

## ROMANIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF FOOD. BETWEEN EMOTIONAL DIETS AND RATIONAL MEDICAL ADVICES

**Valentina Marinescu**

Bucharest University, email: valentina.marinescu@yahoo.com

### ABSTRACT

*The article had searched answers at the following research questions: “What are the main aspects related to the theme “food” presented by the Romanian media?” and “How are the topics related to “food” covered in articles published in the Romanian media?” The research took the shape of a quantitative content analysis of the articles published in the Romanian media between January 1, 2014 and January 1, 2017. The analysis of coverage in the Romanian media of food indicates the minimal appeal to scientific evidence in the coverage of this topic - almost half of all articles did not mention a person or document when they addressed the subject of food. Secondly, the focus of the articles was almost exclusively on the coverage of certain aspects of food in relation to health and disease, nutrition in general and diseases related to food and nutrition. This has led to very little coverage of other aspects - in particular those related to food production, national and European legislation on food and nutrition, consumer rights in food and nutrition.*

**Key-words:** Nutrition, health, mass media coverage, Romania.

## **Introduction**

In recent year a number of studies (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999) have stressed the impact of social determinants (e.g. socioeconomic status, social integration, race and ethnicity, place, environmental support, and social policies) on individual healthy dietary habits and the interventions aimed at addressing them (Sorensen et al., 2003; Smedley & Syme, 2000; Viswanath et al., 1991). The importance of social determinants for health has been discussed from “ecological perspective”, which suggests that individual health behaviors are subject to the influence of factors across multiple levels which are mutually influential and interdependent (National Cancer Institute, 2005). It has been recommended that public health interventions should take into account multiple factors which came from multiple levels, including the individual and the environment (Emmons, 2000; Smedley & Syme, 2000). In the same vein, in health communication, there has been an increasing emphasis on understanding how communication behaviors of individuals and effects of communication on individuals are influenced by the larger social environment (Viswanath & Demers, 1999; Viswanath, 2006).

At the same time, in recent decaes, the public’s desire for information on nutrition is increasing (Ayoob, Duyff & Quagliani, 2002). In recent years more and more members of the audience have quoted the print media as a key source of information on nutrition and food (Grilli, Ramsay & Minozzi, 2005; Holgado et al., 2000). However, there is a lack of empirical research that has examined the quality of food and nutrition reported in the media.

In Eastern European countries the interest in topics related to health, nutrition and communication is only at the beginning. The present article addresses the issue of media coverage of nutrition and food and tries to fill a gap in the existing literature.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Mass media play a key role in informing the general public of scientific developments. A 2005 Kaiser Family Foundation survey reported that 40% of respondents indicated they get health information mainly from the media; in comparison, 20% respondents reported getting health information mainly from health professionals and 14% from family members and friends (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). Health information reported in the

media has been shown to influence individual behaviours (McIntosh & Blalock, 2005; Grilli, Ramsay & Minozzi, 2002). While in recent years top print newspapers' circulation has waned, largely giving way to Internet and other electronic media, print newspapers continue to play a primary role in public health agenda-setting and provide the base content for many other forms of media (Roberts, Wanta & Tzong-Horng, 2002).

Food has generated new forms of media engagement through its uptake on social media, photo-sharing sites and apps, among other media forms. Scholars of food and lifestyle media have frequently identified changes in contemporary food media and food politics as primarily consumer-driven and, in particular, as a reflection of the increasing global influence of neoliberal, consumer-oriented modes of citizenship (Miller, 2007; Lewis, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Much of the literature in this area has focused on the politics and personal food practices of consumers (de Solier, 2013; Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Leer & Povlsen, 2016), and how these are framed and addressed in media and other texts (Rousseau 2012; Bradley, 2016; Lavin, 2013). Such studies tend to consider the emerging consumer politics surrounding the health, environmental and animal welfare impacts of conventional food systems, as well as the practices of taste, distinction and lifestyle involved in the purchasing, preparation, consumption and mediation of food.

