

THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER | USC ANNENBERG
HOLLYWOOD, HEALTH & SOCIETY
Entertainment Education for Television, Movies & New Media

With Sweets Leading the Way, Food Has Starring Role on US Television

USC Research Previewed at Expo Milano 2015

Also Says “Fake News” on The Daily Show Has the Power to Improve Eating Habits

LOS ANGELES, CA and MILAN, ITALY, Sept. 8, 2015—Food, especially sugary foods and desserts, plays a leading role on American primetime TV entertainment, and satirical news on *The Daily Show* can change viewers’ eating habits for the better, according to new research from the **University of Southern California** released at **Expo Milano 2015**, the World’s Fair now under way in the commercial and cultural capital of Milan, whose theme is “Feeding the Planet/Energy for Life.”

The findings, from the **USC Annenberg School’s Norman Lear Center**, were previewed by Center director **Martin Kaplan** at *Hollywood and Dine: The Image and Impact of Food in Entertainment*, a **USA Pavilion** symposium featuring legendary writer, producer and director **Norman Lear**; **Phil Rosenthal**, creator of *Everybody Loves Raymond* and the new PBS food and travel series *I’ll Have What Phil’s Having*; music scholar, food historian and USC professor **Josh Kun**; and renowned Los Angeles chef and James Beard Award winner **Sherry Yard**. **U.S. Ambassador to Italy John R. Phillips**, international cinema star **Maria Grazia Cucinotta**, an Ambassador for Expo Milano 2015, and **Geoffrey Cowan**, president of The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnyslands, opened the event.

The research, conducted by the Lear Center’s **Hollywood, Health & Society** program, comes from a content analysis of more than 1,300 episodes of the most-watched American TV shows over a 10-year period. It found that food was depicted in about eight out of 10 primetime episodes. Fruits and vegetables were shown onscreen as frequently as cookies, ice cream and other sugary foods. But when researchers analyzed the food that characters were shown *eating*, desserts were consumed more often than healthy food. In comedies, sugary food was eaten nearly two-and-a-half times more often than fruits and vegetables. “We know from other research that viewers are influenced when characters similar to themselves model healthy or unhealthy behavior,” said Kaplan, adding, “Is it any wonder that America has a giant sweet tooth?”

Researchers also assessed the impact of so-called “fake news” on audiences. In a 1,600 person sample, one group watched a segment of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* about the food industry’s conflicting messages about nutrition. Others viewed a video or a print news story with the same information, but without the satire. Compared with those who saw the straight video or print stories, initial findings indicate that viewers of the *Daily Show* story remembered more information; became more cynical about the food industry, but were more optimistic about changing it; and a month later were eating more fruits and vegetables.

Hollywood, Health and Society research specialist Erica Rosenthal led the studies, along with Kaplan, Lear Center project administrator Adam Amel Rogers and HH&S program director Kate Langrall Folb. For more information about the findings, go to www.usc.edu/hhs.