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THE CONVERSATION

The limit of labels: ethical food is more than consumer choice

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Over the past hundred years, industrial agriculture and the globalised food system have produced cheaper, longer lasting and more diverse food items. We can now enjoy tropical fruits in winter, purchase whole chickens at the price of a cup of coffee, and eat fresh bread long after it was baked.

Once celebrated as the benevolent results of food science and ingenuity of farmers, these cheap and safe foods are dismissed by critics as the tainted fruits of “Big Food” – the culinary version of Big Tobacco and Big Oil.

Food is no longer simply a matter of taste or convenience. Our food choices have become ethical and political issues.

An innocuous but central strategy in these debates is the food label.

In recent years there has been an explosion of [ethico-political food labels](#) to address concerns such as slavery, nutrition, environmental degradation, fair trade and animal cruelty. These disparate concerns are unified by their connection to the amorphous culprit “Big Food”.

The idea is that by knowing what is in our food and how it was produced, we will reject unethical food corporations, buy from ethical producers and thereby promote justice.

But is this necessarily so?

The power of truth to awaken the slumbering consumer giant has been in place since at least the mid-1990s. In the introduction to her landmark book, [No Logo](#) (1999), Naomi Klein outlines her hypothesis:

that as more people discover the brand-name secrets of the global logo web, their outrage will fuel the next big political movement, a vast wave of opposition squarely

targeting transnational corporation, particularly those with very high name-brand recognition.

According to Klein, when the veil is removed and people discover the “secrets” behind their consumer products, an outrage will be unleashed that will transform the global web of capital.

We see this logic in [calls for food labels](#) to reveal unethical food production practices of Big Food. By giving consumers more information, it is believed they will use their buying power to force change. Perhaps.

Limits of ethico-political consumption

First, a danger of ethico-political consumption is that citizens are transformed into consumers, and political action is reduced to shopping. Rather than holding companies and governments to account for unethical practice, it becomes a matter of consumer choice.

For example, most of us would consider a proposal to use consumer choice as a way of resolving slavery in the American cotton industry during the 19th century to be a perverse idea. Slavery, we like to believe, should be outlawed. It is not an issue to be solved through consumer preference. Yet today we find ourselves in a [situation](#) where we are trying to solve issues of [slavery](#) and [exploitation](#) through consumer choice.

Today, 45.8 million people are living in slavery. According to the [Global Slavery Index](#), 4,300 are working in Australian food production or sex industries. Many more work in the global food system, of which Australia is a part.

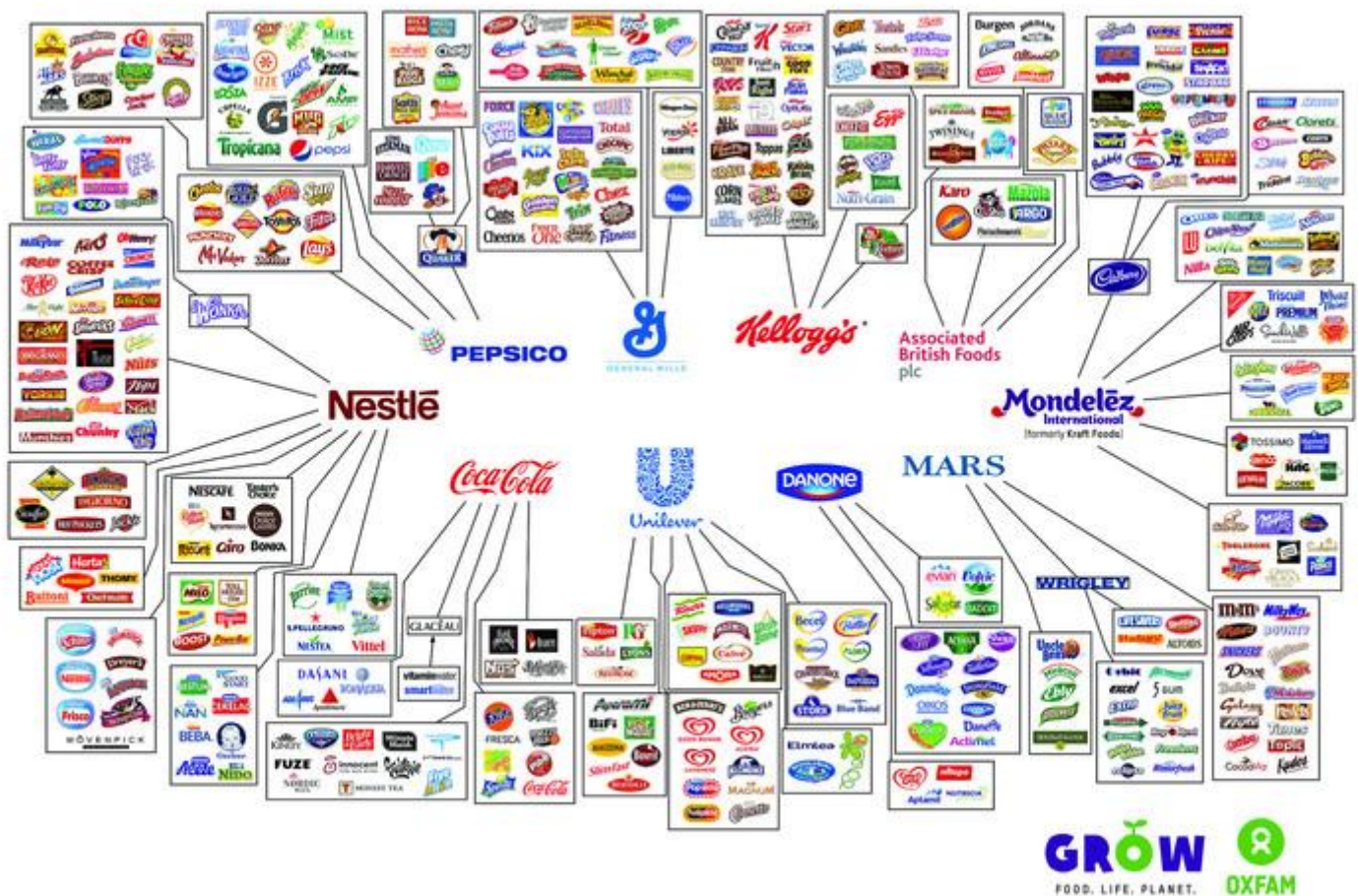
As Nicola Frith has previously argued in *The Conversation*, the slavery used in the global food system that supplies prawns to UK and US supermarkets [should not be considered an issue of consumer choice but a crime](#).

