

**Corporate Producer Dominance in the FPCN: How a Moral Shift Led to the Modern
American Health Crisis**

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
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The Dangers of the American Food Network

The most lethal part of your life is the food you consume each day. That seems unbelievable. But as transmissible illnesses and infections have steadily declined over the past one hundred years, preventable illnesses, primarily caused by the consumption of unhealthy food options, have steadily increased (Jones et al., 2012, pp. 2336-2338). Preventable food related illnesses contribute to seven of the top ten causes of death in the United States (Ellis, 2023) even as death due to unhealthy habits such as heart disease are at historic lows. This form of unhealthiness is reflected in the amount of obesity present in American society. A record high 42% of Americans are obese, a number that has tripled since 1960 (USA Facts, 2019). Why have preventable illnesses trended upward over the past seventy years? Dietary illnesses, or illnesses caused by the excessive consumption of harmful ingredients or the insufficient consumption of vital nutrients (Gropper, 2023, p.1), have increased in the United States over a time period when consumers have lost autonomy in the food production-consumption network (FPCN). The FPCN refers to the system of processes involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of food within the United States, a system which has reduced contact between primary producers and consumers by adding more steps that need intermediate actors (Lockie, 2002, p. 279). Lost autonomy within this system is most discernible in the lack of knowledge people have surrounding their food. According to the National Library of Medicine, 58% of Americans do not understand the food labeling meant to serve as a quick reflection of the material entering their bodies. 52% of Americans do not read the ingredients labels at all (Goyal & Deshmukh, 2018, p. 56). In addition, the system prioritizes long production chains to minimize product price while sacrificing the personal relationship (Counihan, 1992, p. 55) further dissociating

consumers from suppliers within the network. This gives agency to the producers at the expense of consumers (Lockie, 2002, p. 280).

Happening concurrently with the power shift in the FPCN is a moral priority shift within the American public as successive generations enter the marketplace (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 26). Generational patterns show that younger generations place more value in categories centralized on personal happiness compared to older generations whose priorities centered on the health and personal freedom experienced by their families (McNeally, 2022). Personal happiness has increased in importance over the past seventy years with each successive generation. The generational differences show a shift from prioritizing personal responsibility to prioritizing happiness (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 22). Shifting moral priorities also shape the value consumers place in agency within the FPCN which is allowing corporations to seize more influence (Lockie, 2002, pp. 284-285). The result is a worsening health climate in the United States. This paper argues that American moral priorities have shifted, ceding control within food production-consumption networks to large, collective actors, primarily major food production corporations. The loss of consumer agency within the food network continues to cause a decline in American health because a limited number of corporate producers hold control of the market (Lakhani et al., 2021) without focusing on the health of the consumer. The moral priority shift is understood using Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory to understand different moral priorities and the power dynamics within the food industry are viewed through Stewart Lockie's FPCN construct (Lockie, 2002). The paper concludes by offering a three step approach to solving the lost agency issue: (1) returning to the moral priorities of prior generations, (2) improving communal education on nutrition, and (3) using communal loyalty to maximize the power of collective action, returning power in the FPCN to the consumer.

The Contributions of the Moral Shift on American Health

The American people's moral shift can be best understood using a framework known as Moral Foundations Theory composed by Jonathan Haidt. This framework uses six axes of moral consideration, weighted differently depending on the individual, to understand why people arrive at differing moral decisions (Haidt, 2012, p. 146). Haidt's framework better suits studying a moral shift compared to the narrow set of ideas used in other models describing comfort and responsibility because his framework axes underlie human moral decision-making. Through this framework, the personal responsibility focus of past generations can be understood as loyalty in an earlier time. Although the traits describing personal responsibility (McNeally, 2022) seem to center on selfish pursuits, they describe a person who seeks to be self-sufficient, unburdensome, and able to protect others. Modernization trends around cultures in industrial societies, where a large percentage of jobs focuses on manufacturing such as that of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, agree that earlier generations had a more communal or familial focus (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 25). Each of these match high on the loyalty axis as described in Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012, p. 163). The younger generations, aligning more with moral reasoning in the modern age, had goals centered on personal happiness and freedom (McNeally, 2022). Inglehart and Baker's modernization studies tend to agree that generations through the post-industrial age, defined as service-based occupations beginning in the 1980s in the United States, place more emphasis on self-expression and person-to-person interactions in lieu of family-based relationships (2000, p. 22). Haidt writes that liberty centers on an instinct that notices and resists signs of domination whether power is accumulated by an individual or an institution (2012, pp. 202-203). This sorts younger generations into moral reasoning primarily along the liberty axis.

