Trends in US prime-time television food advertising across three decades

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to describe the content of food advertisements broadcast during prime-time network programs and determine what changes have occurred over the last 30 years. The sample comprised foods advertisements (N = 38, N = 31, N = 91, N = 105, N = 108) from 1971, 1977, 1988, 1992 and 1998, respectively. Of the commercials shown in 1977, 1988, 1992 and 1998, 31, 35, 20, and 15 per cent, respectively, were for food advertisements (data were unavailable for 1971). Using simple linear regression, the hourly rate for total commercials is increasing significantly (p = 0.04) by 1.4 commercials per hour each year. However, the hourly rate for food advertisements is not changing over time in a statistically significant fashion. There is very strong evidence of an association between the type of food advertised and year (chi-square = 62.691, p < 0.001). The top four categories contributing to the chi-square are: restaurants, low-nutrient beverages, protein-rich foods, and breads and cereals which, together, account for 75 per cent of the chi-square value. For the past three decades, the “prime-time diet” has comprised mostly low nutrient density foods that are promoted by slender, healthy actors.

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Americans spend a vast proportion of their waking hours watching television. For instance, children aged 2-11 are estimated to watch television for three hours, 17 minutes daily, or over 22 hours weekly (Nielsen Media Research, 1998). Adolescents (12-17 years old) in the USA watch more than 20 hours of television every week (Nielsen Media Research, 1998). TV, a powerful and persuasive teacher, socializes children and teens and teaches them knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about a variety of subjects including nutrition and health (Dan, 1992; American Dietetic Association, 1997; Bandura, 1977; Prabhu et al., 1996). These lessons are not always consistent with practices parents and educators teach and in some cases these lessons can result in dangerous and destructive behavior (Medved, 1998; Anonymous, 1993; 1994; 1996; Willis and Strasburger, 1998). Children believe a majority of the health messages communicated via advertisements regardless of the truthfulness of the messages (Lewis and Lewis, 1975). Additionally, television advertising creates misperceptions among children about the behaviors needed to maintain good health (Donohue, 1975) and the nutritional value of advertised foods (e.g. fast foods) versus foods available at home (Donohue et al., 1978). Frequent television watching also may influence youngsters’ eating behaviors in many ways including food purchases, preferences, and intake (Gorn and Goldberg, 1982; Galst and White, 1976; Galst, 1980; Goldberg et al., 1978; Taras et al., 1989; Scammon and Christopher, 1981; Peterson et al., 1984; Jeffrey et al., 1982; Clancy-Hepburn et al., 1974). Television viewing not only appears to affect energy intake, this sedentary activity affects output as well. Researchers have reported a positive correlation between body fatness and extent of television watching (Dietz and Gortmaker, 1985; Gortmaker et al., 1990). A positive correlation also has been noted between children and teens’ blood cholesterol levels and hours spent viewing television (Goldsmith, 1990).

If television programming can influence the dietary, exercise, and other health behaviors of children and teens thereby increasing health risks, it is vital that nutrition educators...
know what messages related to nutrition and health are presented on television. Several previous studies have examined the nutrition content in children’s programs aired on Saturday mornings (Gerbner et al., 1981) and the commercials shown during those programs (Gerbner et al., 1981; Gussow, 1972; Cotugna, 1988; Brown, 1976; Kotz and Story, 1994). Children, however, do not limit their television viewing to Saturday mornings. In fact, in the USA, children and teens alike spend a large portion of their viewing time watching prime-time programming (i.e. programming broadcast from 8:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. Sunday) (Nielsen Media Research, 1998). And prime time has the highest advertising costs and viewing rates by all age groups (Nielsen Media Research, 1998). While some studies have investigated nutrition messages embedded in prime-time commercials (Gorn and Goldberg, 1982; Scammon and Christopher, 1981; Jeffrey et al., 1982; Clancy-Hepburn et al., 1974; Kurman, 1977), none could be located that reported data less than ten years old. In addition, no studies comparing the nutrition messages embedded in prime-time television commercials broadcast over a span of years could be located.

Given the near omnipresence of television in American homes, it is important that we continue to examine the nutrition information provided via this medium. Thus, the purpose of this study was to describe the food advertisements broadcast in the USA during prime-time network programs in 1992 and 1998 and to compare findings with data collected in 1971 (Cuozzo, 1971), 1977 (Kurman, 1977), and 1988 (Story and Faulkner, 1990) to determine the trends that have occurred over the last three decades.

