



"Improve the economic well-being of agriculture and enrich the quality of farm family life."

Let's Talk About: *Food Inc.*

The "documentary" *Food, Inc.* claims to lift "the veil on our nation's food industry, exposing the highly mechanized underbelly that has been hidden from the American consumer with the consent of our government's regulatory agencies, USDA and FDA." According to the film's original website trailer: "Our nation's food supply is now controlled by a handful of corporations that often put profit ahead of consumer health, the livelihood of the American farmer, and the safety of workers and our environment. We have bigger-breasted chickens, the perfect pork chop, insecticide-resistant soybean seed, even tomatoes that will not go bad, but we also have new strains of e coli – the harmful bacteria that causes illness for an estimated 73,000 Americans annually. We are riddled with widespread obesity, particularly among children, and an epidemic level of diabetes among adults." While these assertions reasonably reflect what the film is about, there are many inaccuracies both in the film and in the direction that it leads the viewer that must be addressed.

Synopsis

The film targets companies including Smithfield Foods, Tyson, Perdue, and Monsanto, as mega multinationals that have undue power in agriculture and food markets, claiming that they "control" everything from seed to plate. After various stories, video clips, and several interviews (notably **not** with scientific experts) the film implies that these companies are responsible for the overuse of corn in U.S. food production resulting in higher likelihood of food borne illness, obesity, and declining numbers and market power of farmers.

The film concludes by recommending consumers know more about the food they eat, buy organic products, keep business local, and show support for farmers. The first conclusion is a no-brainer and perhaps the film's most significantly positive contribution. The agricultural community greatly appreciates the final conclusion. Buying organic or local are consumer choices and should be informed choices because they do not always deliver the benefits consumers believe.

While the film primarily attacks large multinational agricultural and food corporations, the less than accurate information and assumptions upon which the film is negatively based affect one's perception of the food system including many modern farming practices. This is a dangerous result in a nation that boasts the gold standard for food safety and efficient food production.

Missing Messages

While makers of the film seem to side with some advocates who would reduce consumer choice to promote their food philosophies, they miss some key attributes of the U.S. food system.

- ✓ U.S. consumers are fortunate to have many safe and nutritious food choices that are the product of a dedicated system of farmers and ranchers, manufacturers and retailers, government and academia all working to produce a safe, nutritious, bountiful harvest that is the envy of most of the world.
- ✓ While the U.S. food safety system can always be improved, it is the model regarded as the gold standard by most nations of the world. Our food is as safe as or safer than any country of equal scale in the world.
- ✓ The U.S. will export an estimated \$96 billion worth of food in 2009 to countries around the world who do not have the ability to grow it themselves. The entire world, not just the U.S., relies on successful U.S. agricultural production.

Inconsistencies

Inconsistency	Fact
A “deliberate veil” is being held over the food industry and farmers aren’t allowed to talk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on U.S. food, food companies, and most production systems is publically available from the company, industry associations, the regulatory agencies, and farm groups. • The movie tries to deliberately exploit consumers’ ignorance about production agriculture and food production, processing, and preparation. • Farmers are some of the industry’s most powerful spokespersons. Many farmers are able and eager to tell consumers how they produce food.
Modern farms (dubbed corporate factory farms) use practices that harm the environment and produce inferior food.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than 96% of all farms in America are family farms. Family farms can be large, small, or somewhere in between. • No matter the size of the farm, farmers know that a healthy environment and healthy animals make for healthy food for consumers.
There are insecticide-resistant soybeans and by implication, this is strange or bad.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The majority of soybeans grown in the U.S. are not insecticide-resistant, they are herbicide-tolerant. This means they may be treated with modern herbicides, allowing farmers to control weeds with little or no tillage. • Modern herbicides are much more benign than other products and methods used in the past to control weeds.
The U.S. food system is “controlled” by a few corporations that put profit ahead of the American consumer, farmer, and the environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. food system developed and evolved to meet the needs of changing consumer preferences and trends. • Such trends and preferences are transmitted to the food industry and retailers via annual surveys (most of which are publically available). • Each year, the food companies and retailers use the results of the surveys to develop new products, marketing ideas, etc... • Large food companies did not create and do not control the food system.

