SEARCHLIGHTS & SUNGLASSES
LEARNING LAYER

Track consumption with a media diary

One the first tools nutritionists give their clients is a food diary. In it, dieters record everything they eat during the day. Online versions calculate calories as you go. Let's spin off of the idea of news as "brain food."

Choose from these student activities:

Flashlight: Using this example of a food diary, students will develop their own media diary. Entries should specify the "media meals," such as "Morning snack, 10 a.m., 45 minutes of Good Morning America." Have students assign a "nutritional information value" to each entry, a scale of 1 to 5, "1" being almost no information to "5" being high-value information. After a week, students discuss:
1) Do you have a healthy media diet ?
2) What should you cut back on or consume more of?
3) Do you "eat" too much of the same media?
4) Why is your diet the way it is?

Spotlight: Designed by a cardiologist, the South Beach Diet limits "bad carbohydrates." In addition to sugary sweets and alcohol, dieters must do without potatoes, pasta, rice, bread and more for the first two weeks. The diet promotes vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean proteins. What would a "South Beach Diet for News" look like? A healthy food diet promotes physical health: What does a healthy news diet promote?

Searchlight: The author defines good journalism with the acronym FACT, the Fair, Accurate, Contextual search for Truth. Bad journalism, he says, is the opposite: unfair, wrong, sensational and false. (FACT is a shortened version of the principles of journalism created after four years of research by the Committee of Concerned Journalists.)

Have each student find a news story that was told by two different outlets. Create two "nutrition labels" for each story, one using FACT criteria, the other translating that into food language, like protein, fat, etc. Don't forget the vitamins! Post the best of these "nutritional news label infographics" on a class blog.

Extra Credit: After reviewing this "healthy eating pyramid," students design their own media diets and stick to them for a month. They do "before and after" videos in the style of a television infomercial, touting the effects of their diets. After viewing the videos, discuss with the class the questions raised in a piece on "Unhappy Meals" in the New York Times by food journalist Michael Pollan. Dieting people often take on a new diet to replace nutrients lost from the original weight loss. Did that happen with the media diets?

Bonus discussion questions: Webster defines truth as "that which is true or in accordance with fact or reality." But people can look at the same fact and say it represents different realities. Professor Jonathan Haidt argues that people are intuitive rather than rational. In the food world, would the "search for truth" mean turning the package around to look at the nutrition label? Or is the "truth" of food how real, natural or authentic it is and not a list of ingredients?