



## **Eating Green: Coverage of the Locavore Movement**

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**Abstract:** Various environmental, health, and food safety concerns have affected the purchasing decision of consumers and contributed to the growing demand for local produce and products, all of which can be found at local farmers markets. The research reported here adds knowledge about the media coverage regarding the role of farmers markets in local food consumption. Through a framing analysis of newspapers from eight different U.S. cities, the study revealed that four frames describe the coverage on the farmers markets and the buying local trend. Suggestions for Extension outreach efforts based on the locavore movement are offered.

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### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, the increase in consumer concerns regarding food origin, agricultural production methods, and food safety have changed the landscape of consumer purchasing decisions and contributed to the growing demand for local produce and products (Food Institute, 1995; Atkins & Bowler, 2001). In fact, most consumers today prefer locally grown food and are even willing to pay more for a local product (Darby, Batte, Ernst, & Roe, 2008).

Local food consumption has been defined as a product that is "made or produced within 100 miles" from home or a product that "has been made or produced in state"

(Hartman Group, 2008). The support and purchase of local products have become a commitment for many consumers; consumer desire for locally grown products has garnered so much attention that the new word of the year in 2007 was "locavore," which defines the consumer who eats food grown or produced within local limits, usually a 50 to 100 miles radius. "The 'locavore' movement encourages consumers to buy from farmers' markets or even to grow or pick their own food, arguing that fresh, local products are more nutritious and taste better" (OUP blog, p. 1).

The trend of purchasing locally grown food has been the reason for the growing popularity of "direct marketing models such as farmers markets, u-picks, and community supported agriculture" (Alkon, 2007, p. 1). Although one of the oldest forms of retailing, the resurgence of farmers markets presents continuous agricultural opportunity by providing farmers direct access to the local community of consumers (Abel, Thomson, & Maretzki, 1999; Kezis, Gwebu, Peavey, & Cheng, 1998; Wallgren, 2006). In addition, evidence of the effects of this trend on the agricultural industry is the significant growth of farmers markets in the United States over the last 12 years, "a 150% increase from 1994 through 2006" (AMS 2007 in Brown & Miller, 2008, p. 1296).

Reasons for the growth in farmers markets and demand for local products vary; however, commonly cited motives include community aspiration to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on food transportation; a desire for fresh, nutrient-rich food that does not require the amount of packaging and refrigeration; an appeal to lessen the environmental impact by saving the energy used to preserve and transfer products to supermarket shelves; and an interest in strengthening local communities by investing food dollars close to home (Halweil, 2002; Brown, 2002). In addition, the many benefits of farmers markets include that they "help establish connections between consumers and food producers, provide an additional income source for farmers, and in general, serve as a tool for community development" (Abel, Thomson, & Maretzki, 1999, p. 1).

## **Locally Grown Agendas**

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, heightened media attention on various environmental issues, sustainable lifestyles, and contemporary consumer food fads could also contribute to the increased consumer rhetoric and adoption of the locavore trend. Demonstrating the link in public awareness and media coverage on environmental issues, Hansen (1991) and Dunlap and Mertig (1992) suggest that "the environment first became a subject of media coverage in the 1960s, that such

coverage grew to an initial peak around 1970, and then receded to a higher-than-earlier-1960s plateau" (pg. 444). Hansen continues to suggest that following a decline in environmental media coverage in the mid-1980s, there has been a dramatic increase in media interest in the environment ever since. It appears that the media interest in the environment over the last decade corresponds with the significant change in consumer purchasing and lifestyles, which runs congruent to the concept of agenda setting.

Agenda setting suggests that the mass media has the ability to transfer the items on their news agenda to the public's agenda (McCombs, 1994). Agenda setting is "the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind" (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 240). Thus, if the news media covers farmers markets and local food consumption, then those issues become more salient to the public and are seen as important information and/or priority behaviors. Similar to several studies that have attempted to uncover the link between public awareness and media coverage on environmental issues, the study reported here investigated the media coverage with the intent of revealing the potentially ensuing public perception regarding farmers markets and the locavore movement. Although research on the growth of farmers markets currently exists, the relationship between the media coverage and the ensuing consumer conversation on farmers markets and buying local has not been investigated.