A second problem with ethico-political consumption is that the consumer response is susceptible to co-option by the very corporations that are being protested. Due to the vast array of products sold by trans-national corporations, it is possible for corporations to maintain highly profitable but “unethical” products, along with less profitable but “ethical” products.

For example, Pace Farm is one of the largest producers of cage-eggs in Australia, yet they also sell [free-range eggs](#). They also have [other brands](#) that are not obviously associated with Pace Farm, like [Family Value](#).

In 2013, Oxfam launched [Behind the Brands](#). This campaign draws attention to the influence of multinational food corporations on the global food system and negative impacts on women, workers, farmers, land, water and climate. Although the campaign uses a variety of strategies to critique these corporations, much of the focus falls on consumers.

A popular image associated with the campaign shows the way hundreds of popular food brands are actually owned by ten corporations. It’s worth noting this chart is several years old and some of the listed brands have changed hands, but its point remains.



GROW FOOD, LIFE, PLANET. **OXFAM**

The illusion of choice. [CLICK TO ENLARGE](#) Oxfam/Behind the Brand

The image has been repeatedly shared on social media and is commonly accompanied with the text “the illusion of choice”. However, clearly there is choice here – there are hundreds of brands, each with thousands of products. Of course, the sentiment of the “illusion of choice” statement isn’t simply that we have only a single choice of soft drink or cereal, but that all choices lead to one of ten transnational corporations.

The more troubling illusion, however, is not that the thousands of products lining the supermarket shelves are owned by ten corporations, but that political consumption – the proverbial “voting with your wallet” – is illusory.

The illusion of consumer food choice as an ethico-political act is not the pernicious creation of food corporations, but co-creation of public health experts, consumer advocates, governments, food ethicists and a host of others.

Even if these labels serve to disrupt corporate brands, they also trap individuals into responsibility for systemic and global issues, such as public health, global poverty, animal welfare or fair working conditions. This isn’t to say we are absolved, but the idea that more consumption will solve the problems of consumption is self-defeating.

Using labels or apps to draw attention to the political and ethical features of consumer choice is a fine objective, but largely symbolic. If certain activities of food corporations and the

global food system are considered unethical, then a plurality of approaches is needed – one of which needs to be international and domestic legislation.

As the American economist [Robert Reich](#) argues,

Companies are not interested in the public good. It is not their responsibility to be good...if we want them to play differently, we have to change the rules.

For the past decade, there has been an over-reliance on self-regulation and naïve expectations about corporate social responsibility. This needs to change, and not by simply adding a new label to our food.