

Big Food Inc. will do everything to stop you talking about this

Interview with Robert Kenner

By [Laura Sevier](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

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Filmmaker Robert Kenner's documentary Food Inc has shocked audiences across the US with its stark portrayal of industrial agriculture. And that's just the bits the lawyers let you see...

This is not a film about food: it's a film about rights

Laura Sevier: What inspired you to make the film about the food industry?

Robert Kenner: I had read Eric Schlosser's book Fast Food Nation and Michael Pollan's Omnivore's Dilemma. I realised I knew so little about where food comes from and how much our food systems had been changed.

The illusion is that food comes from a farm with a white picket fence and barns but it's not. It's from huge mega factories where tens of thousands of animals are confined in one space. Waste used to be fertiliser - now it's a pollutant. The pieces of the system no longer make sense.

LS: Did you set out to listen to all sides of the story - from organic farmers to Monsanto?

RK: I thought it would be interesting to talk to everyone - food companies, industrial and organic farmers and have a conversation about how we can feed the world.

Little did I know how off-limits the food world would become and how much industry does not want you talking about this subject. I went from one company to the other - in the film you only see ten or so but actually there were dozens that did not want to talk to us.

I realised the system was off limits. Ultimately in the US food products have started to have more rights than we as individuals. There are laws in place to protect companies - known as 'veggie libel' laws - that stop you from insulting a product or endangering profits of a corporation. [Food libel laws or food disparagement laws exist in 13 US states]

LS: Can you tell me about the legal challenges you faced with this film?

RK: The irony is that it's more frightening to talk about it here than in the States. I didn't realise what we faced until we talked to Barbara Kowalczyk, a food safety advocate whose son died having contracted E-coli from a tainted hamburger. She mentioned what happened to Oprah Winfrey who, on a program about BSE in 1996, expressed concern about the safety of eating hamburgers. [Texas ranchers sued Winfrey under a food libel law, although in

1998 the [jurors rejected](#) the \$11 million dollar defamation lawsuit.]

I ended up spending more legal fees on this film than the past 15 films combined – times three! The world of corporate food is a very litigious world. They will do everything to stop you from getting people to think about this subject. It made my life very frightening. If I'd known all this before I started out, I might have had second thoughts about making this film.

We went through the film and thoroughly fact-checked every single statement.

I took things out of Food Inc that I thought were true but [over which] I didn't want to spend time in court.

LS: Did legal opposition from various companies force you to edit out parts of the film?

RK: No-one forced me to but there was always the inherent threat. In our attempt to reach companies we'd call and say, 'We're talking about so and so. Don't you want to comment?'

With Carole Morison, the chicken farmer who worked for Perdue Farms – she said she's immune to antibiotics and that she had been feeding her chickens a feed additive made from arsenic (as requested by Perdue).

We spoke to Perdue who said: 'we stopped doing that [arsenic] a day or two ago so Carole is incorrect.' They defended the practice in the recent past! I took out that bit from the film to err on the side of caution.

LS: What was the most shocking aspect of making the film?

RK: There were two things. One was early on when we went to a hearing about whether to label cloned meat. A representative from the meat industry said it would be 'too confusing for the consumer'. I realised I had entered an Orwellian world where people are being 'protected' by not being told.

Then when I asked food safety advocate Barbara Kowalczyk what food she eats and she couldn't answer me or she'd be sued. I realised it was not a film about food: it was a film about rights. Seeing how food products now have more rights than individuals – that was more frightening than seeing how the food was produced.

LS: In the film there is a focus on the food system in the US – does the situation apply to the rest of the world?

RK: This is not a film about the US. I thought of filming in other countries and you could have been told the exact same story. It might have started in the US, but it is spreading. It's starting to happen here and it happens in Asia.

LS: How was Food Inc received in the US when it was released last year in June?

RK: It became one of the most successful documentaries of all time. The amount of press we got was really incredible. For a while we were the number one selling DVD on Amazon ahead of all the Hollywood movies.

It's very gratifying to see how much it played into growing food movements and how passionate people are and how it cuts across ideological lines. There is something about

food that does cut across ideological lines – we all have to eat!

LS: In the film you tell people to ‘vote with their fork’. Is consumer power enough to change this system? Obviously it’s a matter for the regulatory agencies too but as Food Inc reveals, the FDA and USDA are somewhat toothless...

RK: It’s a two-pronged battle. Consumers do have the power to vote three times a day. But you’ve also got to create a level playing field. Unfortunately if you’re subsidising food that’s not good for us it means that poor people are having to buy cheaper calories and these cheaper calories are making us sick. It also takes consumer consciousness to infringe this group. It’s never going to change unless we have a movement to help us change it.

As a common movement gains strength it’s able to put pressure on governments all over the world. Entrenched corporate power is only concerned with the very short term, in looking after its own bottom line. You can still make money selling healthy food too. We need to know how to put pressure on and pay the real costs of food. We all love cheap food – but we’re beginning to see the hidden cost of it.

LS: What do you hope people will take away from the film?

RK: That the system is unsustainable. We’ve created a world where we’re using up our natural resources and, in doing so, robbing our children and our grandchildren. We have to think about growing and producing food in a fairer way.

We have to return the balance of power towards individuals and away from the corporations. The film does show Walmart in a good light for helping to ban a growth hormone given to cattle to produce more milk.

We also need to figure out how to create another system. The current food system is all based on oil. If you believe in peak oil we’re going to run out at some point. We need to think about how to feed the world and what’s sustainable. People should have the right to know the consequences and the cost of the industrial food system.

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