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COMMENT

There’s something rotten in the state of supermarkets

New Zealanders are being gaslit about our health on a grand scale by people in the food industry and those in politics who help them by flying the ‘personal

responsibility’ flag, writes Jess Berentson-Shaw

Food, glorious food

Hot sausage and mustard

While we're in the mood

Cold jelly and custard

OPINION: Recently my 8-year-old’s drama class put on a production of Oliver and as I listened to her singing about hot sausage and mustard over the last

few weeks, I found myself pondering how profoundly food shapes our lives.

Food is at the heart of community and culture. It builds our health and wellbeing both directly through nutrition and indirectly through the way it connects

us to each other. We watch programmes about it, base celebrations on it and around it, make art about it, grow it, share it in times of grief and happiness.

We even write songs about it!

When it is easy to get, low cost, plentiful, nutritionally dense and produced in ways that care for people and the planet, food makes life glorious.

Is it worth the waiting for?

If we live till 84

All we ever get is

GRUEL

But food is also associated with stress, unhappiness, and a loss of health and wellbeing. When we don't have enough of it, or we can’t get enough of the

type that powers our health, when it is made hard to buy, is too expensive, when the production of it is destroying the water and soil environments that

also sustain us, or harming the people who work to produce it.

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And while we are frequently told that our food experiences are determined by our individual effort, our ‘choices’, or the vagaries of ‘the market’, our

food experience (both good and bad), has much more to do with the food environment that is created for us, including by the decisions and choices of people

in the food industry. And last week when the veil was lifted on one part of the food industry some pretty ugly behaviours were revealed – and the impact

of these on our community wellbeing is wide ranging.

Everyday we say a prayer

Will they change the bill of fare

Still we get the same old

GRUEL

Some powerful people in the grocery sector are extracting a lot from our communities

When the Commerce Commission

 released its interim findings of its market study of the grocery sector

it used the bland language of a sector “not acting as competitively as it should”. What it went on to detail were a raft of behaviours that we should not

tolerate in any group of people in our society, let alone an industry so fundamental to our wellbeing.

From “confusing customers” to “avoiding competing with each other”, and “exercising their buyer power to push excess risks, costs and uncertainty onto

suppliers”. There was mention of land banking large swathes of inner city land, all to ensure they are making “persistently high profits”.

READ MORE:

\* Small muesli maker blows whistle on big supermarkets

\* Online grocer faces 'bully tactics' from supermarkets

\* Government must break supermarket stranglehold

These people’s practices don't just negatively shape the food options available to us, the Commerce Commission findings indicate they are limiting our

small businesses' ability to innovate and grow, restricting housing in cities, stopping families being able to feed their children, and impacting on the

wellbeing of the people who work for them.

No matter how many school or sporting events people in these organisations sponsor, or free fruit they give away, the structure and practices embedded

in their organisations are extractive and we are all getting gruel as a result (except the very wealthy who are getting eye fillet and expensive pinot

every night).

block quote

The people running large food companies have been degrading our health and our kids' health and wellbeing for years with their nutritionally empty products,

that they aggressively market, especially to children, all while lobbying people in politics to continue unregulated, and embracing the as so convenient

‘personal choice’ mantra.

block quote end

Sure something should be done about it, and hopefully the Com Com will come up with some effective actions that get implemented by people across government.

However, let's not kid ourselves that this is the only part of the food industry extracting more from our communities than they put in.

The wider food industry also needs to be re-shaped to deliver for our wellbeing

People in large multinational corporations have been at the heart of some nefarious and unethical practices for decades that erode our health and wellbeing.

It isn’t for no reason that those professional troublemakers – people who care about the public's health – have been the target of

“hit jobs”  paid for by people in the food and tobacco industry

 (the fact that people from these two industries work together should ring alarm bells).

The people running large food companies have been degrading our health and our kids' health and wellbeing for years with their nutritionally empty products,

that they aggressively market, especially to children, all while lobbying people in politics to continue unregulated, and embracing the as so convenient

‘personal choice’ mantra. The dissembling tactics people in this industry use to avoid being held to account, while continuing to extract as much profit

as possible,

are just a standard part of the big industry playbook

 to concentrate wealth and power.

block quote

It is not that hard to name what a healthy food industry looks like when you value the wellbeing of all children and the planet.

block quote end

I have found the way in which our children are manipulated by people in the food industry pretty rotten. It is a source of great stress in our family when

we try to help our kids have an appropriate (as in research-based) balance of nutritionally dense and treat (also known as nutritionally less dense, sugary)

foods.