In a society where suffering of the physical variety continues to shrink, personal suffering is the target of those who prioritize liberty. Generational differences can be used to approximate moral foundations because positioning on the moral axes remains somewhat stagnant after early childhood (Dahl & Killen, 2018, p. 4). This trend maps the loss of autonomy in the food production-consumption network with a moral shift. Instead of prioritizing loyalty, many Americans now prioritize liberty which has led to less autonomy in the food industry.

One aspect of contemporary American culture lending itself to emphasis on the liberty foundation is the minimization of monotonous and personally expensive options. As early as the 1970s, food expenses, in time and money, were minimized by separating consumers from producers and introducing many intricate processes needed to create newer, cheaper food products (Counihan, 1992, pp. 55-56). This separation had the benefit of cheapening cost, but it also carried the drawback of placing power in the hands of producers. The ease of this newer system allowed individuals, especially those entering the FPCN independently for the first time, to recuse themselves from the responsibility of accumulating nutritional knowledge (Counihan, 1992, pp. 57-58) or entering any disputes or agreements within the food network. These disputes were historically mediated by a member of the family or community prior to the last forty years (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 25) which provided communities with tremendous bargaining power in the FPCN. Instead many consumers opt for authoritative actors, namely corporations within the FPCN who confidently proclaim expertise on the subject, to mediate contradictions (Lockie, 2002, p. 280). Trust in growing corporations has replaced loyalty historically given to local producers whose reputation was cultivated by interpersonal relationships with members of the community.

A lower loyalty valuation can be seen in college students during the early nineties who, while using their newfound freedom in the social sphere, made decisions that neglected their health and the health of those around them. Instead of conforming to the dietary expectations of their parents, such as eating regular meals with high amounts of vegetables and healthier proteins, many severely restricted food consumption which led to eating disorders or lacked the control to restrict unhealthy food consumption (Counihan, 1992, pp. 60-61). Less adherence to the traditional familial and communal structure directly results in a perceived “game between persons” where individuals are the key negotiators (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 22), but dietary structures have corporate producers acting as organized power structures that prevent effective individual action (Lockie, 2002, p. 287). When given the freedom to make their own food choices, younger generations fail to consume the proper amount of food and fail to obtain various nutrients obtained through diet. Both of these pathways demonstrate limited focus on practicing healthy habits that result in bettering the situation of those around them. These control mechanisms instead focus on minimizing the mental harm felt by the individuals exercising said mechanisms. This is in stark contrast to the eating decisions of earlier generations who typically developed more regular eating schedules focused on the health of their families (Counihan, 1992, pp. 59-60) and communities.

As Counihan found in his study, individuals, in the later phases of this transition away from the loyalty based foundation, will attempt to exert personal control in any aspect of their lives. Traditions, including agency within the food production-consumption network, that individuals see as directly beneficial to themselves will be upheld (Counihan, 1992, p. 62). This is seen in the examples of middle-class families in the study. Conversely, individually beneficial traits from one perspective often experience trade-offs with dire consequences, namely the loss

of financial and physical health to gain subjective well-being (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 22). More commonly, knowledge-based agency is rejected in favor of decision-making based on the interests of powerful actors within the network in order to reduce the power of familial, communal, or traditional decision-makers like parents (Counihan, 1992, pp. 62-63).

