

Food facts are not the answer to fear of foods

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Real Food, Real Facts: Processed Food and the Politics of Knowledge by Charlotte Biltekoff, takes a close look at people's concerns about processed foods and how the food industry has failed to respond to them.

Charlotte: I was really struggling to understand what was going on around me in the sort of mid like, say around 2014, 2015. I just felt that I was immersed in this really confusing landscape, where on the one hand, a lot of people I knew were concerned about processed food and trying to avoid processed food, preferring real or natural food. Right. That that was pretty normal in my milieu. And then in my other life, my work life and my sort of professional relationships in food science and in the food industry, I heard a lot of people saying that those views were misinformed and based in irrational fears.

And ultimately, I decided that what I was really seeing was a contest between two different ways of thinking about the same thing: processed food. And that on the one hand, we had this, what I call the real food frame, which is an articulation of public concerns about what's in processed food, its effects on health, its relationship to the environment and overall sense that it's like a troubled product of a troubled food system. All of that comes together to make this real food frame. And then, on the other hand, we have this other completely different way of thinking about the problem, a point of view in which the problem isn't processed food itself, but consumers' misinformed ideas about it. Misperceptions, lack of scientific literacy, and an assumption that those can be corrected, right, with better education and facts and that kind of thing. So I call that the real facts frame. And so the book really tries to make sense of the sort of friction between these two very different ways of thinking about the same thing.

Jeremy: You talk about a kind of a deficit model that the food industry thinks that the public has. Well, actually not just one, but lots of deficits and that's what's getting in the way.

Charlotte: Yeah. So looking at, you know, the food industry, communication with the public, and food industry communication with itself, food industry magazines and other ways in which the food industry talks to itself. I realized that there was this really pervasive assumption that public concerns about really food technologies and the food system at all — but I focused on processing technologies, and processed food — came from like, not understanding the science, not understanding the benefits of the science, not understanding what science is and does. And its, you know, beautiful imperfections. And being emotional. There's a lot of language about consumers use ... Being driven by emotions rather than being rational. This, all of this, just really echoes a long standing assumption among experts that skepticism or hesitancy around science and technology is driven by knowledge deficits or trust deficits.

Social scientists have long argued that that's not the case. Not that we don't have deficits. Like, nobody understands all of this perfectly. Scientists themselves have plenty of knowledge deficits in their fields even, let alone others. But the argument here is that that's not what drives the ... That's not the main driver of any kind of like, you know, overarching skepticism or hesitancy around the uses of technology. So, yes, deficits exist, but no, they don't explain widespread public concerns about certain technologies, such as food processing.

Jeremy: And addressing the deficits doesn't have any impact either. All that they do is tell us how safe it is and the benefits. And people still don't trust them or want the products.

Charlotte: Right. It doesn't work because it misdiagnoses the problem. And in fact, I would argue that it leads to greater mistrust and alienation because it is such a misdiagnosis of the problem. Right. My argument really is that ... Also really building on long standing social science arguments about like public concerns about technology. A) they're not anti science and B) they're not based in deficits, but rather they're about big important questions like in the case of processing like to what ends like what are the aims and the purposes and the values that the kind of technologies we're developing and deploying serve? Those are big, important questions. Who gets to

decide the kinds of questions we ask, the technologies we develop, and towards what end? Who gets to decide what's safe and who regulates? And it's about power dynamics, and it's about big questions about the aims and trajectory of the food system. But the discourse, both among experts and in popular discourse, really focuses on this question of risk. You know, this assumption that, like, the public is just concerned about their own safety or their, you know, pocketbooks. And again, it's a misunderstanding of the public. And it just leads to more alienation.

Jeremy: But now one of the interesting responses by the food industry was this Center for Food Integrity, and they kind of tried quite hard to change the nature of the discussion, saying that, "no, no, no, you know, you've got it all wrong. food industry, you need to be more transparent. You need to understand what people are ...". Did it have any impact?

