

Reimagined in America: What Can the World Teach Us About
Building a Culture of Health?

Episode 16: Moving Food and Beverage Corporate Policies Toward Equity

WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT

On the September 15, 2023 episode of RWJF's [Reimagined in America: What Can the World Teach Us About Building a Culture of Health](#) webinar series, Ashka Naik of Corporate Accountability and Jeff Chester of the Center for Digital Democracy shared insights from other countries that are implementing equitable food and beverage corporate policies to protect healthy diets and advance health equity.

A full transcript of the discussion can be found below.

Please note: Transcripts are produced by a third-party transcription service and may contain discrepancies.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. I'm Jamie Bussel, I'm a senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, also a member of our Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions Team. And I am thrilled to be your moderator for today's webinar, which represents our 16th episode in the Reimagined in America series. So if you are returning to the series, we welcome you back. Thrilled to have you. And if this is your first time, we promise it'll be the best hour that you spend all day. We are really excited to have you. I hope you all had a chance to take the Blue Marble Quiz we had up on screen. It's a lot of fun. If you didn't, you could certainly spend a few minutes after the webinar to take it.

So before we begin, I just wanted to go over a few quick logistics. If you'd like to turn on live closed captioning, simply select the live captions button on the bottom of your screen. You can submit a question at any time for our speakers by clicking on the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. And in addition, we are recording this webinar so everyone will receive an email likely early next week with a link to the recording and any resources that are referenced today.

So before I jump in with some background on our topic, I wanted to take an opportunity to recognize that my work home, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Princeton, New Jersey, is located on the ancestral lands of the Lenape people, also called Lenni-Lenape, who were forcibly removed from their land and relocated west and north. As we begin this event, let's take a moment to honor the original caretakers of this land, recognizing the histories of land theft, violence, erasure, and oppression that have brought us here. Thank you.

So if I ask you to think about how commercial entities influence our health, what would you picture? Perhaps you would think about working conditions, advertising and marketing tactics and strategies, or specific products, all commercial determinants of health. That is the systems, practices, policies, and products through which commercial actors influence health and equity. The private sector has long shaped the world around us, influencing the conditions that create health, and this includes influencing our food choices and our diet. We all know that all parents and caregivers want to provide their kids with the healthiest best life possible, and that includes providing them with healthy food. But that can be really challenging for many, many families in America. Interconnected issues of inequity, racism, and poverty make it very difficult to find and afford healthy food. And clearly, inflation has been pushing healthy eating out of reach for millions of kids and families in America.

Large multinational food and beverage companies help to create some of these barriers, pushing kids, parents, caregivers towards options that may be convenient but would certainly not be considered healthy. Food and beverage companies spend almost \$14

billion per year on marketing and advertising. 80% of which promotes fast food, candy, sugar-sweetened beverages, and unhealthy treats. These efforts are so successful that more than 60% of the calories consumed in the US are from processed or ultra processed foods, which we know increases a person's likelihood for things like type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. And yet across the globe, we're seeing nations develop approaches to really push back against inequitable corporate policies, including marketing practices.

Food policy examples from around the world aim to safeguard the public from industry interference and work towards advancing health equity. Just to give you some examples, the United Kingdom recently passed comprehensive food marketing regulations, which include a ban on all paid advertising of unhealthy food products in the online space. Chile was one of the first nations to adopt a mandatory front-of-pack labeling policy over a decade ago as part of a broader law to limit the consumption of unhealthy foods. Countries like Brazil and Columbia have policies on industry interference and conflicts of interest to reduce their undue influence. And Mexico has had a sugar-sweetened beverage tax on its beverages as part of a public health policy aimed at reducing and mitigating the consequences of obesity.

There is clearly a lot of inspiration that we can draw from these examples, and I would argue the timing for this conversation could not be better. There is so much happening right now, from the World Food Forum and Sustainable Development Goals Summit happening this fall to regions in the Global South taking charge of their own food systems. Seismic shifts are happening in the geopolitics of food. The World Health Organization will issue its very first annual report on the commercial determinants of health likely later this year. It will also be releasing a new report on digital marketing related to food products. And the central importance of the commercial determinants of health in health equity was lifted up and illustrated in this past spring's Lancet series.

So today I am so grateful to have two amazing, brilliant colleagues and speakers to share what we can learn from the world to help shift food policy and marketing practices towards racial and health equity. But before I introduce our esteemed speakers, we always like to begin with a few questions that we pose to our audience. So we have three questions which you should see on your screen momentarily, and I'll ask you to take a look and click on your answers. Our first question is, what do you feel is the greatest threat to our collective well-being and health of our food system? We ask that you check one, and we'll give you a few moments.

