With the maturity of social media and the expansion of the Internet, the web now serves as an advocacy tool that cultivates conversation and distributes information about food in American school systems. Websites such as Facebook and YouTube have profoundly altered the way in which people share information about food, particularly in schools. Even a picture on Twitter of someone’s lunch can be illuminating, revealing the habits and tastes of the eater. Blogs and various social media sites generate particularly important dialogues about nutrition in U.S. schools—dialogues that are occasionally broadcasted nationally, sparking a conversation between food marketers, consumers, suppliers, congressional leaders, and young students. This paper will explore changing attitudes towards nutrition in the U.S. school system and how the Internet has contributed to this transformation. Furthermore, this paper will encourage a deeper analysis into the decisions, regulations, and policies that drive school nutrition.

**The Social and Cultural Importance of Food**

In the article “Reading the Food Social Movement,” New York University professor Marion Nestle argues that the combined efforts of cooks, scholars, and journalists have created “a revolution in the way Americans consume, think about, and produce food” (38). Nestle asserts that famed American Chef Julia Child and food studies scholars Sidney Mintz and Eric Schlosser have most powerfully demonstrated the political dimensions of food. While Nestle credits Child for encouraging Americans to demand better quality in food products, she praises Mintz for his research on the history of sugar, which showed how this basic ingredient has political and economic histories that influence world politics. Nestle also commends Schlosser for shedding
light on the intersection of food and politics, and converting his readers “into advocates eager to change the current food system into one that is better for producers as well as eaters” (39).

These formative players in the food discipline have demonstrated food’s cultural and social importance. They also illustrated how food is not merely a means of survival or a source of fuel, but a culinary art, experience, and place for criticism about national and global politics and regulations.

THE DIALOGUE ON OBESITY

Although the work of these figures has improved Americans’ understandings on food and nutrition, one issue continues to remain at the forefront of food dialogues and scholarship today: childhood obesity. In the 1990s, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was alarmed by statistical evidence found in a National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey that showed a spike in “high cholesterol, hypertension, respiratory ailments, orthopedic problems, depression and type 2 diabetes” amongst children (U.S. Department of Health). The survey also showed that the “number of adolescents who are overweight... tripled since 1980 and the prevalence among younger children... more than doubled” (U.S. Department of Health). More recent studies reveal that from 1980 to 2008, obesity jumped from five percent to seventeen percent (U.S. Department of Health). HHS tried to account for this shift, saying “there are a number of root causes of obesity in children. Selecting one or two main causes or essential factors is next to impossible given the current data, because the potential influences of obesity are multiple and intertwined” (U.S. Department of Health). HHS, however, reported one noticeable trend in obese children: the fact that many children with health issues consumed most meals outside the home. They found that children’s “intake from outside-the-home food sources
increased from 20 to 32 percent from 1977-1978 to 1994-1996” at the same time that portion sizes of meals increased between 1977 and 1996 (U.S. Department of Health). A similar result was found in children who ate more salty snacks outside the home that increased in size from 1.0 to 1.6 ounces as well as soft drinks that increased in size from 12.2 to 19.9 ounces (U.S. Department of Health). Regina Benjamin, Surgeon General of the United States, warned that “The nation’s childhood overweight and obesity rates, if not corrected, may dramatically impact the quality and longevity of life for an entire generation of children” (“Childhood Obesity”).

**THE MOVEMENT TO IMPROVE SCHOOL HEALTH**

As part of “The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity,” Benjamin proposed regulations that would increase physical education in schools, provide healthier food alternatives at school lunches, and supply communities with recreational facilities accessible to students of all ages (“Overweight and Obesity”). With over 50 million children attending school daily, Benjamin asserted that classrooms should be a place for students to not only learn about health, but practice healthy behaviors (“Childhood Obesity”). She said, “Well-designed school programs that promote physical activity and healthy eating can reduce the rate of obesity among children and teenagers and improve academic achievement” (“Childhood Obesity”). Working with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Benjamin designed several wellness programs to combat childhood obesity.