Producers Can Not Be Trusted to Manage the FPCN

Aside from the shifting moral matrix decreasing the perceived importance of personal responsibility on the consumer side of the network, there is an effort primarily by corporate producers to remove autonomy from consumers as well (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 240). Corporate producers, entities which carry out activities related to food while being financially accountable to stakeholders, minimize autonomy within these networks by downplaying the negative effects of unhealthy choices or processes while complicating the information given to the public. Without a concerted effort from another influential and potent group of actors, corporate producers will continue to increase their dominance within the FPCN. The loss of autonomy, as previously discussed, will continue to result in declining health outcomes for the average American. Because of the network dominance of corporate producers, decisions regarding food are typically made with the sole objective of maximizing profits, demoting the importance of health. This takes place in a myriad of ways including promoting the importance of particular food products, making health promises without an intention to improve customer health, and prioritizing taste and cost over health outcomes.

Many individuals following the American political discussion would acknowledge that corporate entities within various production networks have too much influence and too little restriction, whether from consumers or government regulators, despite nearly half of Americans

having little or no confidence in these corporations (Frick, 2018). In the food production-consumption network, this lack of trust arises from many different corporate producer practices ranging from promoting improper portion sizes to directing advertising to vulnerable consumers such as children or poorer individuals (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 240). Some of these tactics directly undermine the ability of consumers to act independently of the interests of corporate producers. For example, producers have developed rating systems such as the Smart Choices Program which are supposed to inform consumers that a product is a good dietary choice (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 242). An inherent problem in this program is that a good dietary choice is heavily dependent on other meals eaten throughout the day and varies from person to person. The Smart Choices Program does not account for these factors. But beyond these concerns, individuals examining the rating would see that of the twenty-two cereal options receiving the Smart Choice label, eleven brands had as much sugar in a single serving as a glazed doughnut and those same eleven had 40% or more of the cereal composed of sugar (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 242). How are consumers supposed to make good choices if rating systems designed to help them make decisions are colluding with corporate producers and downplaying negative health effects?

Another way autonomy is removed from consumers is by developing products from a few crop sources and neglecting the remaining crop assortment when producing food. Potatoes and corn have dominated the American diet for decades now. Reports from the USDA state that potatoes are now the vegetable of choice for most Americans (Bentley & Ralston, 2019) and that corn continues to be the most used crop in the food industry (Capehart & Proper, 2019). Add tomatoes, onions, and lettuce and 80% of American vegetable consumption is accounted for (Bentley & Ralston, 2019). A lack of food diversity becomes problematic for two main reasons;

it decreases the amount of nutrients being consumed and it increases the amount of specific toxins being accumulated. Both issues are underplayed by food producers. Highly popularized foods such as cereals, fried potatoes, and various other carbohydrate dense foods are packed with sugars, salt, and cheap energy, but lack many essential nutrients including fiber and major vitamins (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 242).

In addition to deficiencies in needed chemicals caused by the industry limited palate, an accumulation of negative chemicals also occurs. Too many potatoes and other low nutrient, high carbohydrate foods lead to an accumulation of acrylamide, a known neurotoxin (Jackson, 2009, p. 8165). A similar problem occurs when high quantities of corn are consumed. Mycotoxins, byproducts of fungi growing in close proximity to crops, accumulate as grain based crops are grown. Corn accumulates a recently discovered family of mycotoxins called fumonisins which in large amounts are known carcinogens (Jackson, 2009, p. 8166). In both cases, a narrowed diet organized by corporate producers lowering costs (Caraher & Coveney, 2004, p. 595) is bringing about a decrease in the consumption of various nutrients and an increase in various toxin accumulations. In fact, several food epidemics in the United States's recent history have been the result of unhealthy chemicals being added to food products to cheapen production or improper production procedures leading to food contamination followed by a failure to inform consumers or health officials (Jackson, 2009, pp. 8161-8163).

The presentation of nutritional information to the public by food producing corporations worsens the issue. This is exemplified by nutritional labels. While many people attempt to read them to make nutritional decisions, over 95% of consumers have no better than a partial understanding of the information provided (Goyal & Deshmukh, 2018). This returns back to the values of most Americans who can not spend the time developing the nutritional literacy

necessary to understand food labels. Food labels act as information overloads met to direct consumers away from more sound nutritional advice and toward ratings and seals posted on the packaging. Another overloading technique is to advertise using people and characters of influence, especially toward young and poor populations. Much of the regulation around food advertisements has been left to the industry to regulate (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 244). Corporate producers have made various pledges to curb promotion of unhealthy food items to kids and on television with the implicit idea being a reduced appetite for such products, but there are many questions on if these advertising transitions are met to curb unhealthy eating or if they mark a shift to new food promotion techniques (Sharma et al., 2010, p. 241). To many, these changes feel hollow.