Ready for the second one? So I'm hoping you see the second question which is, what do you feel is the most important benefit equitable food and beverage policies would bring to your community? Again, check one. And lastly, we ask that if you scroll down, you'll

see our final question, and that's simply why did you join today's webinar? Okay, Kyle, you let us know when the results are ready.

POLL

What do you feel is the greatest threat to our collective wellbeing and the health of our food systems? (Check one)

- Proliferation of ultra-processed foods in our diets
- Lack of strong regulations to safeguard public health and food systems
- Deepening impacts of the climate crisis
- Irresponsible and prolific marketing of unhealthy foods by food companies
- Less awareness of the effects unhealthy foods have on people and planet
- Fossil fuel dependent and chemical-intensive agriculture practices
- Wasteful supply chains and consumption patterns
- All of the above
- Other

What do you feel is the most important benefit equitable food and beverage policies would bring to your community? (Check one)

- Advance kids' nutritional and physical health
- Limit young people's exposure and access to unhealthy products
- Boost industry support to protect and promote healthy diets
- Encourage local leaders to hold the food industry accountable
- Improve diet-related health disparities
- Inspire communities to center equity
- All of the above
- None of the above
- Other

Why did you join today's webinar? (Check all that apply)

- I want to know how other countries are implementing equitable food and beverage policies.
- I'm looking for solutions that I can bring to my own community
- I want to understand what we can learn from other countries.
- I'm interested in connecting and partnering with those engaged in efforts abroad.
- I never miss a Reimagined in America webinar if I can make it!

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great. So it looks like there is some consensus here. It looks like most of you feel like the greatest threat to our collective well-being and the health of our food systems lies

within all of those answers. So that was at almost 50% rate. And for the second question, 39% of people responded all of the above as well.

Okay, fantastic. Sorry guys, I'm scrolling down here. Okay, and finally, we're sort of split across in terms of why folks were joining today's webinar. So I think regardless where you landed on question number three, I'm pretty confident that our awesome speakers can help make all of these things happen. So with that, I'm super excited to introduce our two speakers for today.

I'd love to introduce Jeff Chester, who is the executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy. The center advocates for citizens, consumers, and other stakeholders on consumer protection, public health and privacy online. Jeff's been working on public policy and the digital media since the early 1990s, focused on the ways data-driven digital marketing influences the decision-making of individuals, communities, and voters. Jeff was among the first advocates raising concerns about the ways online advertising was used to promote fast foods, alcoholic beverages and prescription drugs. A former investigative reporter, filmmaker and psychotherapist, Jeff Chester received his MSW Community Mental Health from UC Berkeley.

Second guest is Ashka Naik, who serves as the director of research and policy at an organization called Corporate Accountability, an organization working to challenge abuses by transnational corporations. Ashka directs campaign development, corporate research, and policy work while also leading the food program and in her spare time is also pursuing a doctorate at the University of Massachusetts, investigating the intersectionality of food security, women's rights, and policy infrastructure in South Asia. She has more than two decades of international experience working across climate and food movements in India and the US. Welcome to you both. I am thrilled that you are joining us today.

So I'm going to kick things off with a few questions of my own, and then we will be excited hopefully to take a ton of audience questions. For the audience, just remember you can submit a question at any point by clicking on the Q&A button on the bottom of your screen. So let's get started. First question is to you Jeff. I'd love for you to tell us about the work that you are doing around the role of digital food marketing on young people's health. What role should health equity play in policies for regulating the digital marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages? And finally, can you give us a sense of your vision for what an equitable digital marketplace looks like?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

Thanks, Jamie and colleagues. Well, I'm sure we all know there's nonstop targeting of young people, especially youth of color, by the food and beverage brands and their

global digital platform partners all over the world, including of course here in the United States. There's a 24/7 online barrage of highly targeted, cutting edge, and very sophisticated and manipulative marketing techniques used to promote the least unhealthy foods including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, gaming, neuromarketing and other ways to influence the brain and our emotions, intensive location geotracking, influencers, plus data practices based on what the Federal Trade Commission now calls data-driven commercial surveillance. Case study after case study from these food and beverage markers, which we gather and analyze, show these campaigns, which I said operate in the United States and worldwide, have tremendous impact. In fact, it's not about the advertising budgets anymore. Very little money can be spent online that will bring millions and tens of millions of viewers and promote sales.

