

# World Nutrition

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*Editorial*

## **Making dreams seem real**



***What is this 'classic' Coke™ advertisement saying? What does 'yes' mean? Yes to what? Why the angle of the girl's head, and the style of her smile?***

'Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind... And to generate heat not light is the intention'(1). This is how the Canadian sage Marshall McLuhan begins his first book *The Mechanical Bride*, first published in 1951. The book reproduces over 50 images of what was then called 'mass communication', including advertisements. Having isolated them, McLuhan takes them seriously, in separate

essays on what they seem really to be saying. He writes, of his intentions: ‘Where visual symbols have been employed to paralyze the mind, they are here used as a means of energizing it’.

In this issue of **World Nutrition**, we publish a commentary designed to observe and comment on advertising of ‘leading lines’ – food and drink products made, bought, and consumed in very large amounts – in the style pioneered by McLuhan. This may not have been tried before in a nutrition journal. The author, Jean-Claude Moubarac, is an anthropologist and sociologist, now specialising in public health nutrition. Public health nutritionists, in attempts to understand the impact of current food systems and dietary patterns on public health and on society, may note the colossal sums of money spent by the transnational and other huge corporations on advertising and promoting their leading products, sales for which individually often exceed \$US 1 billion a year. But discussion stops short of examining the actual publicity and considering its meaning and impact. Surely this is a strange omission.

Perhaps the reason is that as a discipline, nutrition seems still to be locked into types of research and reporting first devised generations ago. As undertaken and published, the approach is narrow and dry. For example, only now are the more progressive journals including summaries, boxed text, graphics with substantial accompanying text, and regular use of links to relevant material from the internet, in order to clarify and amplify what’s written. Only some use links to still or moving images. Only some cover nutrition as a social and behavioural as well as a biological science. And the notion of ‘impact’ as a gauge of value, a resonant term which actually means number of citations in other specialist journals, needs a radical rethink.

We on *WN* like to think that our very modest journal, with our use of cover images, captioned pictures, pdf links, and the like, together with the Association’s home page use of social media, is just beginning to get some grasp what the real world out there is all about. As things are, it is not surprising that with nutrition, so much of the running is being made by authors, journalists, campaigners and private consultants who don’t know or care about its conventions and conclusions (2).

### ***Things go further with Coke™***

Now please scroll up to the image of one of the most impressive ‘classic’ advertisements for Coca-Cola, shown at the beginning of this editorial: the ‘Yes girl’. Before meditating on this image, we should state what is emphasised at the start of Jean-Claude Moubarac’s commentary. This is that the points being made here are not critical of any specific company, specific products, or specific advertisements. The commentary is generic. In that spirit, the example given here of a Coke™ campaign of long ago, is illustrative of a general phenomenon, common to all high-powered publicity generated by transnational and other giant corporations, now collectively characterised as Big Food and Big Snack (3). A reason to choose an historic Coca-

Cola advertisement as an illustration, is partly because of the company's vast size and long-standing global reach, stretching back to the 1940s and its active involvement in the US 1941-1945 war effort (4). Another reason is that as well as being the first US-based food or drink manufacturer to become fully transnational, Coca-Cola commissioned the most attractive commercial art for its advertisements, now celebrated by many illustrated books and 'collectables'.

### ***The Yes girl***

An account of the 'Yes girl' advertisement can begin by describing what you see, which is perhaps not as obvious as you may at first think. The image is of a slim smooth suntanned nicely made-up young woman in her early 20s, wearing a pre-bikini two-piece with short shorts, sitting on the ground, legs stretched out, body propped up by her arms positioned behind her back. Her bra is decorated or fastened with a bow of ribbon. The impression given is that she is single, free, independent, wholesome, and available. It was first used in 1946, five years before Marshall McLuhan's book was published. The snatch bag by her side and the sunglasses, and the positioning of the Coca-Cola trademark almost as a beach-ball, reinforce an impression of a scene by the sea. But her long hair, styled like that of Rita Hayworth, shows she has not been near the water. But if the image was a photograph it obviously would have been shot in a studio, as indicated by the use of lighting on her face and upper body. But it is not a photograph, it's a super-real painting done by the commercial artist Haddon Sundblom, in the style of a more refined Norman Rockwell. So what we are already seeing is a cascade of illusions.