Kids are swimming in a sea of sugar and nutrient-poor foods, researchers have shown

they have no freedom from the marketing of it

 in their childhoods either. It is in their schools, their supermarkets, their streets, their media. As a consequence, adults around them can’t be free

to just do the best thing for kids without it being a hugely difficult undertaking.

The kids push back, they get the food anyway from other sources and then we get blamed by the health professionals and ‘personal responsibility’ dickheads

if our children get decayed teeth or ‘are too fat’.

All while people in the food industry are allowed to ‘self regulate’, reap the profits and pay PR companies to put out hit jobs on the people who do care

about the changes that will make the biggest difference.

In essence, we are being gaslit about our health on a grand scale by these people and the people in politics who help them by flying the ‘personal responsibility’

flag.

What we need is a collaboration between people in government and those in the food business who care, to create an environment in which it is just the

easiest thing in the world for all of us to get plentiful, nutritionally dense, yummy and affordable food. Imagine it!

Magical food

Wonderful food

Marvellous food

Fabulous food

Beautiful food!

Glorious food!

A cross sector approach to treat food as a collective health and wellbeing issue

Some pretty comprehensive work has gone on

 to figure out how we create a global food environment that is additive not extractive. One that builds our health directly, contributes to our wider societal

wellbeing though things like how people are employed in the industry, and restores and maintains our planet’s health through how it is produced.

Or put another way, we know how humanity can give everyone easy access to low-cost nutrient-dense food that is produced in ways that care for people and

the planet.

The role of policy makers is significant. They have the power to shape food markets, and this shouldn't be underestimated. The Ministry for Primary Industries

already helps shape the type of food that gets produced in New Zealand, which new food innovations are supported, and how food is produced with what outcomes.

It's just that the main metric for shaping that currently is increasing ‘productivity’.

Moving away from simply thinking about how to make the food industry make us more money in the short term, to how it can support our long-term collective

wellbeing (and its own survival) does require a new set of underlying assumptions from policy makers about what matters most (what we value for people

and our planet), and what outcomes matter most over the longer term.

This is where the wellbeing work could really be leveraged. It is not that hard to name what a healthy food industry looks like when you value the wellbeing

of all children and the planet. And that is just one policy shop. Many other areas of policy from health to consumer affairs, local governments can help

shape a healthy food environment.

There are plenty of people inside the industry too who have been squashed by the big boys and their representatives, who care about food as a source of

wellbeing and are just waiting for their chance to shine, to innovate and to be given the support of the people in policy (and the investment that comes

with that) to build a new food environment.

This includes supporting local, community groups and hapū and iwi who are already doing the work of ensuring people regain control of our own food sources,

from growing and distributing it locally, to building businesses that have collective benefits.

The fact that we have a Commerce Commission looking at one part of the industry does show the interest, willingness, and ability of government and government-aligned

organisations. Those who we may not traditionally view as having a role in shaping our food environment, helping to create a better food industry.

Please sir, can we have some more?

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Weird and wonderful songs about food

\* Food Glorious Food,

from Oliver The Musical (1968)

\* When you're eating well, your well,

from Asterix and Cleopatra

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John Stowell

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5 August 2021

I am not familiar with all, or much, of the legislation under which companies and their directors operate in NZ but I would bet that other than not actually

breaking the law, the only responsibility in law is to the company and shareholders. There are many excellent NGOs and individuals campaigning for good

things and good behaviour, but their resources, compared to those available to commerce and industry, are minimal. Industry is well organised to lobby

government and has no obligation consider the wider public interest. Until the legislative framework for industry and commerce includes a requirement to

take due account of the wellbeing of the public, of the environment, and for that matter of future generations in their decision making, there is only

public outrage which they can safely ignore when they have all the real power. If they had a legal requirement to include such considerations, their performance

could then be tested in court.

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