At the same time, concern has been raised that some mainstream science reporting aimed at the general public includes inaccuracies (Henderson, Kitzinger & Green, 2000; Philo et al., 1994) or other shortcomings, such as incompleteness, hype or bias (Stryker, 2002). In one review of over 500 health-related stories, satisfactory ratings were given to just 33 % of stories for quantifying harms, 35 % for discussing the quality of the evidence, and 56 % for seeking independent sources and exploring conflicts of interest (Schwitzer, 2008). Previous research has also shown that nutrition coverage has often been sensationalist, with the headlines not accurately reflecting the scientific research (Basu & Hogard, 2008) and based on reporting preliminary research as a “breakthrough” (Bartlett, Sterne & Egger, 2002). It is common to present contradictory messages or an unbalanced view about health and nutrition in many media articles (Nagler, 2014; Hackman & Moe, 1999; Gross, 2009). However, newspapers do not exist to provide a free public health service to the public but to provide newsworthy articles (Len-Rios et al., 2009).

Borra et al. (1998) concluded that “most nutrition news failed to provide contextual information”. Possible inaccuracies and insufficient practical context questions the value of

nutrition information via the print media in terms of the capacity of individuals to obtain, interpret and understand health information in ways that are health-enhancing (Sihota & Lennard, 2004).

### **The research project**

For the present article we have the following research questions:

1. What are the main aspects related to the theme “food” presented by the Romanian media?
2. How are the topics related to “food” covered in articles published in the Romanian media?

The research project at the basis of this article is mainly qualitative. More exactly, we made a quantitative study of articles published in the Romanian media on the topics of food and nutrition.

Due to the exploratory character of the study, we did not state any research hypothesis apart from the above-mentioned research questions.

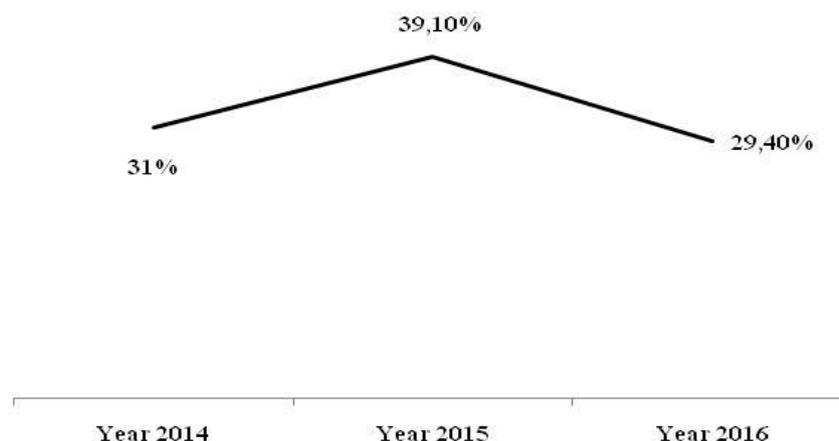
All articles were selected from the Google search engine in the “News” section. The analysis included articles published between January 1, 2014 and January 1, 2017. The first ten Google pages of articles identified in this way were included in the analysis. The word used to identify the items was “food”. The final sample had a volume of 197 articles. The analysis used a coding scheme composed of 45 elements.

The interpretation was performed using the SPSS 11.5 computer program. The analysis presents descriptive statistics - frequent tables and contingency tables.

### **Data analysis**

Our data showed that from a total of 197 articles 31.10% of articles were published in 2014, 39.30% in 2015 and 29.60% in 2016.

Figure 1. Dynamics of publishing articles about food in Romanian mass media (2014-2016)



Most of the food –related articles were published between 2014 and 2016 in newspapers (28.9%), on TV websites (27.90%) and on aggregated sites (18.90%). A percent of 14.20% was published in reviews or magazines and 9.10% of the articles were published by the news agencies. Only one article (0.50%) was published on the website of a radio station and one article (0.50%) was published on a website of news media.

At the level of the entire sample, most of the articles published were articles of analysis (55.30%), followed by review articles - 18.80% - and simple news- 13.7%. In the three years considered there were only 5.60% general TV programs on the topic of food and 3.6% interviews about food in Romanian media. Only two reportages (1%) presented the issue of food and four articles (2%) were opening articles published by Romanian media. Most articles (88.50%) were published together with a real photo, 3.60% articles were published together with a drawing, 3.20% articles have a graph which exemplifies the text and in the case of 4.70% of articles a video was also published together with the main article.