These cases reveal online marketing as a key contributor to our obesogenic environment as well as the shameless targeting, in my opinion, of Black, Hispanic, and Asian American youth. Our group has tracked these developments from the very beginning of the online era, and our work has especially led to various federal and global regulations to better protect children online. For example, we are responsible for the passage back in 1998 of the United States' only law that regulates online privacy, which is for children 12 and under. It's called COPPA. And that's why, if many of you are parents who went online, you would say you have to be 13 and older. That's because of that law, and that's had an impact in some way on the ability of the advertisers to do their job, but it hasn't been good enough. We're especially focused on how food and beverage marketers use racial ethnic geotargeting and other data to better reach and influence youth of color.

The slide is up, so I want to show you this is from a recent presentation, a major ad industry event. What the ad industry understands is, which I think gives communities leverages all of their economic growth in the United States depends on their ability to sell to communities of color. Here you can see from this slide, particularly youth of color. When they talk about the market verticals that they intend to sell to communities of color, food and beverage, fast food is high on the list. So we can take that slide down and show slide two. To better target communities of color, advertisers... Wait a second, I'm so sorry, I've made a mistake. Keep that slide up.

Another opportunity here is... I have to apologize here. Oh no, actually the slides got mixed up. It's slide three, the data slide now. Do slide three. I apologize. This shows you the kind of data sources that the industry has assembled to better target communities of color, and this particular initiative is focused on healthy food as well. These communities face new forms of discrimination from these data practices, surveillance and privacy threats, as well as risks to their health and financial security from such data-driven targeting. But it potentially provides civil rights and health equity groups a powerful instrument, how diverse communities spend their money to demand significant changes in how advertising and digital media impacts their lives.

There's another critical opportunity for civil rights health equity groups that others take advantage here. The series of diversity, equity, and inclusion promises made by the leading food and beverage companies. That previous slide. After the murder of George Floyd and the protest which ensued, the advertising media, digital, fast food companies, all the leading companies made significant promises about how they would change their practices for the next several years. If these promises and commitments were fulfilled, we would see a media system much more diverse, content and ad budgets controlled more by communities of color, and it would also provide an opportunity to have a discussion about how we change the current nature of digital advertising. We also need to take advantage of the growing international focus on digital food marketing and health equity. There's new research tools such as measurement tools and policy proposals developed by the WHO to better measure and respond to unhealthy food marketing. Groundbreaking legislation, as Jamie has mentioned, has been passed in the UK, which is really a case study of what we could do in the United States.

A very small team of public health advocates and researchers work closely together to plan a campaign that over the years led to this major fundamental groundbreaking change. That kind of model could happen here too. There are other laws in the European union to better protect children and teens online and also limit discriminatory data practices. Given that work globally on digital marketing and health equity, the building blocks are there for the US groups to identify and adopt frameworks and initiatives that could change the course of what will otherwise be a highly commercialized discriminatory on unhealthy food environment in this part of the century. Thanks.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Fantastic. Thanks, Jeff. Fascinating, I think frustrating and also inspiring in many ways. So Ashka, next question is for you. How are other nations, particularly those in the Global South, approaching policies that safeguard the health and well-being of their populations, especially kids and youth, and how are those nations overcoming challenges while trying to implement these efforts?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

Thank you, Jamie, first of all, for this wonderful opportunity to discuss this topic with you and Jeff. Thank you to the foundation for the invitation, and also deeply grateful to the hundreds who are joining this dialogue. So I returned from India just a couple of weeks ago, and observing how hunger and malnutrition on the one hand and obesity and food wastage on the other are impacting nearly half of its population and of pretty much the world. I feel this debate seems substantively urgent. While here right in the US, we also know that food insecurities is in double digit despite a majority of actors of the billion-dollar global food industry headquartered right here. So we can agree the system is inequitable and in need of repair.

However, the good news is that today we are seeing greater awareness and stronger policies about what is broken and how to mend it. These Global South nations deserve honorable mentions. It's important to recognize that many of these nations have recently emerged from western colonization, do not own the IPs or the profits of the food industry, but are essentially providing their rich food traditions, their biodiversity as natural resources and their labor for the industry's massively globalized food supply chain and production chains, allowing the giants like the Nestle, like the Coca-Cola and PepsiCo to be what they are today, may it be through access to water or sugarcane or palm oil. Many of these nations are now pushing back on letting their children, their population be the experiments of the food industry.

