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Editorial. The new world disorder

What's going on



‘The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes)’ (1). This paradox was identified by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The insight is a way of encapsulating what we all know, which is for example that I may *see* you, or *see* a thing, but nevertheless not *perceive* you, or it. Or, to put this another way, I may see *that* you are, or *that* it is, but not *who* or *what* you are, or *why* (2). Your meaning eludes me.

This is true of events, too. Thus, revolutions are often only identified as such afterwards. At the time, most people go about their daily business. They may even be in the thick of things, yet experiencing without insight. And then comes confusion, often expressed with feelings such as ‘what’s going on?’ That is, they suffer pressure from events, intensified by not knowing what they mean. This can then be followed by the breakthrough, the revelation of revolution, the ‘aha!’ This is commonly

expressed by exclaiming something like: ‘Why didn’t we see that before? How obvious! It was staring us in the face all the time!’ Exactly.

So now for the big commentary on The Food System, published in **World Nutrition** this month.

Ultra-processing and The Food System



What are these things here? Are they foods, or processed foods, or products? What do they have in common? What is their significance? We need to know

Look at the pictures above, taken from this month’s commentary. What do you see? The pictures are of part of the pack of a breakfast cereal; an ice-cream; packets of savoury snacks; a pizza; trucks carrying the two leading brands of soft drinks; and a whopper cheeseburger. True, so they are.



What do these pictures show? A guillotined head, and a man galloping by moonlight. True, but the significance is that they are images of revolution

But that answer only has a surface meaning. It's the equivalent of saying that the left-hand above (of the execution of Louis XVI) shows a man holding up a severed head, and the right hand picture (of Paul Revere's ride) shows a horseman galloping at night. True, so they do, but that's not what they mean. Pictures of the events shown here are hung on walls in public buildings even now, not because of what they show to an innocent or ignorant eye, but because of their significance.

Back to the six pictures above. They are all of foods (in the general sense that includes drinks). But to play the 'odd one out' game, if there were five of these pictures and the sixth one was as shown below, of a fresh mango, say, or an array of dried beans and lentils, or of a stew cooking in a casserole, would we identify the fruit or the legumes (pulses) or the meal, as the odd one out?



The nutrient profile of fruit, beans, and of a fresh meal, may not rate much higher than that of 'fortified' processed snacks. So what's the difference?

Obviously yes, we would. This prompts acceptance that that the six pictures are, as a group, well... it might be said, of manufactured foods, or highly processed foods. Or are they 'fast' foods, or ready to consume foods, or (to use a current term) foods high in SoFAS (solid fats and added sugars), or perhaps 'junk' foods? This is all fuzzy. None of these terms means much. But so what, anyway? After all, practically everything we consume is processed in some sense; a banana is ready to eat and in that sense 'fast' and 'convenient'. And what's 'high'? How high? Higher than what?

Michael Pollan says no, these are not foods. He says they are 'edible food-like substances' (3). His point is that they have characteristics in common that make them all different from foods in an original sense – grains (cereals), legumes (pulses), vegetables, fruits, meat, poultry, fish, and so on – and from meals made from such foods combined with culinary ingredients. Most people will probably broadly agree. But getting down to our line of professional business, so what? What's the nutritional difference? In the view of the team at the University of São Paulo convened by Carlos Monteiro, this is where the prevailing wisdom on food and nutrition science, policy and action has got stuck.

Here is why. A chemical analysis of say Coca-Cola, shows that its sugar (or syrup) content is much the same as that of 100 per cent fruit juice. A cheeseburger might analyse out as having less fat and saturated fat than a meal of fatty fish together with a baked potato plus butter, and green vegetables. Also, sugary breakfast cereals of the type aggressively advertised to children, are ‘fortified’ and positioned as some sort of yummy multi-vitamin and mineral pill.

The Aha!

The breakthrough made by the São Paulo team, is that products such as those shown above are not processed or highly processed *foods*, in the usual sense of being made from foods whose nature is altered by processing. They are not made from foods. *They are made from ingredients*. Aha!

Yes, some have bits of food added, like slivers of pepper on a pizza, or sesame seeds on a burger bun, but they are fundamentally and systematically different from processed *foods*. Indeed, the team has decided that basically Michael Pollan is right, that they are not foods, but edible *products*. They are not highly processed, whatever that may mean. To coin a new term, they are ultra-processed, in terms of a clear definition. Thus the mask slips. Correctly identified and defined, ultra-processed products need to be separated in food classifications and dietary recommendations, and put in a separate group, which is what the São Paulo team has done.

The team also makes clear why the impact of these products on human health is so troublesome. When products are made from ingredients, especially when using sophisticated modern food technology, it’s almost true that anything can be made from anything. As a class, ultra-processed products are more energy-dense than meals made from foods and culinary ingredients. They are typically fatty, sugary or salty. They are also formulated to be hyper-palatable and are quite often even advertised as habit-forming. Many by most normal definitions, as shown by Association member Kelly Brownell of the Rudd Centre at Yale University in a recent WN commentary, are addictive (4).

