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# "Teaching about Food and Media" Editor's Notes and Introduction

Heidi Zimmerman

University of Minnesota, [zimme313@umn.edu](mailto:zimme313@umn.edu)

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## **Introduction: Teaching about Food and Media**

### **Heidi Zimmerman**

Food media are by no means new. Cookbooks, food and cooking magazines, diet and nutrition pamphlets, recipes written down and shared, and treatises on the ethics of eating all have a long history. But in recent years, there has been an explosion of food-related media. Food TV proliferates, featuring not only step-by-step demonstrations, but also high-stakes competitions. There are cooking websites, blogs, massive online recipe databases, and user-generated restaurant reviews. Media devoted to diet and healthy lifestyle have also surged, with shows like the *Biggest Loser* or mobile device apps that promise to aid dieters with detailed tracking of everyday food habits. And there has also been heightened media attention to the ethics of eating, materializing in several hugely popular books, such as those of Michael Pollan, as well as movies, like *Food Inc.*

This media attention has emerged against the backdrop of mounting economic inequality, anxieties about the so-called "obesity epidemic," and the increasingly evident effects of industrial agribusiness practices (e.g., monoculture, pesticide and herbicide use) on the environment. In contemporary culture, food media operate in multiple and contradictory ways. Food media can be sites of politics, or resources for navigating the food landscape. Within food media, lessons about health, gender, race, class, sexuality, labor and national identity get articulated, often in line with dominant hegemonies. Yet at the same time, food media are sites of struggle over these very categories. This issue of *Teaching Media Quarterly* brings together a range of lessons that critically investigate questions of economic inequality, consumer citizenship, gender, national identity, health and nutrition at the intersection of food and media.

**Laura Hahn and Michael Bruner's** experiential activity, "Film, Food, and Finances: Students Engaging with Food Insecurity," teaches students about food assistance programs. Students are given a food budget and asked to prepare a weekly menu. After students go shopping, they reflect on the efficacy of food assistance programs and the state of their local food landscape. The lessons also include a screening of the documentary, *A Place at the Table* (2012), and in-class discussions to about food landscapes and food insecurity in the U.S.

In "Spectacular Culinary Tourism," **Stacy Jameson's** contribution, students explore food-related travel TV. Through screenings of CBS's *Survivor: China* and Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations*, students analyze how television genre conventions, narrative structures, culinary choices, and (post)-production editing practices shape not just how we understand food, but also how we come to see the individuals, groups, and nationalities associated with these edibles.

**Kristen McCauliff's** lesson, "The Internet, Capitalism and Food Activism: Helping Students See the Connection," encourages students to explore how new media participate in both opening up, and shutting down, discussions food politics. Students consider their everyday, lived experience with food media, then take up the question of the political to consider: How are mediated food activities political? What is the "relationship between the free market and food activism"? And how does capitalism both enable and constrain consumers' choices?

**Tara Schuwerk**'s assignment, "Critical Consumption: Analyzing Food and Nutrition in Media Artifacts," prompts students to identify and evaluate diverse media messages that influence perceptions of food and nutrition. Students apply a range of communication theories (e.g., persuasion theories; health communication principles; or media analysis) to complete a media analysis presentation and a critical reflection paper that encourage them to become more conscientious consumers of media and food.

**Rachel E. Silverman and David F. Purnell**'s contribution, "Barefoot (Contessa) in the Kitchen," asks students to examine the intersection of food television and gender. Students engage with critical readings on food media, gendered labor, and representations of gender and sexuality, and bring these to bear on food TV. Students view two food television shows and analyze contrasting representations of gender and sexuality in several activities that culminate in an analytical essay. This lesson gives students the opportunity to explore the ways in which food TV's construction of cooking is both structured by and perpetuates assumptions about gender, sexuality, and labor.