems are a separate case, and this magnifies the sense of inertia that accompanies all of these trends described above.

Distorting Effect 3: Problems as “The Price of Progress” or “Need for More Progress”

Just as the Modernization model entails rigid and unhelpful understandings of change, it also entails characteristic ways of understanding problems. When people are reasoning (unconsciously) in terms of the model, any given problem related to food is understood in terms of a problem related to modernization.

There are two key types of problem encompassed within the American model of modernization. The first and more dominant is the idea that progress inevitably means the loss of certain positive features of life. Even though Americans tend to view themselves as people who embrace innovation and progress, their model of modernization also includes drawbacks such as increasingly intrusive technologies, bureaucracies, corporations etc. Another unpleasant entailment of progress is people’s increasing powerlessness in the face of larger and more indifferent systems in various spheres of life. Critiques of food systems are swept up into this general model of “what is wrong in the world.”

My sisters all work jobs and they don’t sit down and eat locally grown. They get microwaves and they stick something in there and that’s their dinner and that’s just the way it has to be . . . When I was growing up, it was just simpler. But now there’s more people here. There’s more people living in big cities. In the more suburban areas it’s just a more complex life. You don’t have time to prepare and cook. And so you eat crap basically. [My sisters] try to do the best they can but none of that stuff that you put in the microwave was grown by farmers. Or if it was, it was grown far away and shipped over and frozen somewhere.

Suburban male, age 44

These and other kinds of change are understood as the “price of progress” in a cost-benefit sense. When it comes to the details of change, there is a good deal of uncertainty about what problems ought to be solved and which ought to be accepted as drawbacks that are necessary to allow the good change people want.

Q: How do you feel about [trying to preserve family farms]?

A: If you get to the supermarket you're always guaranteed that your food's going to be there. Whereas if you go to a little farm, there's a limited amount there. People are busy already. So unless they plan on doing all their food shopping on a farm on a weekend, and just taking their time, I don't think they'll go for the little farm thing.

Rural male, age 25

We can either have the set up that we have today where there are farmers making food and there are lawyers doing law and there are writers writing books or we can go back 200 years ago where everyone lives on a farm and everyone makes their own clothes and their own furniture.

Rural female, age 53

According to the cost-benefit logic of modernization, trying to “solve” a problem could prove disastrous if it means interfering with the benefits of progress. Clearly, this kind of thinking is incompatible with a simple Problems and Solutions presentation of downsides of the American food system. People are likely to resist some solutions even when they understand them.

A second way of understanding problems, within the Modernization model, is that progress simply hasn't made enough headway in certain areas, yet. This is the case, for example, with some people's understanding of food safety.

I'm entirely for the genetically altered food, because to me genetically altering it just reduces the need for any chemical, pesticide, fertilizer. That will be the wave of the future. And once people get over the bugaboo of fearing it, then I think that what you're going to find is that organic is going to take on a whole different meaning.

Suburban male, age 40

[Food] is safer than it used to be, but I don't think it's as safe as it could be. One of the things I read up on a few years ago was irradiation of food. How that would really dramatically increase the safety of food and yet the FDA wouldn't let them do it.

Urban male, age 50

The Modernization model leads people to expect that the advancing frontiers of progress will eventually catch up with a problem like this and solve it. The best approach for an individual or a community may just be to “stay out of the way.”

Distorting Effect 4: Information filtered out by the Modernization model

Of course average Americans are not, and will never be, experts on food systems. There are relatively basic facts that they tend not to know – for instance, virtually no-one in the thirty elicitations showed any awareness of herbicide use as an issue.

The relevance of an organizing model like Modernization is that it means that certain pieces of information are more likely to stick and be absorbed than others, because they fit the model and make perfect sense. Other concepts or pieces of information don't fit the frame, and are therefore “hard to think.” The Modernization story itself has no role for herbicides, for example, so unless people have had a very specific and vivid exposure to the topic (as they have with the toxic effects of some pesticides) they are likely to remain oblivious to it.