British chef and fresh food advocate Jamie Oliver reinforced similar ideas in his 2010 TED talk, explaining that nutrition in schools plays an important role in children’s health. In this talk, Oliver boldly (and erroneously) claimed that “we, the adults of the last four generations, have
blessed our children with the destiny of a shorter lifespan than their own parents. Your child will live a life ten years younger than you because of the landscape of food that we’ve built around them” (Oliver). Oliver blames a host of agents for this problem, including big-brand food companies that mislabel products, distort products’ portion-size, and fill foods with unhealthy additives that have become a regular part of the national food landscape. Although big food corporations and supermarkets certainly play a role in childhood obesity, Oliver argues that one of society’s leading failures is the lack of healthy foods produced and distributed in schools. According to Oliver, students eat an average of two out of three meals at school where they consume “highly processed fast foods” and few fresh ingredients (Oliver). He complains that at some schools, French fries were unfairly categorized as vegetables (Oliver). In his lecture, Oliver also recounted stories of children who suffered death and disease related to obesity, ultimately advocating for better lunches and nutritional programs in schools. Oliver’s talk at the annual TED conference in Long Beach, California reached millions of viewers on TED T.V., effectively using social media as a platform to enact social change with food.

**The Let’s Move! Campaign**

Another public figure trying to improve health education in American schools is First Lady Michelle Obama. Obama created the *Let’s Move!* Campaign, which funds programs in schools that teach students about a range of topics from the nutritional facts of desserts to portion control. Surgeon General Benjamin, a strong supporter of Obama’s campaign, praised the *Let’s Move!* Program, believing that it will “help families make healthier food and physical activity choices, and better understand national and local trends...” (“Childhood Obesity”). The mission of the *Let’s Move!* Campaign is simple: to decrease childhood obesity and guide the current generation
to a healthy future ("Let’s Move!"). Through its streamlined website and accessible social media platforms, the *Let’s Move!* campaign demonstrates how leading a healthy lifestyle can be easy, fun, and adaptable.

The campaign’s website is divided into five subheadings with links explaining the mission statement of *Let’s Move!* and the history of obesity in America. The website includes links to information on exercise, nutrition, and strategic plans for parents, children, elected officials, chefs, and community leaders to promote healthy living. The *Let’s Move!* website is successful because it provides comprehensive advice, strategies, and resources written in clear language for readers of all ages. One particularly helpful link connects readers to the USDA’s “Dietary Guidelines for Americans,” which leads to an image entitled “MyPlate” that illustrates models of healthy meals as part of a balanced diet. The *Let’s Move!* website also provides helpful suggestions on how to eat and shop for healthy food on a budget. Beyond the initial page are sidebars for *Healthy Moms, Healthy Families, Healthy Schools, Healthy Communities* that offer useful information on nutrition as well. Additionally, the *Let’s Move!* blog provides articles, webinars, videos, and how-to-guides covering topics such as healthy eating during the holidays.

The *Let’s Move!* website and blog serve as centers for social change with hyperlinks and social media outlets that provide a valuable platform for discussions on nutrition.

**The Ed Bruske Project**

On a smaller scale but with a similar mission is Ed Bruske’s blog “The Slow Cook” (Bruske, “About the Site”). Bruske has had a long career in America as a chef and food expert. In addition to working as a personal chef for clients with special needs, he is co-founder of the
group D.C. Urban Gardeners and advisory board member of the D.C. Farm to School Network. Bruske also teaches “food appreciation” classes to children enrolled in an after-school program at Georgetown Day School. In 2010, Bruske spent a week at H.D. Cooke Elementary School’s kitchen in Washington, D.C., observing and advising school officials on food preparation for student meals. This experience likely informed Bruske’s six-part series of articles entitled “Tales from a D.C. School Kitchen,” which advocates for school lunch reformation. In this compilation of articles, Bruske covered a range of topics including cafeteria food waste and ways to “go green” in schools (Bruske, “Tales from a D.C. School Kitchen”). In all of his work as an author, blogger, and chef, Bruske believes that American consumers need to reclaim control over the food they consume. Bruske’s presence on the web has undoubtedly helped showcase and implement his forward-thinking initiatives on school nutrition. As of now, Bruske has nearly 1,000 followers who have posted his articles on Twitter and “liked” his posts on Facebook. Bruske, therefore, is another example of how the Internet can incite change and communication on the subject of nutrition in the nation.