Charlotte: Well, that's a good question. So the Center for Food Integrity comes along, and they say this facts forward approach to communicating with the public is not working. We need a new approach. And here it is. Here's our trust model. Trust depends more on, you know, a sense of confidence and shared values rather than on, you know, facts and expertise. So let's shift how we're doing this and connect through transparency and a sense of shared values. So what I learned from really looking carefully with the Center for Food Integrity is doing in terms of trying to retrain the food industry and how they're communicating with the public, is that it is a new approach, like it's values focused. They're bringing in multiple stakeholders. They're opening, you know, the conversation to include, you know, that values matter, that people ... a little more empathy, right, for where the public is coming from, rather than just dismissing them as a bunch of irrational, like, misguided, you know, ignorant publics. Right? But ultimately with the same kind of dynamics in terms of like, well, we know best, we've already decided what the outcome of our communication should be, which is that we need to convince you to accept these technologies so you can, can and will consume them. With that being the end point, you know. Yes, fiddling around with what the communication looks like and looking for trusted communicators, you see a lot of female scientists reassuring the public that they also care about sustainability in the environment, you know. So yeah, it looks and sounds different, but the endpoint is still predetermined. And behind it all is still the assumption that the public

has some kind of deficit. There's a little bit of a different kind of deficit. It's like, yeah, their thinking is really shaped by like their relationships and their psychology and these social factors. So a little less dismissive, but it still is really deficit driven. And there's a lot of that real facts frame still in there.

Jeremy: And the impression you get is still that, we determine what questions we're going to answer And we keep answering the questions we want to answer. The fact that you're not asking those questions becomes kind of lost in the mix somehow.

Charlotte: Oh, absolutely. I mean, in a way, you're describing the paradox of transparency, right? This idea that, you know, transparency is kind of now almost taken for granted as like how you need to communicate around these technologies. But transparency can only be paradoxical, right? It promises to reveal everything, but it can't possibly reveal everything, so it reveals something. And again, the communicators decide what's included within, you know, in the .. within the frame, so to speak, of transparency. A very narrow set of questions, like you said, leaves out all the big questions about the power dynamics that shape that conversation. And those are the ones that the book is really trying to point to.

Jeremy: One of the one of the interesting distinctions you make in the book is between, trade lobbying groups who you kind of expect to put an industry point of view — I mean, that's their purpose — and front groups. And I think the Center for Food Integrity is a front group, which is essentially it looks like a disinterested party, but it isn't. Can you expand on that?

Charlotte: Yeah. So one of the the helpful ways of thinking about the difference between a trade association and what critics would call a front group is in the name. That's like a great way to think about it. Like they're ... The book looks at hundreds of trade associations. And so this would be something like the Corn Refiners Association or the Sugar Association. Dairy Foods Association. Frozen Foods Association, Snack Foods. They tell you what they are, and they tell you what they're about. But something like the Center for Food Integrity, in the name. Right? It just, it's very ... It doesn't tell you anything about whose interests it serves. And in the case of the Center for Food Integrity, they explicitly state that they don't lobby on behalf of any particular food company, which is true because they're, in a sense,

because their role is to represent interests across many different sectors of the food industry.

When it comes to the question of communication with the public, the Center for Food Integrity is unique in that most of what they do is facing the food industry. So they have webinars and workshops and training sessions and conferences and reports, all of which are meant to help the industry better understand the the public and how to communicate with them. They develop, you know, seven-step transparency model and an engaged training system for literally how to have conversations with people about controversial topics. Right. They also have a public facing website. I believe it's called Best Food Facts and that is public facing. And it says, you know, we gather the best expert experts in the field to answer your questions about food and health, basically. And it does present as extremely neutral and science driven, which is how ... So largely how the food industry represents itself as science driven, evidence based, really deploying science as a sort of a way of claiming objectivity and neutrality in a situation where that's really not the case. They're not objective or neutral, they're using science in their own interests.

Jeremy: But coming back to the real food thing, we've said that industry doesn't understand what is really driving the real food approach. It seems to be very much a question of anxiety and fear, and in some respects the real food people stoke that fear. So they, they are also working on emotions. They're working on people's deficit, if you like, of comfort with industrial food. There is a problem there, don't you think?

Charlotte: Certainly. I mean, real food as a frame. Similarly, the same is true for real ... the real facts frame the way I use it. It's extremely general and generalizing. And both of these things include a lot, a lot of variation, a lot of perspectives, voices, actions, behaviors. So it's a gross generalization. Very useful nonetheless, but important to acknowledge that. And so you're pointing to a piece of this, right, that is important to talk about. So yes, I think that's true. There's deficit thinking on both sides. There's a lot of, you know ... The whole concept of like lifting the veil. So, you know, if they only knew, you know, if people only knew where their food came from, they would be more responsible. They would make better choices. We could change the food system by voting with our forks. That's like the

fundamental thing of the food movement, right? That is like a deficit model in a sense. Right?