The following are several other areas where people do not understand an issue in the way experts would like – at least partly because the issue does not fit neatly with thinking about modernization:

Sustainability

There is virtually no familiarity with the term, except among a small percentage of active, environmentally-oriented individuals. People do not know what “sustainability” means in regard to agriculture, and cannot guess why our food systems might be unsustainable, except in two senses: Some are aware that soil “wears out” over time, and many guess that the term “sustainability” refers to economic viability – i.e. the idea that it is harder and harder for farmers to pass their farms along to their children.

The very concept of sustainability (preserving things as they are) is a *direct contradiction* of normal attitudes toward progress. Clearly, the Sustainability argument is one that has yet to be made in an effective way with the public – and just as clearly, this argument will be fighting uphill against understandings of modernization.

Diversity

People do not understand the continuing diversity of farm-types and farmers, nor why such diversity might be practical and desirable. They aren't at all aware of the issue of monoculture, or of any problems this might create.

These issues also seem to contradict the modernization model in which one of the familiar “costs” is standardization and bland efficiency.

Subsidies

Average Americans have only a very limited sense of what agricultural subsidies are, and no real sense of the way that they shape food systems. They are usually understood as assistance to family farmers, to allow them to stay in business one more year, for instance.

Q: What do you think the purpose of the subsidies is?

A: Well, it's this idea that farmers can't possibly exist on their own as a business entity, that they need the government to prop them up

Suburban male, age 35

This type of approach certainly seems out of step with the passive, hands-off approach that modernization models call for, and if anything, can be understood as a direct attempt (possibly well-justified, possibly Quixotic) to *combat* modernization.

Organic

While there is a shared understanding that organic food is grown without pesticides, there is a striking lack of consensus about the details of organic farming and whether it makes sense.

Unfortunately, organic farming is often seen mainly as a form of resistance to modernization – one that some people indulge in for idiosyncratic reasons.

I don't really understand organic food. I know that it's food that's grown where they don't use any pesticides or anything to kill of the bugs, so there's not really any artificial chemicals or anything on it. I don't mind if they kill the bugs! It matters not to me.

Suburban female, age 29

This clash makes it difficult for people to recognize organic food as a move towards a superior, “next generation” way of farming, for example. Even people who seem to have all of the information can fall into the idea that organic agriculture is a step back toward the past.

There is no way that you could make a go of it, raising turkeys, feeding them naturally, doing it the way you did it before. Because you could not make a profit and stay in business. There's one farm in Illinois that does it. And they do well just because there are enough people in the Chicago area who want to remember what it was like to eat a turkey thirty years ago when it just [had] so much more flavor.

Suburban male, age 44

A CASE IN POINT: CRISIS MODE AND THE FOOD SCARE

Recurrent stories in the media or advocacy outreach bring people face to face with problems in the food system. The stories can be intensely troubling to people, even if only temporarily, and food scares have been factors in causing people to notice and conceptualize systems that are outside their own experience. Everyone interviewed for this project was familiar with one or more stories about contaminated Mexican strawberries, *e coli* in the beef supply, Mad Cow disease, dolphin by-catch in tuna fishing, or other such crises. In short, food scares seem like “teachable moments” of a sort, where people learn about the existence of food systems – and how such systems actually do intersect with lived experience.

Unfortunately, because of the interfering models described in the earlier sections, food scares do disappointingly little to help people form more helpful understandings of food systems.

Confirmation of the Modernization narrative

One reason for the limited educational value of “food scare” stories is that the problem of the moment can almost always be understood in terms of generic Modernization. Either modernization has gone too far (e.g. the increasing over-reliance on pesticides) or not far enough (e.g. the fact that “safe” pesticides apparently still haven’t been developed). Since the problems do not fall outside the general scheme, they do not lead people to question it. As with other problems, like the standardization and consolidation of supermarket chains, the Modernization model may seem to offer an explanation of food scares, while not offering any real reasons or any rationale for alternatives.

And for all of the reasons discussed in the previous section, the Modernization model does not engage people to act for systemic change:

- Modernization is a process that “just happens.”
- It is too big and the inertia too great to allow dramatically different alternatives.
- “More progress” is often the solution to problems.
- Cost-benefit thinking implies that many problems are probably just the price we pay for our modern way of life (i.e. better than the alternatives).

