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Changing Families,
Changing Food.

Food provision and the media

Researchers

Margo Barker, Human Nutrition Unit, University of Sheffield

Joseph Burrridge, Human Nutrition Unit, University of Sheffield, now an Independent Scholar

Kristelle McNeir, Human Nutrition Unit, University of Sheffield

Jean Russell, Corporate Information and Computing Services, University of Sheffield

Summary

The *Food Provision and the Media* project has been using two samples of over 370 issues of the women's magazines *Woman's Own* and *Woman and Home*, published between 1940 and 2006, to explore various dimensions of the gendered construction of food provision activity over time. The study concentrates upon the

various ends that are offered in relation to the preparation of food: what is it that is constructed as being achievable through food provision? It also explores the relationship between food claims and food policy, and the impact of the wider social context upon the food content of such texts.

Contact:

Margo Barker
Human Nutrition Unit
School of Medicine

Email: M.E.Barker@Sheffield.ac.uk



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www.sheffield.ac.uk/familiesandfood

Research questions

- Are there trends in how women and food are represented in the media, and do these resonate with socio-cultural change in the family context? In what ways are the activities involved in food provision represented in media texts targeted at women?
- To what extent is the responsibility for food provision constructed as a set of gendered practices, and how far and in what ways does this shift over time?
- What range of ends and purposes are offered for the preparation of food, and does the balance between these alter in observable ways over time?
- Do trends in health-related food claims reflect contemporary scientific understanding of the relationship between diet and health and nutrition policy?

Research design

The project involved a time-series examination of food writing in two popular British women's magazines (*Woman's Own* and *Woman and Home*). The series encompassed magazines published from 1940 through to contemporary publications. Analysis proceeded through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of magazine material, including rhetorical analysis of textual and visual content. This examination provides evidence of how the relationship between food and the family have been represented, and allows for analysis of subtle shifts over time of the relative emphasis upon the role of food in particular activities, familial and otherwise.

Key findings

- Our research suggests that advertising claims based on economy, taste and pleasing others were much more prevalent in magazines from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s relative to contemporary magazines. There were clear shifts in nutrition and health messages by decade with changing weightings in types of food advertised, some of which resonated with nutrition policy at the time. There were anomalies between advocacy to consume more of a particular nutrient and exposure to advertising for particular food types rich in that nutrient. An analysis of weight loss diets by decade revealed discrepancy with recommended intakes of fibre, sodium and iron.
- Nutritional and health claims for food were common in 1940s and 1950s magazines. Advertising and articles repeated government policy advice, but food was also advocated on grounds of looking good, soothing nerves, improving digestion and affecting weight loss.
- The relationship between advertising and the

rationing policy in place in Britain during and after the Second World War is more complex than has been argued by several previous studies, with frugality itself often offered as a justification for the purchase and consumption of certain types of product.

- Food provision is often constructed as having a role to play in the management of the emotional responses of family members – with a housewife/mother thereby constructed as accountable for the happiness of those for whom she prepares food. This is a theme present in magazine content across time, but which reduces in incidence from the 1970s onwards.
- The advertising of foods identified as intended specifically for children often makes claims about both their healthiness *and* the pleasure that they will produce – offering the housewife/mother the possibility of balancing those apparently competing imperatives. By being directed at both being healthy and pleasing children this constructs those two possibilities as in tension with one another, which may be counterproductive when it comes to encouraging children to eat healthily.

Publications

Burridge J D (2009) 'I don't care if it does me good, I like it': constructions of children, health and enjoyment in British women's magazine food advertising', in James, A., et al. (eds.) *Children, food and identity*. Palgrave-Macmillan, in press.

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Burridge J D (2008) The dilemma of frugality and consumption in women's magazine adverts 1940-1955. *Social Semiotics* 18: 389-401.



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