Jeremy: Yeah.

Charlotte: But it, you know, it's a deficit model in the interest of getting people to engage as active participants in shaping the food system. Very different from a deficit model on the real facts frame, being used in a purely commercial sense to prepare people to accept technologies and be passive consumers. That's what I'm trying to do for real food is to get past the yes, afraid of ingredients we can't pronounce. We've heard over and over again that that's what the public's really afraid of, right? Ingredients they can't pronounce. Great. So that that gets everybody engaged and teaching people not to be afraid of ingredients they can't pronounce. There's a hundred examples I can give you of people trying to do that. But I'm really trying to say, look, the reason why people are concerned about ingredients they can't pronounce, etc., when it comes to processed food, is because of a confluence of historical factors that change the way we think about good food starting in the early 21st century.

We have, you know, a sociocultural way of thinking about, what the so-called obesity epidemic. We have a whole host of new environmental concerns and sustainability concerns related to food production. And a confluence of those two things. We have an explosion of technologies, lax regulation, increasing concern about risks from technologies. All of these things converge, and increasing awareness of how the food industry manipulates the informational environment by funding science, etc. All of these converge on the idea that the answer is to eat less processed food or avoid processed food. So it comes from these like really legitimate concerns about the food industry and the food system that all come together to say you should try not to eat processed food. And then, yes, in the grocery store, that can look like I'm not buying this because it has more than five ingredients. But taking a step back, zooming out, that's what I'm really trying to do.

Jeremy: Yeah, I mean, the five ingredient thing is interesting as a diversion because all it really did along with unpronounceable ingredients is it kind of gave manufacturers a new target. Can we make this with four ingredients. Can we can we make those unpronounceable chemicals that we're putting in, can we make those

pronounceable? I mean, it moves the goalposts, but the game remains the same.

Charlotte: Absolutely. It was very fascinating. One of the things that I did was read hundreds of articles in the food industry press, and that includes advertisements, the food industry, business to business advertising. And I just watched the whole, you know, opportunity explode, the opportunity right, being to to make these same products somehow. Right. Because the public still wants their food to taste good and have the right texture and be shelf stable, but also ingredients we can pronounce, right. So all these ingredients companies went into overdrive, coming up with new ingredients that could have the same function but be called something different, right. So instead of modified food starch, now we have corn starch. And it sounds less modified, right? And so, but that ... You know, amplify that times a thousand like it was a boom in product development especially ingredient development to meet these supposed needs, you know.

Jeremy: Mhm. Um, let's talk about natural.

Charlotte: Um, let's talk about natural.

Jeremy: It's one of the crucial identifiers for quote, real food unquote is that it's natural, but that doesn't actually mean anything. And in the US, the FDA monitors these things. They had a big hearing to decide what natural meant. On the one hand, look, natural means not tampered with. Natural means stuff you can do yourself if you like. So, A) what was the point of the hearing? And B), was there an outcome? What was the outcome?

Charlotte: Yeah. So natural, all natural claims are ... Became, in the wake of these changes and our ideas about good food, natural claims just became extremely lucrative, natural and all natural just was. It was a huge boom in in product development and marketing. But it was squishy. It was on unstable ground because the FDA didn't have a clear definition and didn't regulate the use of the term very strictly. And so there were a series of class action lawsuits accusing companies of labeling things natural when in fact their ingredients didn't comport with what the public would expect from something called natural. And so as a result of this, like the food industry actually started lobbying the FDA to to better regulate.

Yeah. And the initial request, one of the initial petitions that set the whole thing in motion was from this big trade association called at the time, Grocery Manufacturers Association. And their petition asks the FDA to regulate natural in a way that it would include ingredients produced through biotechnology. That was what they wanted. The Consumers Union, which publishes Consumer Report, which ... you know, also wrote a petition very much arguing for a more narrow definition of natural. So it was a result of all this that the FDA opened a public comment period in 2014-15. They never did go to a hearing, but they did collect over 7000 comments, which I analyzed for that chapter of the book.