Unfortunately, most food scares fit neatly within this general story.

Resurfacing of Lived-Experience Models

Because a Systems Perspective is an unnatural state of mind for most people, people tend to return to their Little Picture defaults as quickly as their context allows, and to lapse into their customary “cognitive blindness” toward vis-à-vis food systems.

Issues that fade away

So, although for some people the food scare can be a transformative experience, for most people the effects only last as long as the media attention. When an incident disappears from the headlines, people forget about it or assume that the problem has been solved.

Q: So do you feel that they resolved that issue pretty much? Or do you just stop thinking about it?

A: I just stopped thinking about it. Once I didn't hear anything else going on about it anymore. I just normally went to the store and went and got it. When you hear the publicity about it, obviously you're reminded of it, so you stop. And when you don't hear anything else about it you forget and then you just go out and get it.

Urban female, age 37

When something seems to disappear from the news, it's usually because it's gotten better.

Urban male, age 37

Naturally, media coverage contributes to this tendency, since it only casts a brief, narrow spotlight on particular cases, and on isolated corners of the food system. And given the cognitive tendency to reduce larger issues (e.g., social justice or chemical pollution) to single, prototype cases, people tend to infer that the larger problem has been dealt with when a particular case is “cleaned up.”

Issues that get translated into little-picture problems

Furthermore, even when people's thinking is impacted in long-term ways by a food scare, their reasoning is likely to be shaped by the much more natural little-picture understandings that generally guide their thought. So, for instance, a food scare may turn an individual into a more careful, health-conscious Consumer – as opposed to a citizen interested in more responsible oversight of food handling and production.

Consumers hoping for the best

When people are operating from the (passive) Consumer Stance, their only apparent course of action is to stop buying and wait for reassurance that things are back to normal. Their limited options as consumers help ensure that they stay primarily within the Little Picture, while the store, the government, and the business community deal with the problems of the Big Picture. This stance also gives them a very powerful motivation to hope and believe that the Food System is OK.

Q: Do you generally trust the food supply? The food that comes in to your home?

A: I do. I do trust it. Because obviously I don't have anywhere else to buy it. Where else am I going to get it from? We know to go to the grocery store to get whatever we need. So you sort of have to trust it. You don't have a choice.

Urban female, age 37

When a food system critique or food scare threatens to detract from people's lived experience, they are capable of "forgetting" about the troubling information. Some people can even describe this experience.

Lately I've been kind of disgusted, because PETA sent me some disgusting flyers, just gross. A whole package of stuff that I wish I hadn't looked at. But I still eat steak. They showed how the animals are killed and all that stuff, and I don't want to think about that when I'm eating meat. So now I actually think about how it got there, you know, when I'm looking at it in the grocery store before I buy it, I'm thinking what happened to it before it came ... It's been about a month since I got that, so it's fading, the memory of the pictures is fading. It was disgusting. I had to throw it away so my family wouldn't look at it.

Suburban female, age 23

Truthfully I never thought about [chemicals in food] until I went to Europe. And I think Europeans are much more conscious of it than Americans are. With beef in particular, with the advent of all of the mad cow disease and that sort of thing. They're very conscious of what gets injected into their animals. And it never occurred to me until it was pointed out so blatantly. But I'll think about it rarely. It's the kind of thing I don't want to think about while I'm eating.

Urban female, age 22

Except specifically during intense media coverage of a scare, people are reassured by a combination of factors.

- government regulations and oversight (the reach of which they generally exaggerate)
- good business practices (e.g. "Businesses won't kill off their customers!")
- fellow consumers (e.g. "No one is dropping dead from pesticides.")
- media quiet (e.g. "Since we aren't hearing anything, everything must be OK.")
- personal experience (e.g. "I've never gotten sick.")

Thanks to these understandings, plus a strong *desire* to be reassured, Americans may consider the idea that the Food System is dangerous, but ultimately most people reject it.

