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NPR Slants Towards Backers of Obama Administration's Kiddie Food Ad Guidelines

By *Matthew Balan*
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NPR's Ari Shapiro leaned towards supporters of the Obama administration's new "voluntary principles" to limit junk food ads to kids on Thursday's All Things Considered. Shapiro played three sound bites from backers, versus only one from a critic who blasted the proposal: **"If the federal government decided to issue voluntary guidelines about what newsmen should say to avoid inflaming the public, I think you guys would be pretty upset."**

Host Melissa Block did acknowledge opponents' concerns about the proposed guidelines in her introduction for the [correspondent's report](#): "The Obama administration wants to limit the amount of advertising kids see for junk food. It's part of a broader push to improve child nutrition, and, as NPR's Ari Shapiro reports, it's part of what critics see as a growing nanny state."

After playing clips from three classic breakfast cereal ads, which featured Count Chocula and Tony the Tiger, Shapiro noted that "those ads have more in common than trippy cartoon mascots: marshmallow bats, sugar smacks, toasted in sugar frosting." He then played his first clip from a supporter of the new "voluntary" guidelines, Professor Stephen Teret of Johns Hopkins University, who stated that the "ability to recognize those characters is a function of how much money the **food makers spend in trying to alter the behaviors of children in a non-healthy manner.**"

Before introducing his sole opponent of the proposal, David Boaz of the Cato Institute, the NPR correspondent summarized the Obama administration proposal: "The government wants food manufacturers to spend less money advertising junk food to kids, not just on TV, but in every medium. It's a voluntary program, but **it still rankles libertarians**, such as David Boaz of the Cato Institute, who doesn't want the government telling us what to eat for breakfast." Shapiro skeptically replied to Boaz's initial critique:

DAVID BOAZ, CATO INSTITUTE: If the federal government decided to issue voluntary guidelines about what newsmen should say to avoid inflaming the public, I think you guys would be pretty upset.

SHAPIRO: Oh, we would just choose not to follow them. Can't food companies do the same thing?

BOAZ: Food companies could choose not to follow them, but every major company in America is subject to so many involvements with the federal government that it's very difficult to do.

Despite identifying the political affiliation of the Cato Institute, the reporter didn't do the same when he introduced the second clip from a supporter: "Margo Wootan...[is] **director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest**, and she helped write these standards. She says companies are already self-regulating ads for kids, but right now, the system is a patchwork with lots of holes." Of course, Center for Science in the Public Interest is a left-wing organization that is always agitating for further regulation of the food industry.

The full transcript of Ari Shapiro's report from Thursday's All Things Considered:

MELISSA BLOCK: The Obama administration wants to limit the amount of advertising kids see for junk food. It's part of a broader push to improve child nutrition, and, as NPR's Ari Shapiro reports, it's part of what critics see as a growing nanny state.

ARI SHAPIRO: Some of the most memorable cartoons on television are less than 30 seconds long. For decades, Saturday mornings on TV have been populated by Count Chocula-

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE ACTOR #1 (as "Count Chocula"): Chocolatey cereal with chocolatey marshmallow bats.

SHAPIRO: Dig 'Em the Frog-

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE 1 (singing): Kellogg's Sugar Smacks.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE ANNOUNCER #1: Part of this nutritious breakfast.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE ACTOR #2 (as "Dig 'Em the Frog"): Dig 'em.

SHAPIRO: And Tony the Tiger.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE VOICE ACTOR #3 (as "Tony the Tiger"): Those big crisp flakes of corn with that secret toasted in sugar frosting- they're great!

SHAPIRO: Those ads have more in common than trippy cartoon mascots: marshmallow bats, sugar smacks, toasted in sugar frosting. Stephen Teret is a public health professor at Johns Hopkins University.

PROFESSOR STEPHEN TERET, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY: Your ability to recognize those characters is a function of how much money the food makers spend in trying to alter the behaviors of children in a non-healthy manner.

SHAPIRO: Now, the Obama administration is offering what it calls voluntary principles to guide industry self-regulatory efforts to improve the nutritional profile of foods marketed to children. In other words, the government wants food manufacturers to spend less money advertising junk food to kids, not just on TV, but in every medium.

It's a voluntary program, but it still rankles libertarians, such as David Boaz of the Cato Institute, who doesn't want the government telling us what to eat for breakfast.

DAVID BOAZ, CATO INSTITUTE: If the federal government decided to issue voluntary guidelines about what newsmen should say to avoid inflaming the public, I think you guys would be pretty upset.

SHAPIRO: Oh, we would just choose not to follow them. Can't food companies do the same thing?

BOAZ: Food companies could choose not to follow them, but every major company in America is subject to so many involvements with the federal government that it's very difficult to do.

SHAPIRO: Margo Wootan hopes he's right. She's director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, and she helped write these standards. She says companies are already self-regulating ads for kids, but right now, the system is a patchwork with lots of holes.

DOCTOR MARGO WOOTAN, CENTER FOR SCIENCE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST: These standards take us from having self-regulation be a nice idea to having self-regulation actually work.

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SHAPIRO: And the food industry says it's open to these proposals. Scott Faber is vice president of federal affairs at the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

SCOTT FABER, GROCERY MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION: Government has a very big role to play if we are going to end childhood obesity within a generation, as the first lady has called on us to do. So these are recommendations that we'll look at carefully as we think of ways to update the standards we're already using.

SHAPIRO: The public has 45 days to comment on these new proposals before the Obama administration sends its final report to Congress. Ari Shapiro, NPR News, Washington.



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