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Jon Leibowitz, Chairman  
Federal Trade Commission  
600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20580

Tom Vilsack, Secretary  
Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Thomas Frieden, Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30333

Margaret Hamburg, Commissioner  
Food and Drug Administration  
10903 New Hampshire Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20993

Open Letter on the First Amendment and the Interagency Working Group Principles

The undersigned professors of law write to convey our conclusion that the draft nutrition principles issued this spring by the federal Interagency Working Group on Food Marketed to Children (IWG) embody a constitutionally permissible set of government recommendations. Despite a number of comments submitted to the IWG claiming the contrary, the nutrition principles, in their current form, do not violate the First Amendment.

Simply put, voluntary principles that food and beverage businesses are free to ignore do not “abridg[e] the freedom of speech.”\(^1\) The draft nutrition principles pose no threat to any rights guaranteed by the First Amendment.

The Free Speech Clause applies only to government mandates restricting or compelling private speech.\(^2\) The draft nutrition principles, which are designed “to guide industry self-regulatory efforts,”\(^3\) do not restrain or compel anyone’s speech. They are not, in fact, government regulation at all. Instead, they are the speech of the government itself.

The Supreme Court has made clear that “the Government’s own speech . . . is exempt from First Amendment scrutiny.”\(^4\) The principles were issued in response to a congressional request for a “report” containing “findings and recommendations.”\(^5\) The agencies have now issued their draft report, and the principles constitute their draft recommendations.

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\(^1\) U.S. Const. amend. I.
The report and recommended nutrition principles contain no mandates. None of the four agencies will seek to “enforce” the principles, which lack any legally binding effect under agency statutes or the Administrative Procedure Act. Accordingly, no federal agency can impose legal repercussions on a company for following the IWG principles in only a piecemeal fashion, for ignoring them entirely, or—for that matter—mounting a wide-ranging public relations campaign disparaging them, as the food and beverage industry has done.

Nonetheless, attorneys retained by industry have invoked a variety of First Amendment arguments, a tactic with the potential effect of diverting policymakers’ attention from the substance of the draft nutrition principles. Nothing in the cases cited by these commenters bears on the IWG principles. The doctrines of “informal censorship,” “unconstitutional conditions,” and “de facto coercion” are completely inapt. The government is neither explicitly nor implicitly forcing industry to espouse any messages or to silence its expression. The IWG is not requiring loyalty oaths, threatening criminal prosecution, or confiscating real estate. It is not establishing or invoking a legal regime. It is simply following a congressional mandate to issue a report with recommendations based on the agencies’ expert analysis of the relevant facts.

The IWG is better characterized as a routine governmental advisory body than an oppressive censorship panel. The situation here is akin to the Environmental Protection Agency promoting the Energy Star guidelines for energy efficiency or the Department of Agriculture announcing the new MyPlate recommendations. The IWG is making suggestions regarding the content of food marketed to children in the same way the National Institutes of Health has called for a reduction in youth exposure to smoking in movies; the Surgeon General has attempted to promote breastfeeding by encouraging hospitals to refuse infant formula advertisements; and Congress has called on the entertainment industry to reduce the exposure of underage audiences to “programs with unsuitable alcohol content.”

The conclusion is straightforward. The principles proposed by the IWG do not violate the First Amendment.

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10 http://www.choosemyplate.gov.
Signatories

Gary D. Allison
Vice Dean and Professor of Law
University of Tulsa College of Law

Vikram Amar
Professor of Law and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
University of California, Davis School of Law

George J. Annas
William Fairfield Warren Distinguished Professor and Chair
Department of Health Law, Bioethics and Human Rights
Boston University School of Public Health, School of Medicine and School of Law

Ash Bhagwat
Professor of Law
University of California, Davis School of Law

Adam Benforado
Assistant Professor of Law
Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law

Vincent Blasi
Corliss Lamont Professor of Civil Liberties
Columbia Law School

Alan Brownstein
Professor of Law
Boochever and Bird Chair for the Study and Teaching of Freedom and Equality
University of California, Davis School of Law

Angela J. Campbell
Professor of Law
Co-Director, Institute for Public Representation
Georgetown Law

Erwin Chemerinsky
Dean and Distinguished Professor of Law
University of California, Irvine School of Law

14 Institutional affiliations are listed for identification purposes only.

Page 3
Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar
Professor of Law and Deane F. Johnson Faculty Scholar
Stanford Law School
Co-Director, Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation and Professor (by courtesy) of Political Science

Richard A. Daynard
Professor of Law
Northeastern University School of Law

Michael C. Dorf
Robert S. Stevens Professor of Law
Cornell University Law School

Peter Edelman
Professor of Law
Georgetown University Law Center

Stephen M. Feldman
Jerry W. Housel/Carl F. Arnold Distinguished Professor of Law and Adjunct Professor of Political Science
University of Wyoming

Lawrence Gostin
University Professor and Faculty Director
O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law
Georgetown University Law Center

Sam Halabi
Assistant Professor
University of Tulsa College of Law

Jon Hanson
Alfred Smart Professor of Law
Harvard Law School

Steven J. Heyman
Professor of Law
Chicago-Kent College of Law

William S. Koski
Eric & Nancy Wright Professor of Clinical Education, Professor of Law, and Professor of Education (by courtesy)
Stanford Law School and Stanford School of Education
Douglas A. Kysar
Joseph M. Field ’55 Professor of Law
Yale Law School

Carlton F.W. Larson
Professor of Law
University of California, Davis School of Law

Anne Joseph O’Connell
Professor of Law
University of California, Berkeley School of Law

Kevin Outterson
Associate Professor of Law
Co-Director, Health Law Program,
   Boston University School of Law
Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*

Frank A. Pasquale
Schering-Plough Professor in Health Care Regulation and Enforcement
Affiliate Fellow, Yale Information Society Project
Seton Hall Law School

Tamara R. Piety
Associate Dean for Faculty Development and Professor of Law
The University of Tulsa College of Law

William M. Sage
Vice Provost for Health Affairs
James R. Dougherty Chair for Faculty Excellence
The University of Texas at Austin

Kevin W. Saunders
Charles Clarke Chair in Constitutional Law
Michigan State University

Paul M. Schwartz
Professor of Law
University of California, Berkeley School of Law

Seana Shiffrin
Pete Kameron Professor of Law and Social Justice
Professor of Philosophy
University of California, Los Angeles School of Law
Steven H. Shiffrin  
Charles Frank Reavis Sr. Professor of Law  
Cornell University Law School

Girardeau A. Spann  
Professor of Law  
Georgetown University Law Center

David A. Strauss  
Gerald Ratner Distinguished Service Professor of Law  
University of Chicago Law School  
Felix Frankfurter Visiting Professor of Law  
Harvard Law School

Stephen D. Sugarman  
Roger J. Traynor Professor of Law  
University of California, Berkeley School of Law

Gerald Torres  
Bryant Smith Chair in Law  
University of Texas School of Law  
Visiting Professor of Law  
Yale Law School

Mark Tushnet  
William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law  
Harvard Law School

Rebecca Tushnet  
Professor of Law  
Georgetown University Law Center