<p>The U.S. food system is more dangerous and monopolistic because the companies are large.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Americans work away from home and eat away from home, thereby demanding quick meals and convenience. • Americans like branding and consistency resulting in large companies and marketing firms having brand power over "mom and pop" outlets. • Size equals economic efficiency in the food industry just as in others. • Food companies are owned by shareholders/consumers who demand a profit on their investment. Decisions made on behalf of those shareholders' profit interests can hardly call it innate corporate greed.
<p>Farm policies created cheap corn and soybean-based food ingredients and products that are causing obesity and health problems for our society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corn and soybeans are two of the least supported U.S. crops. • The American Medical Association, the American Dietetic Association, and others agree that ingredients like high fructose corn syrup are not the cause of obesity or related health concerns. • Rather, increased caloric intake along with little or no exercise is the primary cause of obesity. • The modern food system provides American consumers with the most affordable and wholesome food in the world.
<p>Food in today's system is more unsafe, dangerous, or full of e-coli than in the past. (The movie implies that cattle fed corn in feedlots and processed by large companies are more likely to result in e-coli contamination in hamburger and other products).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumers' knowledge about food storage and preparation has declined markedly in the past 30 years. This results in greater chance for human error in food choices and preparation. • The amount of time and the methods used (e.g., microwaves) have changed considerably, requiring consumers to increase (not decrease) knowledge and vigilance. • Many of the estimated 76 million cases of food-borne illnesses in the U.S. are contracted in the home, and many can be prevented through proper kitchen health, storage, and cooking. • By their nature, food systems are biological and thus not failsafe. However, we are improving food safety all the time, particularly through reporting and tracing when food problems occur. • Twelve years ago, the CDC improved its data collection of food-borne illnesses; the result: a 25% decline in E. coli ailments. Other bacterial infections are down by about 33%. • The majority of food borne illnesses attributed to e-coli comes at some point in the food chain outside of the slaughter facility. • The movie implies that organic foods are less likely to contain e-coli or other contaminants. This is simply not true, the e-coli outbreak in California spinach in 2006 was caused in and by an organic process.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The movie implies that cows fed corn instead of grass have increased incidences of e-coli contamination. Corn is a grass.
Seed/biotech companies have monopolistic business practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most seeds are patented because of the way they propagate; they can be reproduced by replanting each year. • Seed/technology companies spent hundreds of millions of dollars to develop patented seeds that are hugely popular with producers worldwide (as evidenced by their 97% adoption rate for soybeans and 80% adoption rate for corn across the U.S.) • Major biotech providers have licensing agreements for seed distribution and marketing with hundreds of other companies. • Farmers support patenting and licensing agreements that protect the technology so farmers can have the highest yielding technology in the world and maintain global competitiveness. • Farmers in the movie "not able to speak" about the saving seed saving are prohibited from doing so for legal reasons, not because of corporate power. The farmers shown are accused of knowingly saving a patented technology; a crime in the U.S.
Former corporate employees are working for or have worked for the USDA and the FDA, and doing the company's bidding there.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The employment of former technology or other corporate employees in government has more to do with the fact that these employees are highly trained in the relevant technologies needed by regulators to appropriately regulate the food system than anything else. • Government jobs typically pay significantly less than what these individuals would have made in the private sector.

Conclusion

The film does not attack farmers directly; rather, it focuses its attention on multinational agricultural and food companies. While the film makes some supportive comments about farmers and includes a sound recommendation that consumers should "know more" about your food, its inaccuracies attack modern farm practices (e.g., that how cattle are fed, raised, and processed in the U.S. causes e-coli contamination). The modern food system is positioned as a corrupt, evil industry that is harming employees, animals, and consumers while using its power and influence to hide its business practices from view. These accusations are simply not true.

Additional Reading

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