We are seeing policies and practices emerging in these regions that could be loosely grouped into five cohorts. I would say one would be food labeling. Second, around restriction on some form of marketing and sales of certain kind of products to certain types of audiences. Third would be fiscal policies, like soda taxes and so on. Fourth would be around models of evaluating healthiness or unhealthiness of products. And fifth, and in my humble view, quite an important one, is focus on industry's influence and interference in policymaking spaces. I don't think we have the time to share example for each of them, but you already shared the example of Chile, which became the first country to adopt a mandatory front-of-package labeling in 2012. And eventually, it implemented bans on the advertising of ultra-processed food during child-focused TV time at cinemas and locations that attract a high population of children. In 2016, Taiwan adopted a policy to ban marketing of junk food during children's TV hours, TV time hours. I think it's somewhere around 5:00 PM to 9:00 PM.

Since then, many countries have adopted a multifaceted warning and restrictions. Like recently, Mexico and Argentina went a step ahead, included messaging around sweeteners and caffeine with a recommendation to avoid their consumption in children. In India, in 2020, the government of India finalized a law banning the sale and marketing of unhealthy food products in schools and around a 50-meter radius of schools. Also, we talk about children's health, then we can't ignore the role of the infant formula industry either. This is in fact our founding story as you can see on the slide. So a recent survey of the national implementation of the International Code on Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes published I think a few months ago revealed that in countries like Kenya and Cambodia, laws are being passed to regulate production and promotion of infant formula, infant foods including through digital media.

Also in 2023, I think you mentioned in your introduction, World Health Organization published a guidance on policies to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing, which confirms that in the past decade, marketing of ultra processed foods remains quite pervasive and quite persuasive across the globe. But it also confirms that public policies to protect children are by and large acceptable to the public. It is industry that is not quite happy with such policies. So policies remain one side of the coin, but

public awareness or social movements is sort of the other very critical side, especially in Global South countries. For example, in East Asia campaigns like Fix My Food, which is run by youth in I think eight countries from Fiji, Mongolia, to Vietnam and Solomon Islands is sort of taking deeper roots. So there are many lessons to learn for the US through each of this example, but also to be a positive model that others can reference in the future.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks, Ashka, so much. Terrific. And I'm really glad that you elevated the social movements piece. So this next question I'm going to pose to both of you guys. Ashka, we'll give you a break so I'll start with Jeff. Experts and public health organizations have called for the adoption of public policies for better protecting against negative commercial determinants of health. So Jeff, how does your work facilitate broader change in that corporate ecosystem to advance industry accountability for racial and health equity?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

Well, as I said earlier, we closely track the digital media industries writ large, especially the advertising and marketing piece in the United States and worldwide, thanks to Robert Wood Johnson Foundation especially, so thank you, with the food and beverage market. We analyze this information, understand what the system is doing, what the threats are, where the system is going, and we make this information available to policymakers, especially the Federal Trade Commission, which we've had a long-term relationship with since the early 1990s, as well as journalists and academics and other NGOs. And we try also to sound the alarm.

For example, when we uncovered a case study of a campaign by a leading US-based quick service restaurant chain that said openly we were losing multicultural youth, we were losing youth of color, so we had to figure out a way how can we better target them, they came up with a campaign, which is still in process, but the first part of that campaign resulted in cheeseburgers and french fries being sold out overnight at local franchises and the company's share price reaching a new high. And indeed, they secured their what they call multicultural youth market focus. This kind of information, where the industry itself repeatedly, over and over again, and frankly in the United States and across multiple markets and across various industries, so it's not just food and beverage marketing, the picture is often the same, these case studies document how effective the fast food companies are in relatively taking small amounts of money and selling tremendous amounts of the most unhealthy food to the communities who really bear the burden in terms of their health.

Our work has really contributed to the current Federal trade Commission's work on digital advertising and privacy. As I said earlier, we're responsible for the children's privacy law, which we were able to update in 2012 to give it EU like power to protect children. It's about to be further strengthened under this FTC. And indeed, and I'll talk about this later, we're working very closely with this Federal trade Commission, which is attempting to regulate commercial surveillance advertising for children and teens and others. Both Meta and Google, and Google in the food area, have had to change their policies to some extent because of the work that we and our allies are doing. But we're also focused on the changes to the US digital media system broadly, and what it means in terms of equity and diversity and health. The system is becoming more consolidated and more commercialized. I mean, food and beverage marketers and media companies have already adopted ChatGPT, which is the latest form of artificial intelligence, to power advertising, to power targeted programming.