Now look more closely. She seems a well-brought up kind of gal, but exciting. She is also excited: her toes are wiggling. With a winsome smile, she is turning her head up to look at a man who is 'out of the shot'. We know it's a man, because a disembodied male hand appears at the top left of the image. With a light grip, the hand is holding out an open bottle of Coke™, which she could take only by changing her position and moving round to face the man. The feeling, depending on who is looking at the image, is that she, or he, could be you, now or in future, or else could be your daughter or son (or you in your dreams of being young once more). But all this would be so only if you were born in the USA. The image would not fly in other parts of the world, a reason why Coca-Cola relies on its brand-name and logo as the bases for advertisements and hoardings worldwide, as does PepsiCo (6).

### ***How to get your man (or girl)***

Dead centre in the image is the big word 'Yes'. Yes to what? Obviously yes to accepting the offer of a bottle of Coke™. And yes to what else? To a date, no doubt. That is to say, Coke™ is here positioned as being about relationships. The bottle focuses the image, as cigarettes also did in those days: a simple, cheap, stimulating way to make an introduction, and for people to get to know one another. The

message to men is, if you want to get a girl, give her Coke™. The message to women is, if you want to get lucky and get a man, make yourself available to accept the offer.

You need to know the context of this advertisement and the massive campaign of which it was a part. As from the first decades of the last century, after the first period when the product was publicised with quasi-medical claims, Coca-Cola advertisements featured graphic art of attractive or glamorous women holding or drinking the product. But typically the woman was by herself. The general idea was to position Coke™ as a classy product, in the days when among adults, only women would be likely to prefer soft drinks. What caused the change was 1941-1945, when US troops in all theatres of war were supplied with regular consignments of Coke at heavily discounted prices. A GI wrote home: 'It's the little things, not the big, that the individual soldier fights for or wants so badly when away. It's the girlfriend back home in a drugstore over a Coke, or the juke box and the summer weather' (4). Or, back home on the beach. At the time the 'Yes girl' advertisement was released, the hand offering the bottle would be seen as that of a soldier back from the war.

Step back from this exercise in iconography, and imagine you were seeing it and any other such advertisement for the first time. Associating a cheap carbonated soft drink made from water, sugar, caramel, spice and herb extracts and other ingredients, with romance, so that it feels like a good or even vital way to begin a relationship, seems absurd. But this discounts the power and persistence of the Coca-Cola company, with its consistent intelligent relentless massive advertising and publicity. Over a century, at current value, this might have cost so far something like half a trillion (yes, trillion) dollars. The sociological bottom line here, is that if a corporation is big enough, and determined enough, and also is also going with the flow, within limits what it wants to make true, it will make come true, everywhere. Coke has made an illusion real.

### *Sex, thrills, and family love*



*Three more themes: advertising that associates ultra-processed products with luxury and glamour (left), excitement (centre), family love and care (right)*

This editorial is not about Coca-Cola. Nor is it about the specific corporations whose products are advertised in the images above, taken from Jean-Claude Moubarac's commentary. It is about the general tendency of the advertising and promotion created by and for transnational and other giant food and drink corporations, to link their ultra-processed products with what we most desire, want and need in life. What the images above project, is from the left, luxury and glamour (elegantly dressed young women lounging in what seems to be the gangway of a theatre); excitement and thrills (a good-looking young woman confronted by a burger; apparently used only in Singapore); and family love, security and care (a ready-to-heat packaged pizza). The 'Yes girl' advertisement also conveys a feeling of freedom.

Taking these themes one by one, what our commentary indicates is that sexuality, luxury and glamour, excitement and thrills, and family love and care, are – depending to some extent on the nature of the product – consistently and continually used as ways to sell ultra-processed products. Taken all in all, the projection of just these themes must represent a total investment of, who knows, over a \$US trillion. To make an unpleasant comparison, this is roughly what big long wars cost these days, or what it may cost to rebalance the global economy. Big numbers.

