

Reality Bites: Consuming Food Television

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Along with the surge in food reality TV and documentaries looking at the production and preparation of food there is a growing number of programs focusing on the consumption of food within the context of the “obesity epidemic.” Shows like ABC’s *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution* (2010-2011) and HBO’s *Weight of the Nation* (2012), as well as television and film documentaries like *Soul Food Junkies* (2012), *Fast Food, Fast Profits: Obesity in America* (2012), and *Fed Up* (2014), offer important explorations of foodways and food industry practices that impact our collective health. For example, *Soul Food Junkies* and *Weight of the Nation* examine the cultural and historical tradition of soul food and its relevance to African American identity, health, and fat embodiment. Similarly, *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution* looks at socio-economic influences on food selection, food deserts, and the manufacturing of food-like products within the obesity epidemic. By offering critical and contextual takes on food, connecting issues of food production and consumption, these shows ultimately complicate and expand obesity epidemic discourses that frame our eating habits as primarily individual to also being inherently connected to the social, environmental, traditional, and industrial.

However, none of these programs fully decenter individual choice as the primary reason for both food selection and fat embodiment, and fatness is always framed as problematic, undesirable, and automatically unhealthy in accordance with dominant public health discourses in the context of the obesity epidemic. More specifically, *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution* spends a majority of each episode exploring and criticizing the U.S. government’s food decisions, such as the FDA labeling ketchup and pizza as vegetables, resulting in schools serving those foods as vegetables instead of the highly processed, sugar laden food-products they actually are. But the secondary narrative throughout each season focuses on the decisions that families and individuals make at home, which are typically as bad or worse than the foods served in school cafeterias, and then working to “educate” them on selecting, preparing, and budgeting fresh foods in order to maintain or improve health and reduce fatness.

Weight of the Nation is based on a similar premise as *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution*, although it emphasizes documenting the relationship between contemporary food and fat crises

over actively intervening in them (although it should be noted that *WOTH* was produced in partnership with the NIH and CDC, with the series itself positioned *as an intervention*). In Part One of the program, “Consequences,” the food industry is also criticized for being a primary source for our collective health problems and fat embodiment, which is a departure from programs throughout the early 2000s focusing solely on food consumption and lack of physical activity. Yet Part Two moves on to “Choices,” which according to one *WOTN* producer, John Hoffman, is meant to “sound the alarm” on what we as individuals are doing to our bodies through food selection. Reviewers gravitated toward this message as a major takeaway from the series likely because it resonates with long-standing, common sense discourses of individualism. One example can be found in Brian Lowery’s review for *Variety*: “Like many HBO documentaries, this one seeks to inform, inspire, and perhaps even anger, rousing a citizenry from its complacency and unhealthy habits like drinking sugary beverages, from which average Americans derive nearly half their calories.”

Again, these programs necessarily expand on and complicate the idea that food consumption and body composition are solely based on individual actions by implicating contemporary social, economic, regulatory and food industry contexts and practices as contributors to the obesity epidemic. However, despite detailing factors beyond the individual, these texts always circle back to discussing personal responsibility, willpower, self-discipline, and self-control. There is also neither televisual room for being both fat and healthy, nor acknowledgement that many fat individuals eat primarily healthy foods. In this sense, all of these shows are consistent with contemporary public health frames in the context of the obesity epidemic: we need to remove the systemic barriers, such as those discussed in *Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution* and *Weight of the Nation*, making it more difficult for us to make “good” food choices and prevent or reduce fat embodiment, but it’s ultimately on us as individuals to then make those food choices.