**Methodology**

Top-rated prime-time network programs for October 1992 and October 1998, determined using Nielsen Media Research season to date rankings to mid-October of these two years, were recorded. By limiting data collection to regularly scheduled series aired on network television, it was possible to compare this study’s findings with earlier studies (Kurman, 1977; Cuozzo, 1971; Story and Faulkner, 1990).

During each October, a total of 17.5 hours of prime-time television programs were videotaped. This included 29 30-minute programs and three 60-minute programs in 1992, and 17 30-minute programs and nine 60-minute programs in 1998. The videotaping during both sampling periods occurred over a period of two weeks, rather than a single week, because some programs were pre-empted or not scheduled for the selected sampling week.

Although all commercials were recorded, only those advertisements for foods and beverages (referred to as food advertisements) intended for human consumption are reported here. Data for each food advertisement were recorded by one researcher and, for the sake of comparison, classified according to Story and Faulkner’s (1990) categories. The coding was checked for inter-observer reliability by double coding all the food advertisements by a second researcher. Any discrepancies were resolved to reach unanimous agreement. To establish intra-observer reliability, the two researchers independently viewed and coded the commercials in 60 minutes of prime-time programs that were not part of the sample twice, two weeks apart. The intra-observer agreement rate for all commercials was 0.93 and 0.92 for the two researchers, indicating a high degree of consistency.

Data for 1971 were derived by classifying the 38 food advertisements that were reported by Cuozzo (1971) according to the food categories established by Story and Faulkner (1990). These advertisements were aired during seven hours of regularly scheduled, prime-time network serial programs shown in autumn 1971. Similarly, data for 1977 were derived by categorizing the food advertisements reported by Kurman (1977). Kurman’s study included 31 food advertisements recorded during ten hours of regularly scheduled, prime-time series broadcast on network television in spring 1977. Data for 1988 were compiled by Story and Faulkner (1990). Their study included 91 food advertisements that were collected from 14 hours of regularly scheduled, prime-time series shown on network television during summer 1988. Procedures for selecting, videotaping, and evaluating data from 1971, 1977, and 1988 were similar to those used for 1992 and 1998 and are reported in more detail elsewhere (Kurman,

A z-statistic (Snedecor and Cochran, 1989) was calculated to determine if significant differences occurred in time allocated to commercial time and proportion of commercial time devoted to food advertisements in 1992 and 1998. Linear regression and a t-statistic (Neter et al., 1989) were used to establish whether hourly rates for commercial time and for food advertisements have steadily changed. To determine whether changes in food advertisements had occurred, a chi-square statistic (Fienberg, 1985) was used to compare the distribution of categories of foods advertised reported by Cuozzo (1971), Kurman (1977), and Story and Faulkner (1990) with current findings.

Results

Table I indicates the number of total commercials and food advertisements broadcast during each year data were collected. The length of commercials was not recorded in earlier studies. However, in 1992, a total of 197 minutes (19 per cent of the 17.5 hour sample) was commercial time with food advertisements accounting for 22 per cent (43 minutes) of the commercial time. In 1998, total commercial time rose significantly ($z$-statistic = 3.331, $p < 0.001$) to 258 minutes, or one-quarter of the 17.5 hour sample, but the time allocated to food advertisements (44 minutes) remained virtually unchanged ($z$-statistic = 1.285, $p < 0.20$). There was no significant difference in mean commercial length in 1992 (22.06 ± 8.61 SD seconds) and 1998 (22.09 ± 10.11SD seconds). In addition, the mean length of food advertisements in 1992 compared to 1998 (i.e. 24.52 ± 7.32 SD seconds and 24.21 ± 8.21 SD seconds, respectively) was not significantly different.

Of the commercials shown in 1977, 1988, 1992 and 1998, 31, 35, 20 and 15 per cent, respectively, were for food advertisements (data were unavailable for 1971). Using simple linear regression, the hourly rate for total commercials is increasing significantly (t-statistic = 4.889, $p = 0.04$) by 1.4 commercials per hour each year. However, the hourly rate for food advertisements is not changing over time in a statistically significant fashion. Figure 1 shows how the percentage of food advertisements shown has changed over time. The proportion of commercials that were food advertisements may have declined in the past decade; however, rate per hour of food advertisements has held steady at approximately six for the last ten years. Thus, viewers are seeing the same number of food advertisements but are also seeing a larger total number of advertisements for other goods and services.