Rather unexpected, only in the case of five article (2.50%) the in the image/video which was published presented an animal, while in the case of 124 articles (62.90%) the published image/video presented some food. A number of six articles (3%) also have a famous person (from entertainment, politics, arts etc.) who was present in the image/video that accompanied them.

The most important source of articles was other media - 27.30% - followed by a nutritionist (9.50%), a doctor (8.60%) and an academic or a scientist (8.20%). The government was the source for 6.40% of the total sample of articles. In the case of five articles (2.30%) the source was a news agency, while for other five articles (2.30%) this

source was a retailer. At the same time, one third of the analysed sample did not specify any source of the published information (30%).

Nearly half of the articles (44.20%) do not cite a person or a document, 19.30% of them cite a person, and 20.30% cite a document. When the type of citation was more closely analysed, the analysis showed that the people who were most cited in all articles were: a doctor (31%), a nutritionist (23.3%) and a researcher (14.7%). Only six articles (5.2%) cited a representative of the government and 11 articles (9.50%) cited a businessman. Three articles (2.60%) had cited a customer, two articles (1.70%) cited a young person, two of them cited a politician, the same number cited a representative of a customers' organisation and the same number (1.70%) cited a journalist.

Almost half (45.2%) of the documents cited in the sample were scientific articles or reports. On the second place one could place the national report of the government (9.50%), a report from the business or from the industry (9.50%) and an international or an European report (9.5%). In the third place one could rank a national law related to food or/and health (8.70%) and a report from a consumers' agency (6.30%). The documents which were cited less were personal documents (letters, diaries) (4%), historical documents (2.40%) and a document from a regional government (0.80%).

In the case of 44.70% articles from the total sample, there were presented controversial issues about food. Most of them were related to social problems (25.60%), problems in the food industry (20.50%) and the costs and benefits for the food producers (17.90%). The health-related controversies were presented in 12.80% of the total number of articles and the controversies about costs and benefits for the food consumers had appeared in 7.70% of the sample. Controversies related to the environment represented only 2.60% of the total sample and ethical controversies had appeared in 2.60% of the articles.

The main topics covered in the articles for the total sample were nutrition related to illness and disease (47.70%) and nutrition in general (46.70%). On the second place we find diseases related to food and nutrition (26.90%), risks associated with nutrition and food (26.90%), food in general (without any specification) (24.90%) and diets (21.30%). A smaller percentage of articles had as their main topic big business in food industry (11.70%), junk-food (11.20%) and the quantity of food (10.70%). The topic less covered in the articles we enclosed in the sample were: bio- and nano-technologies related to food, pollution and

biodiversity risks and benefits (each representing 0.50% of the total sample) and the food related rights of the consumers (0.60%).

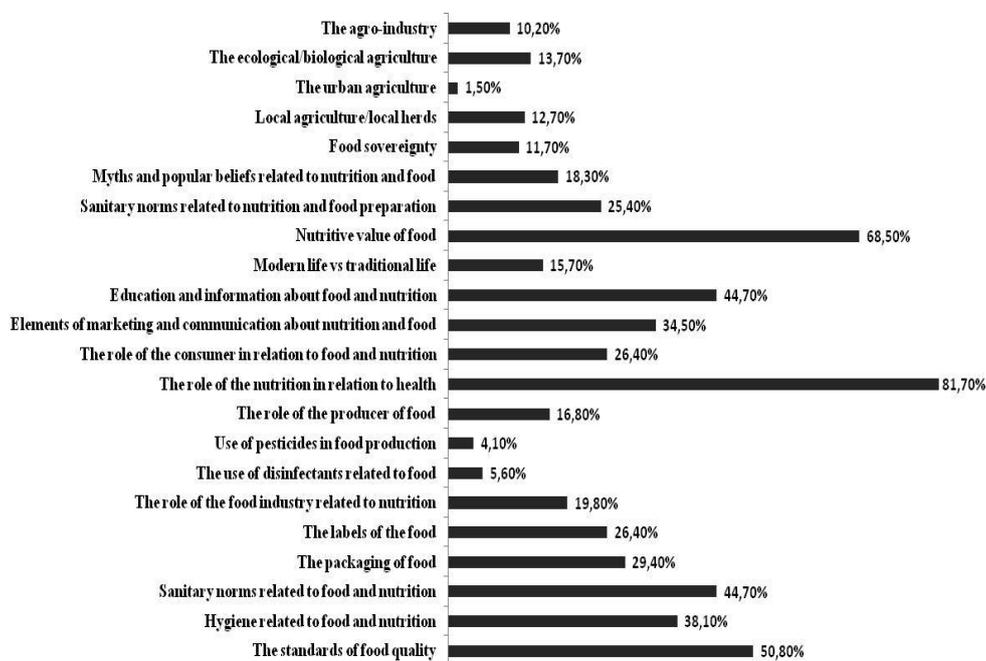
Table 1. Main topic of article (Multiple responses)

