Measuring Food

Food system activist **Anna Lappé** takes stock of the pieces in this issue.

IN A SHORT YOUTUBE VIDEO called "The Secret Life of Eggs," the retail giant Walmart tells the story of the egg. Well, more specifically, the eggs it sells. It turns out those fragile little orbs take enormous amounts of energy to produce. The video quantifies the water used, the feed fed, the fuel expended, and the packaging produced all to get those eggs onto the behemoth's shelves.

Needless to say, it's a lot. And, as the video goes on to explain, every year the company has to throw away 5 billion: all that energy ended up wasted as billions of eggs sit, cracked and uneaten, in dumpsters across the country.

Why? The Walmart video says it's because government regulation stipulates if just one egg is cracked, retailers must throw away the whole carton for food safety and traceability concerns. Government-imposed waste. But, the video explains, Walmart has innovated an "organic laser" identification system would now allow the company to track each individual egg versus a whole carton, making it possible for the company to save billions of eggs a year.

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Fascinating, except there is one thing wrong with this script: The government doesn't actually require grocery stores to throw away cartons of eggs, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) spokespeople I interviewed. In fact, when I asked the USDA about the video, the spokesperson I talked with explained that they'd contacted Walmart to ask them to correct the script.

What is true is that Walmart had been throwing away all those eggs for all these years. Not because the government made them do it, but because it was cost-effective for the company. Any of the other options available—sending the cartons back as a return, for instance—would have required time and a workforce trained in the food safety regulations. With the company's ideologically rigid fixation on cutting labor costs at all costs, those options were not on the table. So the eggs were thrown out. With its glossy video, the company is taking credit—5 billion eggs of credit—for a change in corporate practice that they could have done a long time ago.

How do we measure? What do we count? Who's doing the counting and who's overseeing the measurements? All of these questions matter if we want to understand how any system works, especially a system as complex and far-reaching as our global food system. These are key questions if we want to assess the sustainability of a system, the impacts of going to scale, the efficiencies of infrastructure.

In "The Secret Lives of Corporate Food," Susanne Freidberg shares another example of a Walmart corporate video, this time "The Secret Life of Sliced Turkey." In her piece, Freidberg notes how the company applies a "life-cycle analysis" to the production of turkey. As numbers fly buy, viewers are presented with the illusion of sustainability: a turkey processor reduces water use by 50 million gallons a year, we hear. A packager is using 35 percent less cardboard, and 17,000 more trees are left standing in the forest. This kind of analysis "allows companies to say they have looked at the big picture," Friedberg notes, but in reality much of the story is still missing. Animal welfare, worker safety, biodiversity: much is, by the nature of this kind of analysis, not captured. But as Friedberg notes, "This scale of analysis is itself authoritative."

In Emily Yates-Doerr's excellent piece ("Refrigerator Units, Normal Goods"), she shows how measurement can mislead using the refrigerator as an example. Moving between her experience conducting interviews in Guatemala with a presentation of global public health professionals, she reminds us how indicators can mislead. A refrigerator is determined as the best proxy for progress by a global public health leader. Meanwhile, Yates-Doerr's real-world experience unseats the measurement: Yes, she sees refrigerators in low-income housing developments in Guatemala she visits, but the appliances aren't used for cooling or freezing. Without access to electricity, the families are using the appliances for storage, large and bulky storage.

How we display what we measure is just as important as measurement tools themselves. Whether it's warning labels on tobacco, rBST labeling on milk, or nutrition panel labeling on processed

foods, the politics of labeling is indeed contentious. Manufacturers know that labeling shapes purchasing power. In Javiér Lezaun's piece, "Iconoclasm in the Supermarket," he explores how we label, or don't, genetically engineered foods. And he shows how grassroots activists use do-it-yourself labeling initiatives as a way to subvert the stranglehold the food industry has on labeling regimes.

Alison Fairbrother and David Schleifer ("The Fish at the Heart of the Food System") take on the little-told story of the lesser-known but oh-so-important fish, the menhaden. The fact that most of us are not counting its loss, much less have ever even heard of this all-important fish, is hugely significant. Fairbrother and Schleifer explain the vital role of this fish in healthy ocean ecosystems. The value of leaving these fish in the ocean? Approximately $11 billion. Despite the benefits of keeping them in their natural habitat, Omega Protein—the main supplier of menhaden in the US marketplace—uses the fish for swine, cattle, and fish feed as well as to supply the booming fish oil marketplace. (After the FDA allowed labeling claims about omega-3 fatty acids [the "good" fats], fish oil sales jumped from $100 million in 2001 to $1.1 billion a decade later.) The unregulated overfishing of these sea creatures means that their stocks are 95 percent depleted. If you eat fish, pork, beef, or chicken, or take a fish oil supplement, you're very likely a culprit in their decline. But without labeling, without measurement, few of us realize it.

As the authors for this *Limn* issue grapple with food system scale, efficiency, and sustainability, they cause us to reflect on who controls what we see, know, and hear. After I placed those calls to the USDA and FDA about the Walmart "Secret Life of Eggs" video, Walmart actually edited the script. In the new version, the government doesn't get the blame. Watch it now, and there's no mention of the fictional regulation implicated in the billions of eggs wasted annually. But it does make you wonder: who is holding the company accountable on the next script? ■

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