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Meat in the post-truth era: Mass media discourses on health and disease in the attention economy

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Abstract

The debate on meat's role in health and disease is a rowdy and dissonant one. This study uses the health section of the online version of *The Daily Mail* as a case study to carry out a quantitative and qualitative reflection on the related discourses in mass media during the first fifteen years of the 21st century. This period ranged from the fall-out of the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis and its associated food safety anxieties, over the Atkins diet-craze in 2003 and the avian flu episode in 2007, to the highly influential publication of the report on colon cancer by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in 2015. A variety of conflicting news items was discernible, whereby moments of crisis, depicting the potential hazards of meat eating, seemed to generate reassuring counter-reactions stressing the benefits of meat as a rich source of nutrients. In contrast, when the popularity of meat-rich diets was on the rise due to diets stressing the role of protein in weight control, several warnings were issued. Meat's long-standing and semiotic connotations of vitality, strength, and fertility were either confirmed, rejected or inverted. Often this was achieved through *scientification* or *medicalisation*, with references to nutritional studies. The holistic role of meat within human diets and health was thus mostly reduced to a focus on specific food components and isolated biological mechanisms. The narratives were often histrionic and displayed serious contradictions. Since several interests were at play, involving a variety of input from dieticians, (health) authorities, the food industry, vegan or vegetarian movements, and celebrities, the overall discourse was highly heterogeneous.

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