## **Research Questions**

Based on the literature presented, the study reported here sought to determine how newspaper coverage of the buying local trend might impact public knowledge and understanding of farmers markets and the trend of buying local. The study was conducted following the assumption that media discourse plays a significant role in developing public knowledge and understanding of the role farmers markets have in supporting the locavore movement. Therefore, the following research questions guided the investigation:

*RQ1: How has newspaper media coverage framed farmers markets and the locavore movement?*

*RQ2: What sources were relied on for the media coverage? And what frames are associated with those sources?*

*RQ3: Did the newspaper media coverage differ between metropolitan areas?*

## Methods

The analysis utilized framing analysis techniques to explore the print media coverage of farmers markets and the buying local movement. The theoretical framework for the investigation, agenda-setting theory, is closely associated to the concept of framing, which is "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration" (McCombs, 1999).

Framing is the process that allows the media to present or package information in a way that influences the way the audience comes to understand the issue. Framing is based on the perspective that news is a function that helps explain and shape public perceptions of an event (Entman, 1993). This is accomplished through the use of frames by the media. "Frames are principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6). These frames, though discreet, organize the world into identifiable/understandable schema for both journalists and those who rely on journalists for information (Gitlin, 1980).

In short, framing provides an explanation of the power of text and is a useful research tool for uncovering the elements—such as keywords, sources of information, symbols—that create shortcuts people use to understand the world (Entman, 1993). Therefore, the study reported here viewed framing as an insightful tool to use in exploring the media coverage and prospective public perception regarding farmers markets and the locavore movement.

The framing analysis employed included coverage from the following eight major metropolitan newspapers: *Albany Time Union*, *Denver Post*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The Oakland Tribune*, *Washington Times*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and *Tulsa World*. The selection was based on the rankings of green cities in the 2008 US Cities Sustainability Ranking by SustainLane, which used data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on farmer's markets and community gardens to create rankings. Green cities were chosen due to the assumption that the salience of local food and agriculture to that metropolitan region would provide a robust sample of media coverage to analyze. In addition, those cities that were included in the green cities ranking were assumed to be able to provide a benchmark for those cities that did not find themselves included in the ranking. The coverage time of the analysis was 12 months, from January 1, 2008 until January 1, 2009.

Due to relevance of sustainable living and local food consumption to all geographic areas, newspapers were purposively chosen based on the local food and agriculture rating of their respective city (must have ranked in the top 50 cities by SustainLane), their circulation size, their geographic/regional location, their open access online, and their daily coverage. Articles during the sampling time frame were gathered from WestLaw Campus Research database using the search terms "sustainable consumption," "farmers markets," "green foods," "locavore," and "local foods." The search resulted in 99 articles: 11 from the *Albany Times Union*, three from the *Denver Post*, 12 from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 27 from *Oakland Tribune*, six from the *Washington Times*, 10 from the *Dallas Morning News*, 13 from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and 17 from *Tulsa World*. Due to the limited amount of articles that resulted from the search, all 99 articles were analyzed for the study.

The articles were analyzed for information including the newspaper organization, the headline, the length of the article, the month and day in which the article was published, the types of sources used within the article, the overall tone of the article, and the dominant frames of the article. In determining the categories and possible frames, the research team (two coders) examined 10.1% (10 articles) of the articles, during which they also achieved agreement of coding techniques and strategies prior to coding the entire sample.

## Results

### **RQ1: How Has Newspaper Media Coverage Framed Farmers Markets and the Locavore Movement?**

The purpose of the study was to determine the way in which the media framed the role of farmers markets in the buying local trend. As anticipated, the majority of the articles analyzed conveyed a positive tone and were informative in purpose. Although the media coverage of farmers markets and the buying local movement was diverse, the research team uncovered four common themes that emerged from the analysis: product awareness, economic support, quality counts, and price negotiation.

#### ***Product Awareness***

The first frame simply refers to the numerous articles that featured local products and highlighted their availability at local farmers markets. Some of these articles featured local products by supplying background information on the product, providing recipes to demonstrate the many uses of the product, and listing the

variety of products available at the local farmers market. Everything from watermelon to honey, and quince to red peppers was featured in articles. A few articles listed the availability of seasonal products, while others communicated the variety of products available, referring to the farmers market as a "one-stop shop" or "gardeners' paradise."

