

Book Review: The Handbook of Food Research, edited by Anne Murcott, Warren Belasco, Peter Jackson

*The last twenty years have seen a burgeoning of social scientific and historical research on food. The field has drawn in experts to investigate topics such as the way globalisation affects the food supply; what cookery books can (and cannot) tell us; changing understandings of famine; the social meanings of meals – and many more. Now sufficiently extensive to require a critical overview, this is the first handbook of specially commissioned essays to provide a tour d’horizon of this broad range of topics and disciplines. Reviewed by **Ellen J. Helsper**.*



**The Handbook of Food Research. Anne Murcott, Warren Belasco, Peter Jackson (eds.).
Bloomsbury Academic. August 2013.**

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Eating is rational; a basic, survival-based need. We quite literally cannot live without food. But food is more than fuel; we have emotional and symbolic relationships with producing, buying, eating and sharing food. Eating is part of how we relate to others, a shared experience, interwoven with daily family and communal rituals. Therefore, what lands on our plates and ends up in our bellies is subject to economic, social, political and personal struggles.

The Handbook of Food Research covers the whole spectrum of research related to food production, distribution and consumption and is aimed at a broad audience. Here, I will focus on the two chapters of the book that discuss the mediated aspects of food consumption: Chapter 14 ‘Food Marketing’ written by Lien and Jacobsen, and Chapter 24 ‘Food Representation and Consumption’ by Dickinson. Both are written in a very accessible manner, covering varied research into mediated food consumption but lacking some of the more standard insights from traditional media research.



THE HANDBOOK OF
FOOD RESEARCH

EDITED BY ANNE MURCOTT,
WARREN BELASCO, AND PETER JACKSON

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The chapters discuss the academic debates around the effectiveness of messages in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviours around food consumption in positive or negative ways, pointing out that this research largely follows the cause and effects and persuasion traditions common in psychological and health behaviour change studies. The bulk examines unhealthy food marketing and media representations, especially in relation to children, and there is some evidence that marketing has a short term impact. Evidence and research is harder to come by for social marketing (i.e. using media messages to change behaviour for the public good). The authors argue that this is unsurprising because the unhealthy food industries’ budgets are far larger than that of those involved in social marketing. Therefore, there is both more unhealthy food marketing and more funds for research in this area than in social food marketing. For both media practices the evidence is contradictory; in a really complex multi-media landscape they show weak short term and rarely long term effects on eating patterns. Surprisingly, in the book digital media are ignored. These might be an important site for opinion leaders and influential others to counter the commercial messaging produced by marketers and mainstream media.

The authors are critical of a focus on cause and effects in food marketing and representation research, and argue for a broader critical cultural studies perspective. Since in the Western world there is an abundance of food and raw food ‘products’ are very similar, marketing and media representations are the one way to distinguish them from one another. Lien and Jacobsen argue that we need to ask how media construct food and the wider world around us, as “food marketing brings together producer and consumer[and] in doing so, food marketing changes the way we gain access to food, the way we eat, and the way we think about the way we eat” (p. 271). Dickinson talks about the “...definitional struggles between scientists and medical experts, public policy officials and

pressure groups over the way the underlying issues of food and risks should be understood and presented in the media” (p. 449).

Another critique of mediated food consumption research is that it does not foreground the inequalities and values in the production of food and mediated food messaging. The authors make a plea to refocus research on producers of food-related marketing and representations in the context of a food system that is deeply unjust, rendering millions of people undernourished and about a billion people overweight. Their Bourdieuan approach highlights that mediated food consumption functions to reproduce (elite) practices, meanings and values of an increasingly commercialised, homogenous and unequal world.



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The call for a shift away from pure cause and effects paradigms also highlights related methodological gaps in mediated food consumption research. The authors rightly point out that the use of quantitative, individualist methodologies such as content analysis and experiments boils mediated food consumption down to simple processes of sender– message – receiver. Ignoring more contextual theorisations of media and communications research which link it to a myriad of societal factors. Nevertheless, what is lacking in these chapters and in most research around food marketing and representation is a sense of the historical and social everyday positioning of the ‘audience’. Audience research emphasises the diversified nature of the audience, the idea of agency and the multiple possibilities of the interpretation of media texts.

A further vital element is missing from their discussion of mediated food consumption. The authors discuss production, messaging, and the (lack of) evidence for subsequent attitude and behaviour change without addressing what comes between attitude formation and actual eating. Purchasing takes place in physical locations very different from purchasing settings used in research. Another significant barrier is habit formation around product purchases and food consumption. Brand loyalty and, more importantly, the influence of parenting and family environments on behaviour patterns are very strong for habitual consumption. Dietary patterns are established during childhood and are very difficult to change, influenced by family habits more than by marketing.

We largely eat what we eat because we ate it yesterday, because we ate it last year, because it is what ate growing up. Instant, impulse purchases are easier to influence than general eating habits around habitual breakfast, lunch and dinner practices. However, even these short term effects have to be understood as limited by barriers in the immediate context of purchasing and consumption and an individual's socio-demographic, cultural and psychological characteristics which mess up potential universal effects of media on food consumption.

In summary, the problem with cause and effects, cultural studies and political-economy approaches to mediated food consumption research is that our eating practices are strongly habitual and situational. We eat not just for nutritional reasons or because a media message or producer tells us to; eating is an emotional, social, and nostalgic everyday practice embedded in a myriad of other health and media related behaviours.

Dr Ellen J. Helsper is Associate Professor in Media and Communications at the LSE. Her current research interests include the links between digital and social exclusion; mediated interpersonal communication; and quantitative and qualitative methodological developments in media research. While she was working on her PhD she did consultancy work for OSSWatch (Oxford University), Ofcom, the BBC and Plan International, which included reports on the impact of food advertising material on young people. [Read more reviews by Ellen.](#)

In this podcast, **Dr Ellen Helsper**, Lecturer in the Media and Communications Department at the LSE, talks us through the books that have inspired her interest in media technologies and privacy. Ellen will contribute to the Literary Festival event titled "[Private Lives: Do we still value our privacy?](#)" on 1st March.

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