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MEMO FROM MFJ

# Free the Data!



Every time a checkout clerk at the grocery store beeps a Universal Product Code across a scanner, the global marketing-information powerhouse Nielsen is collecting data about what you're buying.

Big food manufacturers find that data extremely valuable when they figure out how to price and market foods.

But information about the nutrients, ingredients, claims, and sales of the likely more than 60,000 foods sold in Canada would also help the government, researchers, and the public. A public database would help consumers easily find lower-sodium foods, organic foods, foods without nuts or artificial dyes, or even foods that are "Made in Canada."

Knowing what's sold would also help food inspectors (and health advocates) keep tabs on sales trends and pricing patterns. Wouldn't it be interesting, for example, to see how well XYZ Company's new "less salt" soup is selling?

In 2004, to try to get at what Canadians consume, Statistics Canada asked tens of thousands of people what they had eaten over the previous 24 hours. The government takes that information and plugs in its best guess, for example, of how much sodium is in a serving of pizza or how much a slice of bread weighs. Those kinds of averages are probably underestimates.

But even accurate averages conceal the wide diversity and constant changes in the food supply. For example, we often find at least twice as much sodium in one brand of a food as in the same amount of another brand. And experts estimate that as many as one-third of foods that are now on the market weren't there last year, and that about a third won't be there next year.

Knowing what foods we buy could enable policymakers and advocates to answer critical questions like:

- How do the prices of fruits and vegetables vary between rural and urban areas?
- Do healthy foods cost more or less than junk foods?
- How much GST and provincial taxes are collected on healthy foods, and how much is foregone by exempting junk?



Food facts captured in the checkout line could save lives. It should be public.

- Do foods marketed to children have the same nutrients and additives as foods marketed to adults?
- Do companies charge more for foods with marketing claims (like "organic," "natural," and "no trans") than for foods without claims?
- What marketing claims are used to sell breast milk substitutes? How much is sold? Where?

Nielsen keeps track—without our permission—of what we buy. Then it sells that information for a hefty price.

It may be okay to hoard data about plumbing supplies or sweatshirts, but information about food can save lives. That's why the federal

government should create a publicly accessible database using nutrition information from food manufacturers and scanning data from grocery stores.

Tens of thousands of people die prematurely every year from diet-related heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. We can't afford to let a private company deny—to all but the highest bidders—data that could save some of those lives.

*Mike Jacobson*

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