Terms used in the products awareness frame included "accessibility," "variety," "local harvest," "availability," and "choice." The most common way to highlight a product was to provide background on the product in regard to growth and nutritional information and then provide a useful aspect of the product whether through a recipe or functional suggestion.

### ***Economic Support***

The economic support frame focused on the increasing desire of consumers to buy local products. In fact, many articles used the term "locavore" to describe the consumer who primarily eats locally grown products and ingredients. Many articles that highlighted consumer support of the local economy also used terms like "local," "sustainable," "environmentally-responsible," "one-block diet," and "support."

Sustaining the economic support frame were many feature stories on restaurants that highlight local products on their menu or have chefs who frequent farmers markets for their weekly fare. In fact, an article in the *Albany Times Union* exemplifies this angle by quoting a local chef, "It's a chef's dream to get the chance to visit local farms and go to farmers markets to select the finest local ingredients. There are so many great farms in this region and we keep finding new ones." Similarly, an article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* elaborates on the value of this practice, "It's just great to see that there are chefs that are open to using locally produced foods in the restaurants and at the same time educating the general public about where your food is coming from."

Most articles from the economic support trend mention the value of supporting your local economy by purchasing local consumer products found at farmers markets. The assumption of this frame was that the practice of buying local products supports not only local agriculture but the local community as a domino effect. In fact, an article in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* explained this assumption, "The success of local farmers can also help the local economy, revitalize rural communities and help local farm families."

### ***Quality Counts***

The quality counts frame supported the notion that locally grown products, especially those available at farmers markets, have increased taste, nutrition, and freshness. Terms used in this frame included "natural," "fresh," "nutritious," "flavor-filled," "juicy," "healthy," "top-quality," "control," "organic" and "safe." There were several different substantial components to the quality counts frame.

Health concerns were a large component of the quality frame, labeled as everything from a panacea for childhood obesity to a playground of functional foods. Some articles focused on the organic nature of local foods; in fact, one source used in a *Memphis Commercial Appeal* article mentioned that the underlying reason "is healthier food—we're tired of food that has tons of sodium, preservatives and all the nasty stuff they put in food that you don't have to be eating." While other articles featured programs and government policies that were intended to require healthier foods in schools, many times pointing to farmers markets as a potential source for these foods. As evidenced in the *Albany Times Union*, a staff writer wrote, "New York farmers want school kids to eat their fruits and vegetables and drink plenty of milk—if it comes from the Empire State."

The second component of the quality frame included a focus on freshness. Fresh food was recurrently associated with enhanced quality. Most articles mentioned that freshness was the primary reason for purchasing local products. Further, freshness was attributed to the shortened processing and transportation time as well as the lack of preservatives typically used to increase shelf life of produce. Many articles implied that quality is more important than price in consumer purchasing decisions and that quality is the distinguishing factor when buying from farmers markets. As one source used in *The Oakland Tribune* suggests, "You don't have to have any food ideology when the flavor and quality [of local foods] are so evident."

### ***Price Negotiation***

Price negotiation was the only frame that implied a negative aspect of the locavore movement; however, this frame refers to the framing of price in two different ways, creating sub-frames of the larger price negotiation frame. The first sub-frame suggested that consumers can save money by shopping at farmers markets. The evidence provided to support this frame primarily included reduced costs from the shortened supply chain and the ability to buy and freeze/can the products. For example, the following excerpt from the *Albany Times Union* insinuates that it is financially wise to purchase local products: "New York farmers are making some headway these days because it's getting prohibitively expensive, as fuel costs rise,

to import products from distant places such as California and China." Furthermore, an excerpt from *The Oakland Tribune* suggested, "It just feels wrong not to load up on cheap local produce while it's fresh . . . the alternative is paying more in fall and winter for fruits and vegetables that have been trucked or flown great distances before landing limply in the grocery cart."

While many reasons are given to support this cost-saving sub-frame, most articles refer to the lower costs as an economically conscious choice, "With the economy being terrible right now, people are really concerned about buying and affording food . . . farmers markets are packed with both late summer and early winter crops at an affordable price."