	Percent (%)
Organic cultures	3.60
Food in general (without any specification)	24.90
International/European standards and labels in nutrition and food	2.50
Pesticides and herbicides	3
Animal industry	5.60
Nutrition	46.70
Sustainability of food production	7.60
Big business in food industry	11.70
Quantity of food	10.70
National standards and labels in nutrition and foods	4.10
Diets	21.30
National food patrimony	2
Genetic modified organisms	2
Diseases related to food and nutrition	26.90
Junk-food	11.20
Risks associated with nutrition and food	26.90
Consumer rights related to food	0.60
Humanitarian and/or famine crisis related to food and nutrition	2.50
Taxes related to junk-food /alcohol/tobacco	3.60
International/European legal system related to healthy nutrition and food	1.50
National legal system related to healthy nutrition and food	2.50
National policies related to healthy nutrition and food	5.10
International/European policies related to healthy nutrition and food	1.50
Crops (in general, without any specification)	2
Bio and nano-technologies related to food	0.50
Pollution	0.50

Biodiversity risks and benefits	0.50
Local communities risks and benefits related to food and nutrition	4.10
Animal-related diseases (Avian influenza, Blue tongue disease, Salmonella)	1.50
Nutrition and food related to a specific disease or illness	47.70
Nutrition and food related to specific national or religious celebrations/feasts	5.10

For the entire sample analyzed, the most frequently mentioned food-related aspects were the role of nutrition in relation to health (81.70%), the nutritional value of foods (68.50%) and the quality standards for foods. The least cited aspects of these items at the sample level were urban agriculture (1.50%), pesticides' use in food production (4.10%) and the use of food disinfectants (5.60%).

Figure 2. Aspects related to food which were mentioned in the articles



For the sample as a whole our results showed that the foods most often mentioned were vegetables (44.90%), fruits (37.20%), meat and its substitutes (35.20%) and the entire food pyramid (31.60%). On the second category of foods mentioned in the articles one could include milk and its derivatives (cheese etc.) (25%), sweets (17.30%), drinks (15.30%), oils plus fats (13.3%). Spices (2%) and coffee plus tea (9.70%) are the least types of food mentioned in the entire sample of media materials considered for analysis.

While in 93.40% of the total articles analyzed some foods were presented, only in a percentage of 12.20% of them some specific food brands were mentioned. The most frequently mentioned brands for food were those produced by the large chain-stores like “Cora”, “Carrefour”, “Kaufland”, “Metro”, “Auchan” and “Lidl”.

In the case of half of the items in the total sample (50.8%), the articles presented some dietary and non-dietary products. The dietary foods most often presented throughout the sample were sugar-free fruit and derivatives (85.40%), vegetables and sugar-free derivatives (82.10%) and cereals (46.40%). Meat and sugar and salt derivatives (50.40%) as well as chocolate and sugar desserts (51.20%) were the most common non-dietary products presented in the entire sample. The dietary products which were less presented in the articles were aliments for small children (6.60%) and bottled water (9.30%), while non-dietary products less presented were frozen desserts (3.30%) and salt or sweet products (8.90%). Fats (62.40%) and coffee (35.80%) were other foods which were presented in the articles enclosed in our sample.