If we do not intervene now in our media system, if we don't place the health equity and diversity and public service as values, as this media system becomes under the control of fewer and fewer companies with advertising and marketing and data collection at its principle core, then we will lose something very, very critical here in the United States. But I think that we can look elsewhere for models abroad, including the European Union and elsewhere to bring here to promote protections against advertising of young people, to promote diversity, and to promote public health equity. It's time now to develop a US strategy to accomplish this. Thanks.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks, Jeff, so much. I definitely hear your sense of urgency as you articulate all of this. So, Ashka, I'm going to repeat the question for you because it's been a few minutes. So again, experts, public policy organizations have called for the adoption of public policies for better protecting against the negative consequences of commercial determinants of health. Can you talk specifically about how Corporate Accountability helps the broker and facilitate that kind of change in the corporate ecosystem to advance industry accountability towards health and racial equity?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

Sure. Thank you, Jamie. And this is all sort of just adding to what Jeff shared. You already shared some numbers at the outset, Jamie, so I'm going to add to those numbers. So let's begin with some of those. So despite wars, floods, wildfires, last year the top 25 companies of the food sector generated \$1.8 trillion with profits close to \$160 billion. Out of the 10 top companies by market cap, six are headquartered right here in the US. I'm just going to let it sit with us. Many of these companies spend tens of millions of dollars every year in the US on lobbying around trade and taxes. And United States is one of 200 countries that many of these corporations do business in. So why do these

numbers matter? Because we, like many others and Jeff's organization, began to observe in the past few years what is it that is allowing these corporations to market and sell their unhealthy products in such an inequitable and unregulated manner. And this is because of the immense political power that this industry has amassed over time.

So over the years, our food campaign has concentrated on exposing this power and challenging industries interference in the politics and policies related to food and nutrition. It initially focused on McDonald's, compelling it to retire its clown Ronald McDonald from luring kids into buying their unhealthy products and focusing more on issues related to food marketing to communities of color, children and youth. But our campaign is also evolving as are the tactics of the food industry. Additionally, our work also focuses on dismantling how industry influences science on the one hand and public narrative in its favor. And what Jeff mentioned is, I mean, it really feeds into building this public narrative.

Following the work of many allies over decades, we have campaigned the likes of Coca-Cola and PepsiCo to stop funding groups like the International Life Sciences Institute or the Calorie Control Council. And there are so many more that do precisely that. Collectively, we have had several victories as well and we believe we cannot and have not done any of this work in isolation. So partnerships with allies like you across civil society, policy, and academic spaces have been instrumental in this effort of making the invisible power of industry over our health and wellbeing more visible to more audiences and making the industry accountable to the people.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Ashka, thank you so much. So again, in the spirit of recognizing that I don't think any of us are anti-business, but we're all really pro-health, can you just talk a little bit before we go to the audience question about any notable models of pro-health acting businesses? In other words, are you seeing good examples where commercial actors are actually doing the right thing in the spirit of improving health and health equity?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

That's a vital injection into the questions, because many of these food corporations are publicly-owned companies. This is very important to recognize because, as I mentioned before, many of these are headquartered right here in the US. So they're in a sense co-owned by thousands, if not millions, of shareholders, many of whom could be in our audience today. So another dimension of our work has focused on shareholder advocacy and working with investors. And over the years we have filed resolutions at annual shareholder meetings of some of the top most food and beverage corporations, demanding they undertake third-party audits, for example, of their products that are fueling diet-related diseases in children and youth, especially from Black and indigenous

communities, to demanding they make all of their political activities and spending transparent across all of their global markets.

And to our utter surprise, the support from shareholders is surging. Sometimes close to a fifth of all shareholders are supporting such resolutions, which is significant because seeing such support has effectively made these corporations pay attention to the issues of equity and accountability and transparency and to begin dialoguing with us and others on those topics. So do we have good examples when commercial actors are concerned? Well, I can say with confidence that there are many good examples of how they can be compelled to focus on specific business practices and change them for the better.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thank you, Ashka. I am going to pivot us right now to, we have a whole bunch of questions coming in from the audience, which is fantastic. So can you talk about how young people, who are the targets of these more insidious campaigns, how are they involved in your work specifically?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

We represent the interests of young people per se. We don't work closely with young people because we're a small organization, but what we do do, which unfortunately very few people do, is we examine the machinery that the food and beverage companies, which include the retailers and Google and Facebook, the platforms, how they package their products to hone them to target young people including youth of color. I mean, it's basically the marketing research industry, which in today's online era includes panels of millions and millions of young people so they can really understand how these young people react and then make the advertising work effectively. We take that data and we give it to regulators. So I guess my answer is we work on behalf of young people, but we don't work closely with young people.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thank you, Jeff. Ashka, what about you?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

So I would say that much of our work is for the young people because I do believe we owe them a lot of change before we sort of retire from our active lives. So systemic changes, but also sort of changes in how they can determine their own future. And I believe that I'm a mother of two children, and in our organization also, there are a lot of parents, and we have actually actively engaged young people in our campaigning. I just mentioned the shareholder advocacy, and I'm not sure if the next slide, I think we were going to put it. But you'll see young children demanding responses from corporations,

parents group activated by children's demand, schools. I'm going to refer to an example of a specific corporation later but, how schools are being oftentimes used as marketing platforms for corporations.