The final method used to complicate the information in the FPCN is to legitimize corporate producers and minimize the authority of other organizations. As corporate producers are globalizing, they encourage consumers to view food as coming from a complicated, corporate, and process oriented system instead of a farm, garden, or local community member (Caraher & Coveney, 2004, p. 592). By reshaping the food industry in this way, corporations gain legitimacy in food based health matters and consumers begin to believe themselves dependent on them. It also delegitimizes the importance and authority of local farmers and independent organizations because they lack the level of experience in production that many of these corporations have (Caraher & Coveney, 2004, p. 592). As discussed in evaluating modern consumer priorities, downplaying the effects of unhealthy choices while promoting unhealthy products, deliberately hiding data on potential health hazards to promote cheaper production crops, and increasing the dietary information load necessary to monitor individual diets decreases the probability that individuals within the FPCN will make healthier food choices due

to the time cost and an increasing lack of subject matter knowledge. These artificial barriers have resulted in an obesity epidemic and an increased percentage of deaths attributable to poor nutrition.

A Solution to Combat the Producer Controlled Network

The power dynamic between consumers and producers within the Food Production-Consumption Network (FPCN) and the moral shift of the average American consumer are not independent events both contributing to the same insidious effect on American health. They are interconnected factors that impact each other, often in a positive feedback loop. Lost consumer power within the FPCN results in moral attitudes less focused on communal loyalty, instead focused on finding the cheapest and most convenient option at the cost of harming local producers. This attitude in turn provides positive feedback to large food producers that cheap production and product placement targeting convenience is valued more than products focusing on consumer health. As corporate producers increase their profits, more power is removed from smaller producers who lack the convenience and thrift appeal of corporate producers (Lakhani et al., 2021). Consumers are left with fewer options. And as options dwindle, the consumer loses more power, has worsened health concerns, and focuses less on the health of their community, instead prioritizing personal outcomes. So the power imbalance within the FPCN along with the moral shift away from communal loyalty feed into each other and ultimately contribute to worsening health effects seen in rising rates of diet-based illnesses and deaths in the United States. This spiraling effect presents a gloomy image of future generations diminishing the importance of health and a society unraveling from the economic and social burdens resulting from a population without responsible consumption habits. But fortunately, there is a three step

solution that can provide a path out of the despair-filled coma Americans have eaten themselves into.

The first step is to reestablish individual loyalty to local communities and the small-scale producers within them in a move I call the moral retrograde. While this step may be the most difficult, without taking this step, the other two would be ineffective. As discussed by Lockie's paper on mobilizing the consumer within the FPCN, power within the network can be defined in two forms. Power can be at times concentrated and hierarchical, as is the current condition of corporate food producers (Lakhani et al., 2021), or it can be dispersed, as is the modern case with the American consumer (Lockie, 2002, pp. 280-281). There are many contradictions within the FPCN regarding the power distribution among producers. Consumers desire local producers to hold the most influence within the FPCN because they are easier to regulate but prioritize the convenience given by corporate producers. Consumers want better health outcomes, but continue to buy based on taste satisfaction which breeds negative health outcomes (Lockie, 2002, p. 280). Instead of resolving these issues within their communities, consumers delegate this responsibility to corporate producers which removes power from the community (Lockie, 2002, p. 280). But this structure is not fixed. Consumers can concentrate power by aligning with each other. This would require consumers to congregate with members of their local communities and reach agreements on modern these contradictions. However, congregation and reaching binding agreements across a community requires personal sacrifice and loss of personal liberty for the good of others. A retrograde to the times when loyalty to the community and care for its health were valued over liberty. This method cannot be instituted by a higher authority because the liberty priority of the younger generations will resist attempts by an outside power to remove autonomy (Haidt, 2012, p. 215), so this process must be voluntary. The majority of consumers

would likely voluntarily sacrifice freedom within this network given how uncomfortable with invasion of corporate producers into their local area most consumers are (Lockie, p. 286). Should a retrograde to loyalty as the moral priority occur, consumers would regain a significant amount of power within the FPCN.

