Yes, not all hamburger meat is from the same cow

By Hank Campbell — August 6, 2015

In our modern industrialized food society, it's easy to lose awareness of how food is made. In the 19th century, when food was just becoming industrialized, it was fascinating to city dwellers. Factories gave tours, but it was certainly not without shock to the public who witnessed the process. "It's better not to know" thinking became so prevalent that, to make his case about 19th century politics, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck once said, "Laws are like sausages. It's better not to see them being made" and that resonated with the public. Today, the public would still contextually know what it means, even if 98 percent of Americans do not work on a farm or in the meat business.

Given our modern distance from food, Washington Post writer Roberto Ferdman may be shocking the public [1] by noting that not all hamburgers are made of meat from the same cow.

We should hope not. To scientists and the food-savvy public, such a process would be an alarming waste of resources. Imagine the energy to fire up a grinder for each cow individually when just in the last 30 years, 100 billion cows have been used to feed Americans.

A hamburger is different than a steak, which does come from a cow in whole form, and that difference is why calorically hamburgers are such a good value. A hamburger, like a sausage, is made from "parts" - a wonderful use of meat we already have but that would be hard to process manually. If we did not use parts, food would be expensive because it would be so much more resource-intensive to create. If you prefer a less obvious ethical reason, it would be environmentally destructive to not use cow parts because it would take so many more cows.
But "parts" are shocking to people who are out of touch with their agriculture, which is why it has been so easy to promote fear and doubt about food, as ABC News did in its hyperbolic coverage of "pink slime," a process created to extract as much meat as possible from animals that had already been slaughtered. ABC was counting on the fact that the public thinks meat is actually deep red, like we see in stores after it has dye placed in it, and they hoped people would believe extracting meat as effectively as possible was shocking - if framed properly. Food Safety News and the New York Times were happy to help and it worked; the outrage juggernaut got rolling and a valuable business was shattered for no reason. The journalists behind it got subpoenaed in a defamation lawsuit over their part in creating the hysteria [2].

Showing 'how sausage is being made,' and creating outrage about it has been a popular trope since Upton Sinclair exposed rampant health violations in the meatpacking industry in his 1906 book The Jungle, but Sinclair was documenting the plight of immigrants, not setting out to scare people about food. Many of his philosophical descendants in journalism instead set out to "make a difference" rather than inform the public.

Watching the corporate advertising dollars and attention roll in, ABC used the term "pink slime" for dramatic effect 52 times in just two weeks in order to generate even more outrage. It was blatant media exploitation and organizations like the American Council on Science and Health were a voice of reason at the time, but it did little good.

Had the public been more literate about food, more in touch with agriculture, ABC would not have bothered because they would have known it could not work. But we're not all farmers anymore and food is something we cannot opt out of, so scaring people about it is easy and profitable - all it takes is hiring political science majors at environmental groups and putting them on the phones - while creating science about food is quite expensive.

So why is a hamburger different than a steak? The practical answer is because a meat grinder would be incredibly inefficient processing one cow at a time. But there are numerous reasons it's a good thing your hamburger did not come from one cow, and they appeal to values across the spectrum: If you care about emissions due to electricity, grinder efficiency would drop at least 75 percent if even a small processor had to use one cow at a time; if you care about the poor, a hamburger would cost $10, which means meat would only be for wealthy elites; and if you care about using natural resources most effectively, parts in hamburger are the best way to show it. As Ferdman notes, "hamburgers might, in fact, be one of the more ethical uses of meat there is."

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