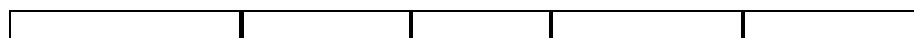
The second sub-frame presented the notion that prices at farmers markets were on the rise and that consumers would pay more for the benefits that farmers markets offered. However, increased costs were often justified or explained with the rising prices that farmers are facing. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal*'s article, "Feeling the Squeeze," includes an exemplary excerpt:

Rising oil and natural gas prices have hit farmers in myriad ways: dramatic cost increases for fertilizers and animal feed; higher charges for plastic supplies for greenhouses and irrigation systems for fields; larger energy bills for heating greenhouses and soaring prices for diesel used to fuel farm equipment and the trucks used to carry their products to the markets. Even the plastic bags they put their products in are more expensive this year. Many farmers have had no choice but to pass the rising costs to their consumers.

The price negotiation frame presents two different angles to the buying local investigation, which is evident in the contrast terms used to communicate this frame. Words like "save," "cost-savings," "expensive," "supply and demand," "inflation," and "fuel costs" were all associated with the price negotiation frame.

The frequency of each of the dominant frames—economic support, quality counts, price negotiation, product awareness—is reported in Table 1. As recorded, the product awareness frame was the most commonly used frame; economic support, quality counts, and price negotiation frames subsequently followed.

**Table 1.**  
Dominant Frames Frequency by Newspaper



Newspaper	Economic Support	Quality Counts	Price Negotiation	Product Awareness
<i>Albany Times Union</i>	5	5	2	1
<i>Memphis Commercial Appeal</i>	5	4	4	5
<i>The Oakland Tribune</i>	3	4	2	10
<i>Minneapolis Star Tribune</i>	5	4	0	0
<i>Tulsa World</i>	3	4	0	4
<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	0	0	1	1
<i>Washington Times</i>	2	0	0	2
<i>Denver Post</i>	0	1	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>26</b>

**RQ2: What Sources Were Relied on for Media Coverage Surrounding Local Food Consumption? And What Frames Are Associated with Those Sources?**

Although many different types of sources were used to cover the trend of buying from farmers markets, findings reveal that local growers and producers (farmers) were used most often. Typically, farmers conveyed information on the effects of the buying local trend on their operations and the products that they sold. A few articles used farmers to communicate how economic pressures have affected their business and how those pressures were passed on to consumers. A close second to farmers was the food business owner source. The high frequency of this category was primarily caused by the use of restaurant owners and chefs who often commented on their use of local products to differentiate their restaurants and support/recognize their local farmers/suppliers. Following both the farmer and food business owner was the consumer source. Sources used in the capacity of consumer ranged from

mothers who served as the primary shopper for their household to food bloggers. Consumers typically served as advocates for buying local, citing a variety of reason for their advocacy. The total number and type of sources used are included in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
Source Frequency

Source of Information	Total
Consumer	9
Grower/Producer (Farmer)	21
Food Business Owner	17
State Political Leader	2
Local Political Leader	1
Agricultural Agency Representative	8
Food Distributor/Wholesaler	7
Food Nutrition Expert/Scientist	4
Other	15

Although the association of source and frame was not as apparent as anticipated by the research team, the farmer source was clearly more common to the price frame, while the food business owner was more common to the economic support frame and the consumer to the quality frame.

### **RQ3: Did the Media Coverage of Sustainable Consumption Differ Between Metropolitan Areas?**

Because eight different newspaper outlets were covered in the analysis, the research team believed it would be important to compare the coverage between the eight newspaper outlets with the intent to uncover differences in regional coverage. One of the most obvious differences in coverage was the number of relevant articles that resulted from the search. Aside from the difference in coverage amount, the only differences that emerged from the analysis was the tendency of the outlets from the western region of the United States, *The Oakland Tribune* and the *Denver Post*, to feature or highlight local products with the purpose to increase product awareness.

However, there did not seem to be a significant difference between regional areas and the ensuing coverage.

## Conclusion

Framing analyses have limited value if the findings do not provide implications as well as recommendations for research and practice in the area of investigation. Therefore, the following implications and recommendations provide a foundation for further academic dialogue and inquiry as well as provide insight for Extension professionals working with both consumer and farmer/producer audiences.

One of the most significant implications of the study arises from the price negotiation frame that emerged from the coverage. As previously explained, price (or cost) was mentioned in two different ways throughout the articles analyzed; farmers market purchases were presented as a cost-savings behavior as well as a venue that can be more expensive than its supermarket counterpart. These conflicting frames of price could cause consumer confusion surrounding the fiscal value of buying locally grown products. As a result of the current economic climate, many consumers are tightening budgets and finding ways to cut costs; therefore, most consumers are extremely price conscious, which could cause some consumers to develop an inaccurate perception on the costs associated with locally grown foods.