I think young people have in their own sort of scope and ecosystem have tremendous opportunity to really call these things out publicly and collectively. In fact, the example I shared in the East Asian, these are all young people, youth, college kids or school kids that are getting together to demand healthier environments and to really regulate commercial determinants working with legislators. So I think it interlaces with young people, but the political power is where I think the focus of our campaign has been lately. And yes, we can still do a lot directly with children on that regard as well.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great, Ashka. So I think you started getting at this, Ashka. The next question is, how can US communities, organizations, policy makers, funders like us really shift food policy and marketing practices and really begin to push back against these inequitable corporate practices?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

So Jamie, I think with the economic power centered in the US around food industry, the country has a very unique role to play. We need to recognize that not only as a member of the global community, but also as a model, that invariably many other regions will follow to structure their economic and policy schematic. Equally important is the reckoning of where Americans find themselves today with food insecurity on the one hand and exploiting diet-related diseases on the other. But Americans don't have the constitutional right to food either, as countries like Brazil, South Africa, India now do have. Also, there is a lot of corporate money as we saw in politics. But polls have shown repeatedly that nearly 70% of voters want to limit or actually remove corporate money from politics.

So first and foremost, I feel that policymakers and activists here must steal this opportunity to ensure that the food industry does not have a pronounced sway on policymaking. Institutions like the USDA, the FDA, HHS and others should be free of industry interference. And engagement with the industry should be prevented altogether, especially when policies that affect industry's business and profits are under deliberation. As you may be aware, some of us have raised flags around the process of developing the Dietary Guidelines for Americans for this precise reason. So keeping food industry money and influence out of politics also means stronger laws around conflict of interest and curbing revolving doors between the industry and public office.

And, of course, federal policies that educate masses about the harms of ultra-processed foods, not only on humans but on ecological health are vital, maybe strict

front-of-package labeling regime. At more of a community level, as those we saw take shape in several Global South countries around banning unhealthy food and advertising in schools, in public institutions, awareness and action-oriented campaigns to cultivate healthier food environments that engage a wide cross section including children, youth of population is critical. A stronger implementation of policies like good food purchasing policy, which can ensure that procurement decisions are made centering equity are critical. And Jeff's work is immensely urgent, because much of the digital world remains unregulated even in the Global South.

So all in all, it is time to stop offering social license to the food industry so that the likes of McDonald's can not enter schools with McTeacher's Nights as charity events, which clearly are marketing strategy to attract even more kids to unhealthy products. And I'm not sure how Jeff feels, but it sometimes feels to us that we are playing a game of whack-a-mole. Right? We work on this issue on commercial determinants here and we see inequities emerge there. And I think this is exactly why, in tackling these issues, what is required is global cooperation in which the US is not too late to join and emerge as an effective model of nation, of communities that really prioritizes its health, of its people, and the planet over everything else.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great. Ashka, I love sort of that vision. Jeff, if you certainly can add here. We have a ton of audience questions. So I have a bunch of additional ones that I'd love to post you, but I don't want to cut you off if you want to respond specifically here or jump in to something else.

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

I totally agree with Ashka, that there's a global infrastructure in place now: global and regional public health entities, organizations, researchers, initiatives. And the US is kind of a laggard, I hate to say that, in terms of really addressing unhealthy food marketing in the digital context. I just want to say that I think more information is also necessary. All the food and beverage companies, all the retail companies are now big data companies. And then that affects everything they do from the products they order, to who gets what product, to what gets marketed to. The public has no idea and many policymakers have no idea about how these companies have transformed themselves to be in essence. Many Googles and many Metas.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Fascinating point. So Jeff, many of these companies will likely say, "Hey, this is an individual personal responsibility issue. This is an individual choice matter and that people can always choose not to eat this, not to use this product." So how do you respond to that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

Well, I was going to say earlier, you asked for good examples and I really can't give you very good examples. The marketers have no incentives to offer advertising in a different way, because the model in the United States, with the exception of the children's privacy law which is limited, is complete collection of data. The use of all of these very powerful tools that I described earlier, including neuro research to understand how to craft a message for specific individuals, specific groups, and get that message to resonate in people's emotions and subconscious. This is a technique that's been used for years, it's growing and it's all over the world. Then you're surrounded.