As far as I know, nothing has happened. I mean Mad Cow disease I don't think has come over here so far. As far as chemicals, I don't think that there's any problem with anything out there. I'm sure the Food and Drug probably looks into preservatives and chemicals that go into food.

Rural female, age 23

I don't want to buy a head of lettuce and have a bug fall out of it, nor do I want to buy a head of lettuce and have no bugs fall out because it's so full of pesticides that if I eat it, it makes me sick. So it's nice that there's somebody overlooking [sic] things.

Suburban male, age 60

I know some people might have problems with gene manipulation of fruits and vegetables – I personally don't, but again, I don't know the scientific background . . . You want to be aware of it. I mean I don't want just any pesticide on my food. I don't want to find myself with cancer down the road, but on the other hand, I think it's pretty well – naively, of course, and the laziness kicking in – I think it's pretty well regulated.

Urban female, age 33

Q: Do you feel like the food sources are safe?

A: For the most part. You hear reports of people getting sick from South American strawberries and whatnot. I buy all those foods, and I've never really gotten sick from any foods. So for the most part, by my personal experience, I feel the food supply is pretty safe.

Urban male, age 34

In short, despite the apparent promise of food scares as teachable moments, the results are disappointing. The best evidence for this is that Americans have been exposed to countless food scares, and yet show all the signs of misunderstanding and ignorance discussed earlier in this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Earlier in the report, we discussed average Americans' difficulty in taking in new information about food systems – largely because they have no established model of a food system to “plug” this information into – and the disappointing limitations of food safety scares as teaching moments. In this section, we consider several ways advocates might consider improving their communications about food systems in order to avoid the pitfalls awaiting them. (Note that these recommendations will serve as hypotheses for later rounds of research and testing by the FrameWorks Institute and partners.)

Positive Bridges from Systems to Lived Experience – Slow Food and Local Food

While we did not find evidence that these movements have had impacts at the public level – nor that these are exactly the right terms in which to talk about the issues – cognitive analysis suggests that both the Slow Food and the Local Food concepts have a number of advantages on which advocates might successfully build.

- Each addresses people's lived experience of food – shopping, cooking and eating – while being conceptually organized around big-picture, systems perspectives.
- Both concepts are very concrete, in a way that is pedagogically promising (again, not necessarily as expressed in the current language).
- Both allow people to understand how they can play a role in a larger system.
- Both can be explained in commonsense ways – e.g., Local means not shipping long distances (therefore cheaper and consumes less fuel). Local means that money stays in the community and contributes to a solid, diverse economic base. Local means good things for your locality. Local means fresher, and healthier (and should not mean dirtier and less regulated). Local means, “you know where it came from.” Both take a positive outlook towards food and food systems, rather than relying on uncomfortable messages about danger that people are motivated to dismiss. Both rely upon implicit critiques of the mainstream food system, but focus attention on positive visions.
- Each includes a place for enjoyment of food.
- Each allows for an overarching nurturance model rooted in reciprocity and caring.

We offer two cautions related to these approaches:

Farmer's Markets: For reasons discussed earlier in the report, it is easy to evoke the wrong understandings when talking about food systems – one of these would be to give farmer's markets a central role in discussions of food system changes. These are so strongly associated with quaintness, and so far removed from the “real” food economy, that mentioning them can probably derail a serious discussion.

“Movements”: While movements by definition involve large groups of people, they are also easily seen as special interests. Advocates working with the slow and local food concepts can easily run up against average Americans' distaste for and discomfort with extreme positions or “isms.” In order to reach a group larger than a hardcore few,

communicators should be careful to frame the issues in practical, commonsense terms and to avoid distancing labels.

Organic as the “next generation” of food/farming

Most people regard organic food as “better” than other food (even if it is not “better enough” to justify the extra expense). And from an expert perspective, organic farming seems to offer an opportunity to bring many different threads together, including consumer health, worker health, small farm viability and environmental sustainability. These factors make the organic concept a potentially important communications tool for advocates.