But power within the Food Production-Consumption Network is useless without the knowledge to make health-oriented decisions. This requires the second step, educating consumers on healthy diet choices. This has its difficulties though. As previously discussed, producers intentionally mislead consumers into thinking their convenient, tasty product doubles as healthy when it usually does not. Over 90% of American consumers do not understand the dietary information required of corporate producers placed on most processed foods (Goyal & Deshmukh, 2018). This is considered by many to be baseline health information, so the needed education, starting with nutritional education, must be extensive. Glanz, et al (1998) point out that many consumers do value nutrition when deciding which foods to eat, but it is often outcompeted by taste and cost (p. 1121). Understanding these priorities, nutrition education programs should attempt to design and promote nutritious diets as also being tasty and inexpensive. By demonstrating that cost and taste are not juxtaposed to nutrition, as many individuals stage the relationship, but are instead factors independent of each other (Glanz et al, 1998, p. 1118), more communities would enlist healthier dietary options. The other major education point is the health effects of poor diet, namely obesity and its related afflictions. For example, obese Americans are more at risk for certain cancers, including pancreatic, liver, and thyroid cancers (USA Facts, 2019). Both of these components, along with a plethora of other factors, must be learned by the communal group taking initiative. Community is stressed not only because it concentrates power in opposition to the corporate producers, but because it

encourages people to act together. As Jonathan Haidt points out in *The Righteous Mind*, human minds contain a variety of mechanisms that encourage promotion of group interests (2012, pp. 221-222). A small component of this education is fear. Not only fear of negative health outcomes for the individual, but also for various members of the community whom individual consumers are loyal to. By setting learning nutrition within a group, individuals will encourage each other toward healthier outcomes and hold each other accountable in times of stress.

A moral shift toward loyalty to local communities and nutritional education are great methods to enable action, but no changes occur without some established goals that must be completed. With increased power from collective agreements and decisions motivated by nutritional and food-based illness information, voluntary collective actions in favor of local producers and in boycott of corporate producers must be taken to mitigate the effects of corporate movement into communities. The collective power is realized through the spending power of the community. Collective spending power allows consumers to voice their frustration in a language corporate producers understand. By guiding money toward local producers or toward healthier brands, producers will reorient their production toward legitimately healthier products. This collective action is step three.

Consumers, using collective action, must take personal accountability for the health of themselves and their communities to leverage their newly concentrated power against revival actors. They must also demand accountability from producers that have taken advantage of their lack of attention over the past few decades. By using these three steps in successive order, the negative health outcomes experienced by the American consumer would be mitigated and power within the FPCN would be rebalanced.

Practice and Limitations of a Consumer Controlled FPCN

This paper argues that the continuing trend of declining American health is the result of a moral shift from loyalty, especially to those within the local community, to one emphasizing personal autonomy which has caused the power dynamic within the Food Production-Consumption Network (FPCN) to shift in favor of corporate producers as American consumers prioritize enjoyment and cost over their health. The moral shift is understood by correlating generational trends of life priorities (McNeally, 2022) with Haidt's Moral Foundation Theory to formulate how the American people's moral priorities impact their decision-making. The power dynamic within the FPCN is understood as an information gap which is used to deceive consumers, prioritizing financial motives over consumer health. A three step solution was proposed to solve this health crisis consisting of returning to the moral priorities of prior generations, improving communal education on nutrition, and using communal loyalty to force collective action in favor of local producers over corporate producers with the goal of rebalancing power in the FPCN.

In practice, this would require individuals to put aside their divisions and personal autonomy in favor of better health outcomes and more self-determination within the FPCN. If effectively implemented, the three step solution would remove FPCN influence co-opted by corporate producers and empower local producers who are more amenable to local expectations and standards. Local producers are also more accountable to the community. This solution requires several difficult cultural adjustments, namely a moral shift which would likely require multiple generations to change, collective action without top-down authority which has a spotty record of success, and overcoming division at a time where division seems to percolate every

part of life. But if the American people truly value their health, wishing to minimize the economic and social cost associated with food-based illnesses, these steps must be taken.

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