

In Defense of Food Manufacturers

Holly Henschen, Editor



The U.S. food industry and federal government caused the obesity epidemic facing our country. Or so “[Fed Up](#) [1],” a new documentary on childhood obesity, would have you believe.

“Fed Up,” which debuted at Sundance Film Festival, “reveals a 30-year campaign by the food industry, aided by the U.S. government, to mislead and confuse the American public, resulting in one of the largest health epidemics in history,” according to a synopsis. I can’t help but raise one brow and furrow the other at this conspiracy theory of a statement.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association responded almost immediately after the documentary was screened with [a list of steps](#) [2] it’s taken over the last decade to inform consumers and formulate healthier products.

Adding more weight to the matter, “Fed Up” was produced by both longtime journalist [Katie Couric](#) [3] and Laurie David of “An Inconvenient Truth” fame. That documentary sparked serious international discussion about climate change. Will “Fed Up” do the same for childhood obesity? The weighty national debate could benefit, but only if a rational approach is taken.

No doubt the U.S. and global obesity epidemic is a gravely serious subject. The proportion of children who were obese in 2008 and 2009 was five times higher than obese children in the mid 1970s, according to a long-term study published in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*. Obese children are more likely to be obese adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one-third of American adults are obese. These conditions are leading to huge

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medical costs that tax our healthcare system and decrease the quality of our lives.

It's undeniable that Americans have a national eating disorder. But pinning epidemic health problems on the food industry is incorrect and irresponsible. Like the uber-American trend of fad diets, it's easy to jump on the bandwagon after hearing a one-sided argument. But, like New Year's resolutioners this time of year (and me last week after two days of the Paleo Diet), reality hits hard.

The director of "Fed Up," *Stephanie Soechtig*, told *Indiewire* "...I want [viewers] to leave angry and feeling like they've been duped and that they will never look at the cheese aisle of a grocery store the same way again."

But Americans may not be so open to suggestion. A recent survey by University of Illinois researchers found 94 percent of respondents believe *individuals* are primarily or somewhat to blame for obesity, followed by parents at 91 percent.

Without yet having seen "FedUp," I have a few bones to pick with the premise that's being touted as truth. Shifting blame is not an effective problem-solving strategy.

Since the end of World War II, the U.S. citizens have undergone constant, rapid lifestyle alterations. Our behaviors and education haven't caught up with the changes in our daily habits. Less than a 100 years after the Great Depression, which was followed by a wave of massive urbanization, the 'more-is-better' ethos holds strong. This ideal, partially rooted in biology, was cultivated in times of scarcity by populations who worked for every morsel they ate. When those physical laborers had food, they ate heartily. And we still generally do. But few of us often perform backbreaking work and the pounds pile on.

Processed food was an innovation that helped advance our country. Easily prepared, prepackaged food has helped women with families join the modern workplace with fewer worries about their families getting three squares a day. Certainly not all of the food industry's motives are as nefarious as the film seems to portray.

Under fire is the same food system that stocks fresh vegetables in grocery stores year-round. Few people have the knowledge, time or energy to revert to gardening all summer and putting up food to survive the winter. It's impossible for the billions of Americans who live in cities and spend most of their waking hours on the job. We now live relatively sedentary lives with many workers (myself included) spending eight or more hours a day in front of a computer.

Leisure time for modern children often includes ample video and computer games, as well as endless television choices that discourage kids from getting the exercise they need. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology, children watch three to four hours of television daily. Children who watch a lot of TV are more likely to exercise less and be overweight. More kids live in cities than ever before — cities that don't always provide ample safe areas for exercise.

Obesity is a systemic and cultural problem, not one that can be pinned on any

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industry or group. Like gun violence, it's a social ill with many facets accumulated throughout our history.

As *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman [recently suggested](#) [4], “an official government policy or agency responsible for coordinating and assuring that the nation’s investment in food and agriculture” could go a long way in bridging the gap between citizens and the food industry. A coherent conversation between the groups must be developed.

Though no system is perfect, it's irresponsible to place all of the blame on food manufacturers. I can see the value in piquing interest about food production and consumption, as “An Inconvenient Truth” did for climate change. Reform is necessary. However, consumer education is a two-way street and one can only hope that viewers of this film will seek their own information rather than espousing the rallying cry of “Fed Up.”

Education, level-headed dialogue and reform are more constructive and beneficial responses to the American obesity epidemic than food zealotry.

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Links:

[1] <http://fedupmovie.com/>

[2] <http://www.gmaonline.org/layout/785>

[3] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/01/couric-documentary-takes-childhood-obesity>

[4] http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/opinion/bittman-abundance-doesnt-mean-health.html?src=rechp&_r=0