And the arguments for what natural should mean were all over the place. In general, the industry was claiming that their ideas about what it should mean were evidence based and science based, but they were all over the map. Every argument you could imagine, you know, different companies were making so that the language would include their products because it was so lucrative. Right. And then you have the public and their representatives like Consumers Union, arguing for a much narrower definition. My sense from reading the comments was that the public really did want natural to mean something, to mean that the product was healthier, more responsible or sustainable, aligned with their values in some way. And so they wanted a narrow, stricter definition and regulation around that. And in the end, nothing changed. The FDA never ruled on it, never changed their regulation. Part of the result of all of that, including those early class action lawsuits, was less and less use of the actual terminology of natural, but all kinds of other ways of signaling natural. Like we talked about the short ingredients list, the words you can pronounce, the various kinds of like, you know, imagery or packaging that suggests that something is simpler or natural. It's called, we call that clean label, right? It doesn't use the language of natural. It doesn't have to have to, to convey the same thing.

Jeremy: It's very intriguing, really, that there's a sort of equivalence in both directions on almost all of these things. So, for example, the people talk about the public mistrust of science. You could equally well talk about the scientists' mistrust of the public. I mean, they just don't want to know what the public is really concerned about. Do you see any chance of a rapprochement between the public that wants real food and food industry companies that want sales from a willing public?

Charlotte: Um, well, I mean, I do think that this is a, you know, a long standing and ongoing source of tension and friction that has, like you said, at the heart of it, a double misunderstanding, right? We know well about the public's supposed misunderstanding of science and of the industry. This is a major obsession, right, of experts who are trying to improve science communication. But so much less attention and discussion about the ways in which experts misunderstand the public. So I hope that the book helps these, you know, helps these two different frames, these people who are immersed in them, so immersed in them that the other one just seems completely foreign. I do hope to have at least helped these two groups better understand each other. And that is an opening of, you know, possibly an opening of some movement towards more collaboration and less misunderstanding in terms of ...

Like this is an urgent moment, clearly, right, in terms of how we ... what, you know, really what kind of food system do we want for the future? What kind of questions should we be asking about the food system? Who, whose questions matter? What kind of questions matter, and what kind of expertise is considered relevant to the question of what the future of food should be like? These are urgent matters, right? And I hope to have, like, really shed light on how important those issues are. Like, let's maybe step back from this "should I or shouldn't I eat processed food?" question for a minute and look at all these ... That's kind of what the book is trying to say, is that we need to zoom out to these larger questions, and I hope by doing that, I've contributed a little bit to some movement in the right direction.

Jeremy: You know, I have a long memory for this stuff and yeah, way back in the early 80s, exactly the same dynamic played out with respect to GMOs, genetically manipulated organisms in the food system. And again, anti-GMO was all about risk. Pro-GMO was all about: there is no risk to human health. Europe has sort of maintained an opposition to GMOs. I don't know how long that's still going to last, but it has maintained it because of the larger questions. But America seems to me to have kind of rolled over and given up.

Charlotte: Mhm.

Jeremy: Yes. There are pockets of resistance. Organic is a pocket. But basically, the industry ... I mean, I hate to put it in these terms.

Basically the industry won on the question of genetic engineering. Maybe it'll win on the question of processed and industrial food.

Charlotte: Yes. Yes. Maybe. I hear what you're saying. The issues are in many ways mirrors of each other. A lot of what I've worked out in relationship to processed food applies and builds on scholarship that tried to understand what was going on with GMOs.

You know, there's a real sea change happening right now in the conversation about processed food in the US, and I think elsewhere, because we now have this language of ultra processed food, UPF, which was designed with this exact intent in mind. Like, the Brazilian public health researchers who came up with the NOVA classification gave us the language of ultra processed food because they wanted to enable researchers to investigate the impact of ultra processing and a high percentage of ultra processed foods in our diets on public health. And researchers are picking up that tool and using it. And the results are quite convincing that there's something going on there. Right? And so there is some momentum in the direction of being able to establish some negative health impacts, in particular of ultra processed foods, that could take this in a different direction.

Jeremy: Yeah. And I think that's the big difference between this debate and the GMO debate, is that I still haven't seen anything on human health. I haven't seen anything to suggest that GMOs pose a particular problem. Right. Whereas on on UPFs ...

Charlotte: Yeah, exactly. And our regulatory agencies are only set up to respond to questions of risks to human health. And as you know, one of the big differences in the European and the US context is that the European framework is one of precautionary principle. You know, it has to be proven safe. Things have to be proven safe. Whereas in the US we work on a proof of harm model. It's much more generous towards industry because you have to prove harm, which is much harder to do, in order to regulate. So, very different systems. And I do think that that, you know, they've really shaped the trajectory of GMOs. But we'll see what happens with UPFs.

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