Let's talk about an individual. You have no idea about all the data that's been collected about you and how that data's being used to form advertising in real time. You don't know how the techniques about how that data is personalized and knows you've gone to the grocery store, knows what ads you've watched on streaming video, knows what content you like to watch, knows in your family, in your community what you buy at the grocery store, and puts it all together increasingly in real time to send you compelling messages, discounts, offers, including when you use an app to get your discounts at the grocery store, go to the dollar store. So it's not an individual choice in my view.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah.

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

The deck is stacked, which is why we need regulators to get involved. We're in a moment in time where this Federal Trade Commission, this is a very important period here at the end of the Biden administration. This Federal Trade Commission wants to do something serious to protect children and youth and everybody else. And it would be great if we could mobilize the communities concerned about public health and equity to be more involved to get these through.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, that's great. So frightening, but I think also we have some enlightened leadership, and I think that that's great. Ashka, next question is for you. You've spoken a lot about commercial actors in the food system. In the US, there's a recent movement to recruit the health system including commercial insurers and others to better partner in improving equitable access to healthy food and push back on systems that promote unhealthy lifestyle practices. Are you seeing the health sector in other nations being activated in that similar way?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

This is a quite timely question, so thank you for whoever asked, The consolidation of power across any industry made by food, health, oil, so on so forth, that we see in the West is just coming up in many Global South countries. And I'm most familiar with the South Asian region. The health industry is not as consolidated and concentrated in the hands of a few actors, which is a good thing in many ways because yes, I mean, health professionals in, say my hometown or my region are not getting money from big pharmaceuticals to prescribe certain types of drugs over prescribing good nutritious diet.

So in some ways, the health sector I believe is actually serving better the health and nutrition of populations in the Global South. But also, I mean we are seeing pretty big liberalization of the health markets in those countries. Especially in Africa, healthcare is the next place where most of the private equity and financial institutions want to invest. So it is at danger. I wouldn't say that they're doing everything they can, but there is a lot more awareness and pushback to the industry in many of these countries than we see here in my community, in New England, for example.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Jeff, I don't know if you want to add anything to that. Okay, so given the ubiquitous nature of ultra-processed foods in the food supply, let's talk for a minute about that. With the high recognition of ultra-processed foods and the low cost of these products in comparison to the more nutrient dense foods, can you speak to the expected purchasing results of these products if marketing policies are strongly implemented and enforced, Jeff?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

Well, I mean, people should go look at the Instacart's IPO, it's called an S-1, which came out about two weeks ago, because I think it's emblematic of where food and beverage shopping is done today. It's done in store, it's done online, and a combination of both. You could look at that and you could say it applies to all the supermarkets and the dollar stores, et cetera. What's happened is that the brands are able to buy access to the online system, to the online carts to make, let's say, the unhealthy food the default.

Look, this would not be a complete answer, but they could change the way they market, they could change the incentives, they could change the subsidies. Yes, their profits would be lower potentially here because they make so much money off the unhealthy food, but they could change it and promote the healthy food in a very significant way. Right now, if you look at the system, as I said, it's really rigged because the brands in essence are able to buy individual consumers when they go online and their shopping

carts and when they get their loyalty coupons on their mobile phone. So that's one place we could start.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great. Great. Ashka, do you want to add anything to that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

Yeah, I do want to add something actually. So when we say they're cheaper, I mean, are they really cheap? Because what we don't see, and this is where the invisible power comes in, is the massive subsidies that go into making these products cheap. I think the United States, the taxpayers, all of us spend nearly \$4 billion annually on the sugar production because sugar is subsidized. Corn, in 2019, more than \$2 billion in subsidies went to corn. So are they really cheap, I think, is the first question. And second question, how can we make this invisible cost that we all bear more visible? And I keep coming back to this visibility and transparency issue because as Jeff really highlighted, it really is all happening behind the curtain. So it is not cheap, it is expensive. If we were to stop these subsidies, if we were to start giving subsidies on lentils and spinach and carrots, I think they would be cheap. So I think it is political, it is systemic, and I think it's about time that we start really looking at the true cost.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Fantastic point. Given how nimble industry is with changing marketing, especially in the digital space, how can we get ahead with policy and advocacy to stop predatory practices, Jeff?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

