

Compliant Media Plays Its Role in Activists' War on Food October 18, 2012

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Public relations demonization is an essential part of a healthy anti-business activist's diet. Demonization is playing a key role in the expanding war on "Big Food" and consumer choice, which is why Washington Legal Foundation included it as a key "food group" in our [issue ad](#), *The Real Nutrition Guidelines*. We also devote an entire [section of our Eating Away Our Freedoms website](#) to PR demonization.

Such PR tactics work best when reporters and editors suspend disbelief and present activists' spin with little or no attention to opposing views. We saw a troubling example of this recently in a series of stories about how school districts in several states are trying to ban a snack food. These stories subtly advanced the pipe dream of every trial lawyer and nanny state activist: that some foods are "addictive."

A [story](#) from a Scripps TV affiliate from Northern Kentucky about a New Mexico middle school health teacher demanding that parents not send kids to school with "Flamin' Hot Cheetos" first caught our eye. The article, which cited stories at *Huffington Post* and ABC News, made the unsourced claim that, "Some experts say the Cheetos, riddled with artificial flavors and coloring, are 'hyperpalatable,' meaning they're highly addictive."

So we checked out the stories Kypost.com referenced to see if they cited any "experts." The [Huffington Post story](#) did not directly discuss the addiction angle, but ended with a quote from a child claiming it took him "three months to quit" eating the snack. The ABC News story made the same statement about "hyperpalatability" as the KYpost.com piece, and then quoted an "expert" elaborating on the point.

That expert is [Ashley Gearhardt](#), a University of Michigan clinical psychologist. Professor Gearhardt earned her doctorate in clinical psychology this year from Yale University, where she worked with the school's [Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity](#). One need only spend two minutes on the center's website to see that its interests go far beyond academic curiosity. From its ivory tower perch, the center and its director, [Kelly Brownell](#), have loudly advocated for extensive government involvement to direct Americans' food choices, and encourage the use of litigation to regulate our choices. Professor Gearhardt [wrote about](#) addiction and its implications for litigation while at Yale, and promoted the use of the center's ["Yale Food Addiction Scale"](#) survey. Successful completion of that survey was a key criteria for an April 2011 Rudd Center [study](#) on food addiction.

That 2011 study inspired an ABC News story with the breathless title, ["For Those Addicted, Food Is Like a Drug."](#) It featured numerous quotes from Professor Gearhardt and a helpful

reprinting of the Yale Food Addiction Scale criteria "to help determine if you could have a food addiction." Lest you think we are picking on one particular news outlet, NBC News ran a story in February, "[Can You Get Addicted to Ice Cream?: Maybe, Study Shows](#)," which gave Professor Gearhardt a platform to talk about how "our food environment preys on people." We do credit NBC, however, for at least allowing the ice cream study's author to question whether his own study proved addiction.

That researcher is not alone in his skeptical view of "food addiction." In an April 2012 *Nature Review* article, "[Obesity and the brain: how convincing is the addition model?](#)," three Cambridge University professors critically analyzed the work of other researchers and the Yale addiction scale. They noted that two essential elements of addiction, tolerance and withdrawal, "are not convincingly observed in the human eating literature." They urged researchers to consider the "enormous heterogeneity" of obesity, and cautioned "against the hasty adoption of a model with limited applicability and supporting evidence." We'd be remiss in not also calling your attention to WLF's 2007 Monograph, "[Science Through the Looking Glass: The Manipulation of 'Addiction' and Its Influence Over Obesity Policy](#)."

Public health activists and plaintiffs' lawyers have an enormous stake in moving the food addiction concept forward, as we've [discussed previously](#) at *The Legal Pulse*. Those of us who see their efforts for what they really are—an essential catalyst for truly lucrative litigation—have our work cut out for us. The term "addiction" is [thrown around very casually](#) today, and it is an especially enticing concept in the food context, where people readily seek excuses for not losing weight. And as the stories on the latest efforts to ban snack foods from school demonstrate, we can't expect the full story to be told in the papers, the evening news, or their online equivalents.