Table 2. Dietary and non-dietary products presented in the articles (Multiple responses)

Dietary products	Percent (%)	Non-dietary products	Percent (%)	Other foods	Percent (%)
Bread, rice, pastry	25.20	Sugar-rich cereals	31.70	Nutrition supplements	6.40
Cereals	46.40	Meat and substitute with sugar and salt	50.40	Tea	20.20
Fruits and derivatives without sugar	85.40	Pastry and bread	34.10	Coffee	35.80
Low milk products	31.80	Juice and drinks	27.60	Spices	18.30

		from fruits with sugar			
Low-processed aliments without sugar and salt	26.50	Freezed aliments	14.60	Fats (oils etc)	62.40
Aliments for small children	6.60	Fat milk products	26		
Bottled watter	9.30	Frozen desserts	3.30		
Vegetables and derivates without sugar and salt	82.10	Chocolate and desserts with sugar	51.20		
Other products	6	Fast-food	26.80		
Unspecifyed products	0.70	Sweet drinks	25.20		
		Alchool	18.70		
		Salt or sweet products	8.90		
		Canned products/Canns of products	22		
		Ready-to-eat products	17.10		
		Other products	3.30		

More than half of the articles in the analysed sample present cases and situations and make recommendations about food and nutrition (54.80%). The most important recommendations related to food made in the articles we have analysed had referred to diseases (61.90%), healthy food and nutrition (61.40%), diets (22.80%) and health in general (10.20%).

As regards the most important recommendations related to health in general one could notice that the most important were those related to maintaining a healthy weight (32%) and making regular outdoor activities (also a percent of 32% from the total sample). On the second place one could rank advices related to physical exercises (24%) and thirdly the recommendation related to intellectual activities and free-time ones (8%) could be ranked.

The last place in this list was occupied by advices related to personal development (3%) and working and living in a friendship environment (3%).

When one considered the most important recommendations for a healthy diet and nutrition it could be noticed that the most important recommendations of this type had referred to the whole food quality sample (66.70%), the use of fresh food (59.70%), avoiding processed and / or canned foods (24.80%) and living a balanced life (23.30%). Following doctor's advices came only in the seventh place (10.90%) while the supervising of food by a specialist was mentioned only in 3.9% of the total number of articles. At the same time, the issue of food quantities could be ranked as the fifth (19.40%) and cultural habits related to food was ranked on the sixth place (12.40%). There were a significant lower number of articles dealing with moderate drinking of alcohol (only 4.70%) and stop smoking (3.90%). As regards recommendations related to diets almost half of the sample included diets which involved one or more food restrictions (45.10%), followed by diets low in lipids (25.50%) and diets for getting slim (23.50%). Draconic and severe diets came in the fourth place (13.70%), followed by vegan and/or raw-vegan diets (11.80%). Only 9.9% of the total articles related diets to national Romanian culture and a lower percent (2%) had made reference to diets involved in religious practice.

For the entire sample, the most important recommendations for diseases were those related to cardiovascular (19.70%), gastrointestinal (18.90%), obesity (18.10%) and diabetes (17.30%). With 15.70% of the total sample, recommendations related to hypertension and associated diseases came on the fifth place, the same being true for advices related to high level of cholesterol (15.70%). Recommendations related to allergies came on the sixth place (11%) and aging-related recommendation concerning food came in the seventh place (10.20%). Advices related to food in the case of immunity diseases came in the eighth place (8.70%). Dialysis (0.80%), cystite (0.80%) and infertility are the diseases for which the lowest percentages of food-related advices were published in the analysed sample.

Table 3. The recommendations/advices related to diseases refer to (Multiple responses)

	Percents (%)
Gastro-intestinal diseases	18.90
Allergies	11

Use of specific medicines/treatment	5.50
Cystite	0.80
Infertility	3.90
High level of cholesterol	15.70
Anemy	2.40
Aging	10.20
Immunitary diseases	8.70
Dialysis	0.80
Diabetes	17.30
Obesity	18.10
Hyper and/ or hypo thyroidism	6.30
Hypertension and associated diseses	15.70
Cardiovascular diseases	19.70

One could also notice the fact that there were also recommendations for other diseases related to the functioning of the brain system (10.20%) and cancer (10.20%).

Most articles on the total sample used logical arguments to present the topic of interest (88.80%), while only 11.20% used emotional arguments. At the same time, the tone of those articles was neutral for 78.70% of the total sample, 14.20% presented the food-related issues in a positive tone and 7.10% covered them in a negative way.

## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

It is well-known that food media has a long history, the cookbooks being among the earliest printed books (Mennell, 1996). As Collins (2009) showed, food programming is one of the oldest genres of radio and television and it was initially aimed at instructing women in cookery and home maintenance (Collins, 2009). By the 1980s the emergence of food journalism and food criticism had developed new audiences for food media with their “instruction on enjoyment rather than production - knowledge about, not knowledge of how to” (Miller & McHoul, 1998). The more recent expansion and proliferation of politically infected food media texts draws upon this longer history of pedagogical instruction, and, at

the same time, it is the result of two conditions: the intensification of consumer anxieties about food risk, and significant media industry change. The growth of food media during the 1990s occurred alongside a period of peak concern about the risks of industrial agriculture. Outbreaks of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, colloquially known as mad cow disease), foot-and-mouth disease, and deadly foodborne illnesses caused by salmonella and *E. coli* contamination revealed shocking practices that the industry had previously kept hidden from public view, and highlighted a failure of the European and American governments to ensure the safety of both farm animals and consumers. As Campbell (2015) stressed, persistent energy crises and worries over “peak oil”, in addition to concerns about the health and environmental damage caused by synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, galvanised public interest in food system change during this time (Campbell, 2015). Many of the most well-known food exposés revealed the deleterious economic, health and environmental effects of industrial food systems (Belasco, 2007). In the decade that followed, “campaigning culinary documentaries” fronted by celebrity chefs exposed additional food systems issues, including animal welfare and seafood sustainability (Hollows & Jones, 2010; Bell & Hollows, 2011; Bell et al, 2017).

The Eastern Europe presents a rather different image about media coverage of food and nutrition. Our analysis of coverage in the Romanian media of food and food indicates the following:

1. There was a minimal appeal to scientific evidence in the coverage of these topics - almost half of all articles enclosed in the sample did not mention a person or document when they addressed the subject of food.

2. Media’s focus was almost exclusively on the coverage of certain aspects of food and nutrition in relation to health and disease, nutrition in general and diseases of food and nutrition. This has led to very little coverage of other aspects - in particular those related to food production, national and European legislation on food and nutrition, consumer rights in food and nutrition.

3. The main elements of the diet and nutrition of the articles analyzed have focused on a healthy lifestyle (hence the diets necessary to achieve physical ideals) and diseases. Few articles have been linked to food consumption, global problems related to lack or abundance of food in Romania or elsewhere, rules and laws targeting the food industry. We can also add

that the main brands associated with food were those of large hypermarkets internationally (eg “Carrefour”, “Cora”, “Auchan” etc.).

4. The notion of “food” has thus been presented as a very topical issue, in direct relation to modern diets and healthy lifestyles, on one side, and diseases and health, on the other side. Once again, it should be noted that there is a lack of perspectives on nutrition and food in relation to the food industry, politics and the social system.

The present study has some limitation- the most important being the focus on a specific country (e.g. Romania). Despite this limitation we can conclude that the issue of media coverage of food and health deserves a closer attention at the level of media practitioners and communication experts.

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## РУМЪНСКОТО МЕДИЙНО ПОКРИТИЕ: МЕЖДУ ЕМОЦИОНАЛНИТЕ ДИЕТИ И РАЦИОНАЛНИТЕ МЕДИЦИНСКИ СЪВЕТИ

Валентина Маринеску

Букурещки университет, email: [vmarinescu9@yahoo.com](mailto:vmarinescu9@yahoo.com)

### РЕЗЮМЕ

Статията търси отговори на следните изследователски въпроси: „Какви са основните аспекти, свързани с темата „храна“, представена от румънските медии?“ „Как са обхванати темите, свързани с, храната“, в отделните статии, публикувани в румънските медии?“ Изследването е осъществено чрез метода „контент анализ“ върху статии, публикувани в румънските медии между 1 януари 2014 г. и 1 януари 2017 г.

Анализът на отразяването в румънските медии на храните показва минимално позоваване на научни доказателства в отразяване на тази тема - почти половината от всички статии не споменават личности или документи, когато представят темата за храната. Второ, акцентът на статиите е почти изключително върху отразяването на онези аспекти на храната, които са във връзка със здравето и болестите, храненето като цяло и болестите, свързани с храната и храненето. Много по-малко покритие имат други аспекти и по-специално тези, свързани с производството на храни, с националното и европейското законодателство относно храните и храненето, с правата на потребителите върху храните и храненето.

**Ключови думи:** масмедийно отразяване, хранене, здраве, Румъния.

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