During the past 20 years, the total number of commercials per hour has jumped from 11 per hour to 40 (see Table I). This trend can be attributed to two factors. The first factor is the elimination of the voluntary Code Authority of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), the US television industry’s self-regulatory body, which in the mid-1970s permitted only nine-and-a-half minutes of advertising per hour of prime-time network television (Advisory Committee on

![Figure 1 Percentage over time of commercials that were food advertisements](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Hours sampled</th>
<th>Total commercials (rate per hour)</th>
<th>Food advertisements (rate per hour)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1971&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>38 (5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>108 (11)</td>
<td>31 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>261 (26)</td>
<td>91 (6.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>535 (31)</td>
<td>105 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>700 (40)</td>
<td>106 (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

<sup>a</sup> Data were derived from Cuozzo (1971).

<sup>b</sup> Data were derived from Kurman (1977).

<sup>c</sup> Data are from Story and Faulkner (1990).
Public Interest, 1998). The US Justice Department successfully challenged a provision of the NAB’s voluntary code as a violation of antitrust law thereby causing the NAB to abandon the entire code in 1982 (Masover, 1975). As a result, each network determines the total amount of commercial time they will sell per hour of broadcast time. In the 1992 and 1998 sample, an average of 11.25 and 14.75 minutes, respectively, was devoted to commercial time every hour. The second factor contributing to this trend is the decreasing length of television commercials; the mean length of commercials declined from 30 seconds in the mid-1970s (Masover, 1975) to approximately 22 seconds in 1998 – so, instead of airing only two commercials per minute, an average of nearly three are shown.

Table II presents a comparison of the types of foods advertised as a percentage of total food advertisements on network television in 1971, 1977, 1988, 1992 and 1998. There is very strong evidence of an association between the type of food advertised and year (chi-square = 62.691, p < 0.001). The top four categories contributing to the chi-square are: restaurants, low-nutrient beverages, protein-rich foods, and breads and cereals. Together, these four categories account for 75 per cent of the chi-square value. The largest contribution comes from the restaurants category where advertising is much higher than the last decade. During the 1970s, advertisements for restaurants were virtually nonexistent; yet for the past ten years, restaurant advertisements have occurred more frequently than any other food category. Currently, advertisements for fast food and family style restaurants, combined, represent nearly four in every ten advertisements. In general, the fast foods advertised in 1988 (i.e. hamburgers, fried chicken, pizza) (Story and Faulkner, 1990) tended to be the same as those advertised in 1992 and 1998. However, while fast food breakfast sandwiches were advertised in 1988 (Story and Faulkner, 1990), they did not appear in the sampled advertisements from either 1992 or 1998. In addition, as in 1988, none of the fast food restaurants advertised the availability of salads or salad bars in 1992 or 1998 (Story and Faulkner, 1990).

The next largest contribution to the chi-square value is from low-nutrient beverages. The larger than expected number of advertisements for regular soft drinks in 1971 and 1977 is the basis for this. The third largest contribution to the chi-square value is from protein-rich foods. Evidence of this association comes primarily from the absence of such advertisements in 1988.

Finally, breads and cereals contribute almost 10 per cent of the overall chi-square value. This is due to the large number of advertisements for unsweetened cereals in 1988. The increase in advertisements for unsweetened cereals in 1988 may be due to the popularity of, and at that time largely unregulated, marketing strategies that included claims linking high-fiber diets and reduced risk of certain types of cancer (Kurtzweil, 1993; Geiger, 1998; Federal Trade Commission, 1994). The 1990 Nutrition Labeling Education Act (NLEA) which regulated health claims coupled with the subsequent food advertising policy paralleling the NLEA enacted by the Federal Trade Commission in 1994 may have contributed to the decline in unsweetened cereal advertisements in the 1990s. It is also interesting to note that the rate at which breads and cereals were advertised was fairly constant from 1971 to 1992, ranging from 20 to 26 per cent. However, in 1998, breads and cereals were advertised half as frequently as in early years.

