

**Resource Review - *Food Politics:*  
*How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health***

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Elaine Power

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The main message of Marion Nestle's new book, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, is in the title: food is political. In the U.S. and Canada, food is political for the simple reason that there is a lot of money, and profits, at stake. Nestle, Professor and Chair of the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University, starts from the fact (neither "good" nor "bad") that in a capitalist economy such as ours, food industry, like all others, has a only one logic, and that is to make profits for their shareholders. If nutrition research can help sell products and make profits, then it is useful to food industry. If nutrition research interferes with the industry's potential for profit, then it will use all methods at its disposal to find ways to ensure that that research is overlooked, discounted, or lost in a sea of confusion.

This is a controversial book among dietitians, in part because it challenges some of the "stock in trade" of the profession and calls on us to re-examine the effectiveness of many of our messages. Nestle maintains that messages such as "there is no such thing as a good or bad food"; and "the keys to healthful diets are balance, variety, and moderation" have done more to serve the interests of the food industry than to promote the health of the public. Such messages help ensure that no particular food product or category is the target of an "eat less" message or campaign, even when scientific research suggests that this would be in the best interest of the public's health. She explores in detail how politics has repeatedly trumped science in the history of dietary advice in the U.S., perhaps most famously when food industry was successful in lobbying efforts to alter the name and content of the USDA's Food Guide Pyramid, originally scheduled for release in 1991 as the Eating Right Pyramid. Nestle builds a strong case that the regulatory environment will have to be toughened if the epidemic of obesity is to be brought under control in the U.S.

Nestle compares the food industry to the tobacco industry because both have used similar tactics in their quest for profits: lobbying, lawsuits, financial contributions, public relations, advertising, partnerships and alliances, philanthropy, threats and biased information. She carefully stitches her case together, square by square, producing a dense book in terms of the information presented. Reading one chapter in isolation may lead the reader to wonder what all the fuss is about, but the overall effect is staggering. While the details of the book are all American, in this era of free trade, its fundamental concepts and the issues it raises are also applicable in Canada. Indeed, I was told by a representative of a multinational food corporation at an industry-sponsored dietitians' event that his company loves to sponsor such events, because they know that when it comes time to change government regulations, they will have the support of dietitians.

*Food Politics* is written in an accessible manner, suitable for anyone interested in how food companies influence our food choices. The political and ethical challenges it raises make it mandatory reading for dietitians. I expect the issues Nestle has opened

up will be hotly debated within the profession for a long time to come.

*Disclaimer: The conclusions, findings and opinions expressed here are those of the individual contributor and not Dietitians of Canada.*