**D.C. CENTRAL KITCHEN**

In line with the *Let’s Move!* Campaign and Bruske’s work on lunch reformation, D.C. Central Kitchen is a non-profit organization that promotes better nutrition among residents of our nation’s capital. One of their goals is to train unemployed men and women, specifically those who have struggled with homelessness, addiction, or incarceration, in the culinary arts. D.C. Central Kitchen has also established a food recycling program that provides leftover foodstuff to those less fortunate. Moreover, D.C. Central Kitchen funds a school food program that “serves 4,200 healthy, locally-sourced, scratch-cooked meals to 2,000 low-income D.C. schoolchildren


...every day” (DCCentralKitchen.org). On their website, the non-profit powerfully declares that “We use food as a tool to strengthen our community” (DCCentralKitchen.org).

To fulfill this goal, bloggers for D.C. Central Kitchen post messages daily on how to fight hunger and poor nutrition through education. Visitors to their website appear to be listening since the non-profit has accumulated over 8,000 followers on Twitter and nearly 5,000 “likes” on Facebook. The non-profit is also active on Twitter and Pinterest. Because of their advocacy through social media, the company has dramatically grown since their founding in 1989. They have attracted the support of many charities, whose donations make up thirty-six percent of their revenue (DCCentralKitchen.org). These donations have allowed D.C. Central Kitchen to deliver 5,000 meals to low-income children at 10 D.C. schools. Put simply, D.C. Central Kitchen, and its effective use of social media, proves that food can be instrument for change.

**Activism and Social Media**

Following in the footsteps of Michelle Obama, Ed Bruske, and D.C. Central Kitchen, American students have also utilized social media to foster social change with food. In the Pittsburgh suburb of Plum, Pennsylvania, students of the Plum Borough School District started a #BrownBagginIt movement on Twitter. These students used the hashtag #BrownBagginIt to protest buying school lunches and “low quality food,” tweeted one student (Attkisson). Plum Borough students were not alone in this movement. In the *New York Times* article “No Appetite for Good-for-You School Lunches,” Vivian Yee explains that the #BrownBagginIt movement collected the support of students across the country who took to Twitter and Facebook to get the attention of politicians on this issue. Parsippany Hills High School in New Jersey, for instance,
created a Facebook group with over 1,200 members encouraging students to boycott school lunches. In September 2012, students at Wallace County High School in Sharon Springs, Kansas also created a YouTube video entitled “We Are Hungry” that attracted over 1 million views and captured the attention of government officials in Washington, D.C. (“We Are Hungry”). Set to the music of “We are Young” by the band Fun, the song’s recurring chorus sings “set the policy on fire” in reference to the USDA’s new policies on school lunches that critics complained were too small and unsubstantial. The students of Wallace County High School and other schools across the country clearly made an impact because on Dec. 8, 2012, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack announced in a letter to Congress that the Department will change the school lunch policy and no longer include daily and weekly maximums of meats and grains in school lunches (Associated Press). Voicing their concerns on Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube, students are using the Internet in inventive ways to influence food policy.

**CONCLUSION**

Social media is a valuable platform with which to discuss food. Websites, Twitter feeds, and blogs are providing activists with a dynamic way to share and express new ideas about food. More specifically, the *Let’s Move!* Campaign, Ed Bruske’s work, the D.C. Central Kitchen, and the BrownBagginIt Twitter hashtag have inspired a productive dialogue on the subject of school nutrition. All of these food reformers show how social media is critical to impacting social policy on food. These reformers also reveal how the Internet can empower consumers and facilitate food activism. Although childhood obesity and school nutrition are still major issues in this nation, activists and their savvy employment of the Internet continue to improve school nutrition and influence the nation’s attitudes towards food.
Primary Sources


---. “Tales from a D.C. School Kitchen.”


Secondary Sources