Highly sweetened foods (i.e. regular soft drinks, sugared breakfast cereals, and sweets/desserts) were the most heavily advertised foods in 1971 and 1977, representing 32 and 48 per cent, respectively, of all food advertisements. The prevalence of advertisements for highly sweetened foods declined sharply in 1988 to 22 per cent, rose slightly in 1992 to 28 per cent, and dropped to 16 per cent in 1998. In the 1970s, soft drinks dominated while in the 1980s and 1990s, sweets/desserts predominate. The decline in advertisements for regular soft drinks over the past two decades has not been offset by an increase in diet soft drinks. However, currently, low-nutrient beverages do represent one of every six foods advertised.

Across the five data collection periods, there was little fluctuation in the percentage of advertisements focusing on convenience entrées. For every year examined, advertisements for dairy products, fruits and vegetables, and protein-rich foods seldom occurred. In fact, none of these three categories ever represented more than 5 per cent of the advertisements in a sampled year.
Table II Food advertisements shown during prime-time television by category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of food advertised</th>
<th>1971a (n = 38, hours = 7)</th>
<th>1977b (n = 31, hours = 10)</th>
<th>1988c (n = 91, hours = 14)</th>
<th>1992 (n = 105, hours = 17.5)</th>
<th>1998d (n = 108, hours = 17.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast food</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>23 (25)</td>
<td>23 (22)</td>
<td>31 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family style</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>9 (9)</td>
<td>11 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-nutrient beverages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft drinks, regular</td>
<td>5 (13)</td>
<td>8 (24)</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft drinks, diet</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>6 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee/tea</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>6 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer/wine</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breads and cereals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugared breakfast cereals</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>6 (6)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsugared breakfast cereals</td>
<td>3 (8)</td>
<td>4 (12)</td>
<td>17 (19)</td>
<td>11 (10)</td>
<td>6 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsweetened grain products (e.g. breads)</td>
<td>4 (11)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>10 (10)</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweets/desserts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice-cream, frozen treats</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cake, candy, cookies, etc.</td>
<td>6 (16)</td>
<td>6 (18)</td>
<td>7 (8)</td>
<td>15 (14)</td>
<td>12 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrées</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience entrées</td>
<td>4 (11)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>7 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy products</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yogurt</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits and vegetables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits and fruit juice</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables and vegetable juice</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>7 (7)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salty snacks</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butter, margarine, oil, fats</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condiments, seasonings, ingredients</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein-rich foods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peanut butter</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, fish</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary supplements</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>1 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>8 (7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

a Data were derived from Cuozzo (1971).
b Data were derived from Kurman (1977). Note: column total exceeds 31 because the source of these data reported only 31 food advertisements; however, 33 brand name items were listed. Although it is impossible to determine exactly why this discrepancy occurred, it is probable that two breakfast cereals were promoted in each of two advertisements.
c Data are from Story and Faulkner (1990).
d Data are from Story and Faulkner (1990). Note: column total exceeds 108 because two advertisements each promoted four different foods.

* Percents do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Dietary supplements are a relatively new advertising phenomenon. Although one such advertisement (i.e. Geritol and Carnation Instant Breakfast) was broadcast in 1971 and in 1977, respectively, none was noted in the intervening years until 1998. The dietary supplements advertised in 1998 were Pediasure, meal substitutes (two brands), Creatine Fuel, One-A-Day Vitamins & Herbs, and Rite-Aid vitamin and mineral supplements (shown thrice).

Consumer-related promotional claims, particularly those focusing on flavor, quality, and economy were used to promote the vast majority of advertised foods and beverages (99 per cent, 94 per cent and 89 per cent in 1971, 1992, and 1998, respectively). In contrast, nutrition-related claims (e.g.}
contains specific nutrients or ingredients, minimizes or eliminates specific nutrients or substances, promotes good health or nutrition) were used much less often (35 per cent, 43 per cent and 39 per cent of food advertisements in 1971, 1992, and 1998, respectively). These findings are similar to data collected in 1988 in that the promotional claims made in food advertisements tended to be consumer-related with few advertisements making nutrition-related promotional claims (Story and Faulkner, 1990) (more specific data were not reported). Similar data were not available for 1977.

In 1977, 1992, and 1998, the overwhelming majority of actors in food advertisements were slender. Overweight persons were almost never shown in food advertisements. (Similar data are not available for 1971 or 1988.)