And so, circling back, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insight is vindicated once again. At first: ‘one is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes’. Like the cheeseburger and the fizzy sugared soft drink. But then, after suffering paradox and confusion, comes the breakthrough. ‘Why didn’t we see that before? How obvious! It was staring us in the face all the time!’ Now that this class of products has a distinct name, we can do more than *see that* they are. We perceive *what* and also *why* they are.

Burgers and twitter

This editorial also introduces two of the columns in this month's issue of the Association's website. Both also point to new phenomena. First, that by Philip James. He points out that families on low and even average incomes in countries like the UK are now being driven to 'fill up on' cheap products like those shown below. This is reality, within countries whose average income is high.

Why, again circles back to Ludwig Wittgenstein. Try as we all may to deny it, we are living inside a time of global depression, and whatever politicians and economists may say, there is no end in sight. Our times now are of the technological and electronic equivalents of bread and circuses: burgers and twitter.



Fried chicken bits, instant noodles, tinned pies and chips. In Britain more people are now eating cheap fatty and also sugary processed products

Philip James writes: 'In Riyadh recently my jaded senses were bombarded with advertisements for junk food and soft drinks, everywhere. What impact does this ruthless and aggressive marketing have on impressionable young people? Is industry seriously interested in improving public health? And he ends by saying 'Tell that to the marketing boys'. Because of course ultra-processed product manufacturers are seriously interested in profit.



Nikki Minaj, a biddable mixture of Michael Jackson and Lady Gaga, hired by Pepsi for their global campaign to associate Pepsi-Cola with instant bliss

In his column this month Geoffrey Cannon investigates what PepsiCo is now up to, with a glimpse of the current Pepsi global campaign. Its purpose is to imprint the mind of the billion and a half people calibrated as impressionable, with the idea that Pepsi-Cola is an essential item of cool kit, of a dream of happiness that comes true every time kids take the hit of fizzy sugar. Pepsi's new buy, above, is Nikki Minaj, a kaleidoscopic chameleon singer and dancer. But more: Pepsi have now resurrected their previous top act, Michael Jackson, from the grave, as shown below:



The 'Live for Now' Pepsi campaign is now penetrated in multi-media all over the world, fronted also by Pepsi's resurrected phantom of Michael Jackson

Pepsi-Co's 'Live for Now' campaign may turn out to be a defining phenomenon of the times we all live in now, wherever we are. They don't happen by chance. Panicked by 'the markets', now meaning the shock of finance, fuel and food fluctuation and free-fall, Pepsi-Co is seeking safe haven. Forget health (except of course in public statements). And so thus it is that \$US 500-600 million is being pumped into the Pepsi 'fun for you' products, and its cheap sugar hit.



Here are Brad Jakeman, Pepsi President of Enjoyment, and Mauro Porcini, Pepsi Chief Designer. They make sure that happiness means Pepsi-Cola

Such seismic changes do not happen by chance. They are planned and executed by very clever people. See above. On the left is Brad Jakeman, hired by PepsiCo as

President of Enjoyment, to penetrate the thought that happiness means sugared fizzy water branded Pepsi-Cola, into the minds of young people in all countries in the world. On the right is his Chief Designer, Mauro Porcini. Both are extremely intelligent and very impressive shapers of general mood, of the type that got Ronald Reagan, Tony Blair and Barack Obama elected.

Here is an extract from an interview Brad Jakeman gave to a trade journal earlier this year, about ‘*Live For Now*’. He says: ‘What informed it was a rigorous review around the world over 10 months to really answer the question of, does a Pepsi loyalist have a distinct set of values by which they live their lives that are distinct and separate from our competitors and could those be codified into a single positioning for the brand that could work globally? There is. When you talk to Pepsi loyalists around the world, they over-index on this desire to make the most of every moment... We took that as a kernel of an idea and validated it in all our key markets. We used databases... to get to 1.5 billion people on a global basis who have that mindset and belief system. Why we feel so great about it is because it’s based on all of that work, we know it’s a very authentic place for Pepsi to live’.

We see ‘*Live For Now*’. But do we *perceive* it? What is its significance? We had better think about this now.

Notes and references

- 1 Wittgenstein L. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1958.
- 2 When you are asked ‘who are you?’ the question is usually not answered by you stating your name, but by giving some sort of account of yourself.
- 3 Pollan M. *In Defense of Food. An Eater’s Manifesto*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2008. Anon. Addiction. Food on the brain [Editorial]. *World Nutrition*, September 2012, **3,9**, 386-391. Obtainable at www.wphna.org
- 4 Brownell K, Gold M. Food products. Addiction. Also in the mind. [Commentary]. *World Nutrition*, September 2012, **3,9**, 392-405. Obtainable at www.wphna.org.

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