Modernization: One of the most important potential pitfalls in communicating about organics is the risk of seeming to go up against Modernization. Because Modernization is a powerful cultural model which views progress through time as inevitable and one-directional, a message that seems to fall on the wrong side of progress is unlikely to succeed. There may be value in pointing out that organic farming is “traditional” farming in many ways – but advocates must also make it clear that the real motivations for going organic have to do with new science (e.g. of health and environment), innovations in method, and economic realism. If organic farming is “merely” about preserving a “dying way of life” (i.e. the family farm), it can only ever appeal to a small percentage of the population.

Commonsense: In order to make the most of this concept – as with local and slow food – advocates must take care to frame organic farming as a smart, economically viable approach, rather than a fringe movement that appeals to the tastes of “single-issue consumers.”

Definition: Organic farming is defined in terms of chemical inputs and technical farming practices, and most people do not have a clear sense what it refers to. It is important for communicators to find ways of defining the term in user-friendly ways that do refer to particular materials and practices – one of the communications advantages of the concept is that it is scientific, concrete and objective.

Broader context: Because of the understandings people bring to the topic of food, it is also important for advocates to tie organic food/farming to broader ideas like community, local economic good, and the experience of shopping/eating.

A new cultural model of Food Systems

The biggest “win” for advocates on this issue (and for everyone else), and the greatest challenge, would be to introduce a new, full-fledged cultural model of Food Systems into Americans’ shared understanding of the world. Such a model would not only enable people to notice the systems that produce their food, but would also encourage them to take an interest in and engage constructively with those systems. Ideally, such a model would:

- Make people conscious of and curious about the fact that food comes out of a Food System;

- Make it easier to connect people's Lived Experience to the broader system, ideally in multiple and overlapping ways, and in ways that feel important;
- Create the sense of a food system that people can feel positively about as opposed to one they fear or are angered by;
- Make it easier to absorb central concepts like "sustainability," and "environmental health," as coherent parts of a larger picture.

Achieving this new level of public reasoning and discourse represents one of the core challenges facing food system advocates, and would require a sustained effort aimed at educating the public, in addition to effective explanatory language around which to build this strategy.

CONCLUSION

There are a wide variety of ways in which people's default understandings of a topic can impede progress on an issue:

- People may feel they have a rich understanding of a topic, while actually lacking some very basic knowledge. This is the case with childhood development, for example, where people fail to appreciate the fact that a young child's interactions shape the development of brain architecture.
- Or they may lack even a rudimentary understanding of an issue – as is the case with global warming, where only a tiny percentage of Americans understand that the problem is caused by a heat-trapping layer of gases.
- Or they may use an inappropriate frame to process new information, as when people understand rising obesity rates in terms of the country's "moral decline."

In the case of food systems, Cultural Logic's elicitation research points to a combination of all of these problems. Americans have rich sets of understandings and associations related to food, which reduce their interest in and ability to grasp new information. They also lack a fundamental concept – the idea of a food system. For lack of such a conceptual model, they make certain reasonable guesses and a number of false assumptions about the American food system, by drawing on some fragmentary knowledge about food and where it comes from, plus their rich but generic understanding of Modernization. Finally, their stance towards food – primarily the Consumer Stance and the passive Food Receiver stance – actually motivates them *not* to want to understand. Given this combination of factors, it is not surprising that advocates have had a difficult time making headway on some crucial issues. Nonetheless, as communicators continue to develop conceptual approaches that offer the public concrete new ways of understanding the food system and our relationship to it, there is an opportunity for real and important progress.

About the Author

Cultural Logic, directed by anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady, is an applied cognitive and social science research group that helps organizations frame their messages for maximum effect. Working with a network of experts and partner organizations including the FrameWorks Institute, Cultural Logic focuses on research relating to public interest issues. Topics have included global warming, violence reduction in communities, conserving the Chesapeake Bay, global interdependence, gender equity in schools, and toxins in the domestic environment. Axel Aubrun, Ph.D. is a psychological anthropologist whose research and publications take an interdisciplinary approach to problems of communication and motivation. Joseph Grady, Ph.D. is a linguist whose research and publications focus on the relationship between metaphor and other aspects of thought and communication.