In a way we all know this already. Of course manufacturers of chocolate are liable to sell the product using images of slinky women, with or without men in the picture. Naturally firms that make or sell burgers want to give the impression that these will make you feel good. It stands to reason that corporations that graduate from ready-to-eat snacks to ready-to-heat dishes stacked up in the cold-chill compartments of supermarkets, need to persuade purchasers – who usually are women – that pizzas whose packaging may cost as much as the edible part of the product, are a manifestation of love and care. If you were in these businesses this is what you would do – or would need to do, if you wanted to stay employed with the prospect of promotion. It behoves us to give some sympathy to fellow professionals.

### ***Big Food and Big Snack are in the same business***

A central defence of big corporations is that they are in competition with one another, and that this creates variety, and energy to excel, which favours the best companies while giving space to worthy competitors. With Big Food and Big Snack, the giant corporations making and selling ultra-processed products, this is true only in a limited sense. Indeed it is true that the leading manufacturers of cola and other soft drinks are in competition with one another, as are the biggest manufacturers and purveyors of burgers and pizzas, and the leading makers of ice-cream, chocolates, cookies, chips (crisps), French fries (chips) candies, 'chicken' and 'fish' nuggets, and so on (7). But within any product range, the master messages of advertising are much the same. Leading soft drink manufacturers project fun, company, parties. Leading chocolate and confectionery makers focus on comfort, sexuality, romance. The makers of instant meals and dishes made to be consumed in a burger or pizza outlet

or at home emphasise meals, nourishment in all senses, love, care, warmth and family (or once in a while go over the top).

Taken all together, what Big Food and Big Snack are selling to us, are dreams. Their aim is to put us in the moods that audiences once luxuriated in, when movies were shown in big cinemas. The difference is that we are not watching the dreams, we are eating and drinking them. But if people really want to live inside their heads in a world of illusion – or if they have no real choice, because of being unemployed, impoverished, frightened, abused, or in pain or despair – who are we to deny them? Even if the result of consuming dreams is that they become obese, or suffer premature diabetes or cancer? Must keeping chronic diseases at bay until people are retired and often a drag on the public purse, be the one and only first priority of governments? These may well be questions asked by the dream makers. They may even cross the mind of policy makers who used to say ‘hands off booze and fags, the proles are entitled to their simple pleasures’ (8). After all, you and other readers of this commentary can afford nice meals and can fly away and have fun. What about the slum dwellers?

### *References and notes*

- 1 McLuhan HM. *The Mechanical Bride. The Folklore of Industrial Man*. New York: Vanguard, 1951.
- 2 As for example Taubes G. *Good Calories, Bad Calories. Challenging the Conventional Wisdom on Diet, Weight Control, and Disease*. New York: Knopf, 2007.
- 3 Gomes F, Lobstein T. Food and beverage transnational corporations and nutrition policy. *SCN News* 39, late 2011, 57-65.
- 4 The \$3000 bottle: Coca-Cola goes to war. [Part III chapter 12]. In: Pendergrast M. *For God, Country and Coca-Cola. The Definitive History of the Great American Soft Drink and the Company that Makes It*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. Having won the war, Dwight Eisenhower became a ‘Coke President’. Here he is below posing for product placement at Gettysburg, during his successful campaign for re-election in 1956. Robert Woodruff, Coca-Cola president from 1923 to 1955, arguably the greatest US food and drink entrepreneur of all time, in 1980 endowed Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, the headquarters of the company, with over \$US 200 million, worth well over \$US 500 million now, discounting interest.



- 5 Haddon Sundblom was the lead artist for Coca-Cola in this period, continuing to work for the company until the 1970s. He is credited with having invented the modern image of Santa Claus, to promote Coke™ at Christmas. His last work is shown above (centre): the 1972 Christmas cover of Playboy magazine, combining the Santa outfit with a pin-up girl, and the Coke™ logo and trademark.
- 6 Pepsi also places its product at presidential level. The picture above (right) is of the then Brazilian president 'Lula', posing with Socrates, the former captain of the Brazilian football (soccer) team.
- 7 The bigger firms tend to take over smaller firms, or drive them out of business, which to this extent vitiates the theory of fair competition, but this is not part of the point being made here.
- 8 'Fags' meant cigarettes in those days.

## **Acknowledgement and request**

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