To check the validity of both price claims, further investigation is needed to compare and contrast the economic sense of buying from a local farmers market as opposed to supermarket shopping. Although research from the University of Seattle shows that the prices at most farmers markets might actually be lower than at traditional grocery stores, additional research that compares the prices at farmers markets with those at grocery stores would provide the consumer concrete evidence that answers the price negotiation debate. In addition, it is important for Extension professionals to recognize this potential consumer confusion and incorporate the message of price (e.g. variables, value, context) into communication surrounding farmers markets through workshops, seminars, and marketing collateral.

Another noteworthy implication relevant to the buying local trend includes those associated with the economic support frame. It is unclear whether the buying local trend will continue to prosper; however, whether the locally grown trend creates short-term or long-term demands on local farmers, Extension professionals and agriculture communicators should proactively promote the advantages of local farmers markets rather than reactively meet the demands of local consumer trends. In fact, farmers, too, could benefit from the buy local trend. Govindasamy, Italia,

and Adelaja (2002) suggest that farmers markets offer that agricultural community an opportunity to increase profit margins with a direct-to-consumer model, which is especially important with increasing production costs. In agreement, Macias proposes that "large-scale farmers transitioning into sustainable production, for example, may begin to see the financial advantages of direct-market sales in local food systems . . . also fostering face-to-face, 'embedded' relationships between farmers and consumers" (2008, p. 1086). Many times serving as a liaison between the farming community and consumers, Extension professionals can encourage both audiences to participate in the locavore movement fostering a much-needed familiarity and appreciation for each other.

Apparent in the data is the consistent use of local farmers as sources for media coverage. This finding reveals the importance of media training for farmers. Due to their sought-after experience and opinion, farmers could be used as a way to deliver consistent messaging for the Extension system and could certainly enhance consumer awareness of the importance of and value in supporting local agriculture. Nonetheless, is the local farmer a source that the consumer will consider as credible? This raises an important question and potential area for further investigation; should Extension professionals rely on the farming community to serve as a source of food-related information for a consumer audience? Providing the media with trained and articulate sources for relevant coverage can be an important role for the Extension professional.

The prevalence of the product awareness frame suggests that media outlets as well as media consumers are interested in feature stories that highlight local products and their use. An article that follows a product from field to fork or a column that underscores functional aspects of local products might be particularly relevant to achieve this frame while instilling an appreciation for food in consumers. In sum, agriculture communicators and Extension professionals could use this frame as a guide for media efforts by pitching stories that highlight local products, cooking ideas, and cooking demonstrations. In fact, some food organizations have already implemented programs like the 100-mile challenge or one-block diet as a way to increase awareness of local products and change behaviors in favor of local consumption (Coster, 2007).

Finally, in regard to communication surrounding local support of agriculture, the quality counts frame suggests that locavores are most concerned with the quality of their products, which would mean that a campaign that spotlights the safety, the availability, the taste, and the freshness of products may attract more consumers to

join the farmers market trend. Additionally, the use of local, reputable chefs as third-party advocates for farmers markets would be a possible route for campaign spokespersons. Local chefs have already established community credibility as well as an inherit expertise in food, which are ideal characteristics for campaign spokespersons. In addition, local mothers could be used as possible spokespersons to establish the family-friendly pathos of farmers markets and to present the benefits of locally grown products.

The buying local trend resembles an agricultural system of yesteryear, where food was a part of daily discourse and where consumers were active in the consumption process and concerned with the origin and composition of their food. The increase in demand across the U.S. for locally grown products "tends to support the notion that people are becoming more aware of and involved in local agricultural production" as well as other societal benefits (Macias, 2008, p. 1086). For this reason, the "locavore" movement provides ample opportunity for Extension professionals to create awareness of local agriculture, promote Extension programming, as well as support state and locally run farmers markets (Burrows, 2008). In sum, "From education to advocacy, from research to advising, Extension educators have multiple roles to play in promoting the growth of farmers' markets" (Abel, Thomson, & Maretzki, 1999, para. 26).

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