Well, yes, they change, and yes, they're always on the cutting edge. I mean, if you looked at all the fast food companies now, as I said, they're all using ChatGPT. It's been three months, and they're already using it to create products and advertising campaigns. But it's not rocket science how to regulate them, which is why we've been focused on privacy and data from the very beginning, which by the way is a bipartisan issue in many ways. If you change the nature of the data system and if you prohibit the kind of discriminatory data practices which are pervasive and unfairly impact communities of color especially, you can stop a lot of this. We have models now in the UK, yes, it's been delayed, it's now for 2025, but it's a model. So we can have an impact in what they do, which is why, as Ashka said, they are lobbying 24/7 to make sure that rules on children are not passed currently.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Ashka, I don't know if you want to add to that and we may have time for just one more question. So let's go there. So last question, and I know there were tons of others, so I

apologize that we're not going to get through all of them but, many of these companies are global and headquartered in different nations from the audiences that they reach. However, governments only have power to restrict online activity in their own nations. How do you recommend that governments bring in restrictions that fully restrict all the unhealthy food advertising that their citizens are exposed to? So Jeff, do you want to take that? And then if Ashka has anything to add.

GUEST SPEAKER: Jeff Chester, Center for Digital Democracy

Yeah, I mean, look, of course in the European Union, they're able to regulate among all the nation states, protecting people's privacy online, data practices that protect children and teens are very easy to do. We believe regulators have been doing it elsewhere in the UK and the EU and other countries. And they are poised to do it here. I won't go into the details, but indeed we could cut down on a lot of unhealthy food and beverage marketing if regulators enact rules to protect the privacy of young people.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great, thanks, Jeff. Ashka, I don't know if you want to add anything to that.

GUEST SPEAKER: Ashka Naik, Corporate Accountability

I think what Jeff said is critical and also the digital world is just so all pervasive. But there is an issue here, because this is what we call extraterritorial responsibilities of corporations. When it comes to supply chains, in addition to marketing, I mean, all these corporations, yes, they're headquartered in different nations, but primarily in Global North nations, have all these supply chains. They're extracting water, they're polluting natural resources, they're marketing irresponsibly, and so on so forth. And legally, we haven't evolved enough, and there are many efforts being done by the movements from the legal spaces to activist spaces on really creating a legal infrastructure where corporations can be held accountable for their extraterritorial responsibilities.

For those who may not know, but there is a whole process of treaty making undertaken within the UN auspices, and it's called the TNC, Transnational Corporations Related Treaties, Business and Human Rights Treaty, which specifically is working toward getting these responsibilities being institutionalized in a legal framework. So there is a bigger issue here, and I think of course we don't have enough time to get to the nitty-gritty of it, but I think it's worth keeping in front of us as we take the next steps.

MODERATOR: Jamie Bussel, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Great. Thank you guys so much. This was a totally spirited conversation, tons of engagement from the audience. I'm sorry that we're not going to get to everybody's great questions, but we do want to turn it over to the audience for a question that we'd like to pose at the end. I'm looking on the screen. Okay, so again, we have a question for all of

you. Please drop your response to this particular question in the chat, and I will share a few. As you reflect on what you just heard over the past hour, what gives you hope that there can be a day when government, commercial actors, civic society, all put health and societal well-being first?

I'm seeing some good answers. I'm seeing our youth, future generations of activists. Okay, great. Well, keep those coming. We are going to start to wrap up. I'm sensitive to, we are almost at the top of the hour. And again, just really wanted to thank everyone so much who enjoyed what I think has been a really spirited, very engaged conversation. Huge thanks to Jeff and Ashka. To learn more about their amazing work, please visit the links in the chat that will be put up in the chat shortly, if not yet. And as we said earlier, we'll be making the recording available to everyone so you can listen to the conversation again later if you'd like to and share with anyone who you think might be interested. Again, I feel like this conversation really emboldens all of us to imagine and invest in a world where human and planetary health is always prioritized over profit. So thank you all for that.

Again, after you sign off, we do ask that you take a moment to please fill out the very short survey that will pop up on your screen. Your feedback is incredibly helpful to us as we think about the future of this webinar series. And as always, stay safe, be well. Have a fantastic weekend. For those of you who are celebrating the holiday this evening, l'shana tovah. We hope to see you all on our next Reimagined in America webinar. Thank you again so much. Special thanks also to the entire extended RWJF team and communications team who orchestrate this entire webinar. So again, thanks so much everybody for joining us.