

- 284,000 deaths were attributed to diabetes in 2007. The value of lost productivity due to premature death is \$26.9 billion.



## Attachments for Lesson Plan Day 3

# Article for 'Reading, Chunking, and Discussing'

## Fat & Politics: Suing Fast Food Corporations



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Anti-tobacco lawyer John Banzhaf is presently building more solid test cases against food corporations for knowingly selling products that are injurious to consumers' health. Banzhaf will send a letter to McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell and Kentucky Fried Chicken this month, demanding that they label their food as containing substances that may be as addictive as nicotine.

At the same time, there is talk of imposing a "fat tax" and/or forcing manufacturers to put health warnings on certain foods, similar to the warnings on tobacco products. McDonalds is apparently feeling the pressure. They have recently issued a request to their meat suppliers to reduce the quantity of antibiotics in their meat, perhaps a pre-emptive measure, intended to demonstrate concern about the health impact of their products in case of future lawsuits.

Many issues are bundled in the politics of fat: government responsibility versus individual responsibility; free enterprise versus government regulation; industrial profit versus public health. A fair debate is made more difficult because the media, influenced by the enormous revenue it derives from fast food corporations, typically treats the issue in a derisory fashion: it's all about greedy lawyers, a sue-happy culture and irresponsible consumers. Yet there is more to the fat issue than is suggested by these pre-digested media reductions.

Because it affects people on so many levels, fat is moving to the center-stage of American politics. First there is the issue of health. 36% of Americans are overweight and about two thirds of these are obese. Obesity greatly increases the individual's risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and other chronic diseases. Diet is so important to health that 80% of heart disease and cancer could be eliminated by simple changes in our eating habits, such as reducing meat consumption and increasing fresh fruit and vegetable consumption. Yet, despite these known facts, in 1996 only 22.7% of American adults ate the recommended five servings a day of fruit and vegetables.

The economic consequences of fat in the American diet are equally dramatic. The medical costs of obesity were conservatively estimated at \$51.6 billion in 1994. By now this figure would at least have doubled. More recent studies show that obesity is associated with higher costs for chronic health problems than either smoking or drinking. Only aging is associated with higher medical costs. Heart disease, the number one killer in America, is closely linked to diet, and cost over \$300 billion in medical care in 2002. The medical cost of diabetes, also directly linked to obesity, rose from \$44 billion in 1997 to \$91.8 billion in 2002. These figures do not include the hundreds of billions lost in American productivity every year to fat-related health problems.

But food preferences are so personal and so emotionally charged that they are highly resistant to rational arguments about change. Dietary choices are developed from early childhood through cultural, regional, ethnic, familial and commercial influences. To challenge these habits is, in many ways, to challenge our very identity. Hot dogs and mustard at baseball games, turkey and gravy at Thanksgiving, hamburgers and steaks on the grill in summertime: our national foods and the cultural contexts in which they are eaten are indivisible.



Indeed, they are more than just "choices" — they are a part of the American identity. Shrimp and grits and collard greens and fatback are distinct, traditional elements in southern African American culture. Individual variations on recipes and cooking styles are still passed down through families and are important to our familial and personal history. *We are* what we eat on so many interwoven levels that woe betide the politician who wants to regulate the contents of our refrigerators.

Yet the balance of influences on our dietary choices has changed dramatically over the last two centuries. Two hundred years ago, people tended to stay in one small region for most of their lives and had little or no access to the world outside. The influences on their diet were predominantly regional and familial. They ate the foods that were home grown, hand reared, or caught in their locale. Fresh meat, seafood, vegetables and fruits could not be transported thousands of miles in a few hours, so people tended only to eat locally grown, seasonal produce and locally butchered meat. All the crops, vegetables and fruits were organic, because chemical fertilizers and pesticides had not been invented. All the eggs and chickens were "free range", and growth hormones, antibiotics and steroids were not fed to livestock, so all meat and dairy produced was chemical free. Supermarkets, mass media, and industrial food production techniques did not exist. Even eating in restaurants was a rare experience for most, since the majority population lived in rural areas and the few restaurants that existed were in cities.

In the 20th century, however, the forces that influenced the 18th and 19th century American diet were radically transformed by industry, corporate franchising, and the media. The invention of the automobile, the development of superhighways and urbanization helped to spread fast food franchises, supermarkets, and convenience foods. Regional, cultural, ethnic and familial influences on diet faded as all regional and ethnic preferences were homogenized by the universal presence of fast food franchises. Modern children's food preferences are more powerfully influenced by television advertising than by familial or regional influences. Moreover, modern parents, who were raised on television, supermarket shopping, and convenience foods pass on to their children the food preferences that they developed under these commercial influences. Eating cereal for breakfast, for example, is a manufactured food tradition created by industry and the media.

Breakfast cereals like Froot Loops, Cap'n Krunch, Cocoa Puffs, and Lucky Charms, and many other children's foods such as Oreo Cookies, Eggo Waffles, Jif Peanut Butter, frozen pizza, frozen french fries, and hundreds of breads and baked goods, contain trans fats. Trans fats, or partially hydrogenated oils, increase shelf life and are cheap, so their use is advantageous to manufacturers. However, epidemiological evidence suggests that trans fats account for about 100,000 premature deaths from cardiological disease in the United States each year. Some health care professionals consider trans fat consumption as serious a health risk as smoking, and it has been argued that eating a McDonald's Happy Meal is as damaging as smoking three cigarettes.

The opponents of lawsuits against the fast food industry argue that "everyone knows" that McDonalds and Burger King sell high-fat foods and that those who eat these foods do so by their own free choice. Yet, knowledge alone is not enough to combat the power of life-long exposure to the media and to the omnipresence of fast food franchises and convenience foods. Partially hydrogenated oils have been used in American food manufacture since the 1920s: time for several generations of Americans to incorporate trans fats into their everyday diet and to normalize the consumption of hundreds of foods containing trans fats. Precisely because food preferences are formed over time and are deeply ingrained in our lifestyle, it is difficult for people to change their dietary habits, even when it is revealed that some ingredients in these foods are unhealthy or dangerous.

What is really at stake in the politics of fat is the extent to which government should restrict corporate and media influences on the American diet. There is no choice for consumers when every street corner and highway is crowded with fast food franchises and no healthy alternatives are available. There is no possibility of informed consumer decisions, when saturation advertising entirely overwhelms the cautionary messages of doctors and health professionals.

Only the food manufacturers have the resources and the media access to balance their own marketing and distribution power with cautionary labels and informational campaigns. Only economic pressure can force food manufacturers to eliminate their use of trans fats and other dangerous ingredients, especially in foods that are aggressively marketed to children. As John Banzhaf constructs his case, instead of pursuing the unproven notion that fast foods contain addictive ingredients, he should consider the more insidious and pervasive power of the media and commerce to create unhealthy dietary preferences and to eliminate real consumer freedom of choice.

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