Discussion

For the past 30 years, food advertising has been frequently broadcast during prime-time hours. The so-called “prime-time diet” has largely comprised low-nutrient density foods, namely fast foods, low-nutrient beverages, sweets/desserts, and convenience entrées. Advertisements for dairy products, fruits, vegetables, and protein-rich foods were practically nil. The “prime-time diet” is strikingly similar to the actual diet of the American population; that is, a diet high in sugar, sodium, and fat and low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1988; Tippett and Cleveland, 1999; Putnam and Allshouse, 1999). The “prime-time diet” also mirrors food purchasing in that in 1998 37 per cent of all food advertisements were for restaurants and in 1997 Americans spent 45 per cent of their food dollar on foods prepared outside the home (Putnam and Allshouse, 1999). The impact of eating away from home on nutritional status is of concern. Between 1977 and 1995, the nutrient density of foods prepared at home increased – much more so than foods prepared away from home which tend to contain more fat and saturated fat and less calcium, iron, and fiber (Lin et al., 1999).

Also of concern is evidence that increases in fast food availability along with television viewing may contribute to increasing obesity rates in the USA (Jeffrey and French, 1998).

Although the actual and prime-time diets are similar, the paucity of overweight individuals in food advertisements is not at all reflective of the current situation in the USA where an estimated 97 million adults are overweight or obese (National Institutes of Health, 1998). This contrast raises issues concerning the inherent, yet erroneous, message that it is possible to consume the calorie-laden television fare and remain healthy and svelte. The impact of advertising on body image and self-esteem warrants greater study (Verri at al., 1997).

“Advertising’s critics have generally held that advertising shapes our way of life, while advertising’s defenders have argued that advertising merely echoes existing patterns” (Belk and Pollay, 1985, p. 888). Whether food advertising shapes or echoes consumer lifestyles cannot be determined from this study; however, even if food advertisements are only echoing lifestyles, for the past three decades they have been reinforcing and strengthening less than optimal eating patterns. Alternatively, if food advertisements are shaping lifestyles, they are advocating dietary patterns that are not recommended by health professionals.

The growing body of evidence that behaviors observed on television may be imitated or modeled by viewers underscores the concern for the quality of health information conveyed via television. Social learning theory asserts that many behaviors are acquired through observing others in the environment (Bandura, 1977). While there is no doubt that direct observation of significant people in a child’s immediate environment shapes his or her behavior (e.g. regional linguistic accents, body language), there exists some skepticism as to whether media can shape behavior in a manner similar to “real live” people in the child’s environment. However, as Kurman (1977) so aptly points out, many of our educational systems are based on the premise that observational models presented via media (e.g. The Bible, biographies, self-help guides) can shape behavior. Thus, because “the visual representations of human behavior on television bear a greater correspondence to ‘real life’ persons and situations than print can achieve, it seems logical to conclude that their impact on behavior would be even stronger than that of models offered in such a highly abstract medium as print” (Kurman, 1977,
The impact of the frequent, non-recommended health behaviors is magnified by the hours American children and teens spend observing televised behavior models. A myriad researchers have called for widespread public education programs designed to help Americans choose a diet that will promote health and diminish chronic disease risk (Tippett and Cleveland, 1999; Putnam and Allshouse, 1999; Crawford, 1988). The prevalence of health messages in television advertising that run counter to current recommendations coupled with the potential impact advertisements may have on dietary behavior suggests that this public education should include a media literacy component (Crawford, 1988). This component could teach viewers to become more cognizant of the messages they receive via television and to critically evaluate them. Media literacy programs are particularly important for children because they are very impressionable and tend to have difficulty in both interpreting information provided via television and distinguishing reality from fantasy (Derkens and Strasburger, 1994; Ambrosino, 1972; Centerwall, 1992; Condy and Freund, 1989; Van Evra, 1998; Singer et al., 1980). Moreover, such programs can enable children to become critical thinkers rather than information consumers. Considering the ubiquity of television in American society, the near-obsessiveness with which it is viewed, its potential to be "hazardous to one's health", and the relative absence of accurate nutrition information from other sources, these media literacy programs likely could be considered "vital to one's health".

References

Anonymous (1996), "Across the USA: news from every state: Pennsylvania", USA Today, October 17, p. 8A.


