

## **No More Stitch-Ups! Developing Media Literacy Through Fat Activist Community Research**

**By Dr Charlotte Cooper**

***Summary:** It is very common for fat activists to get stitched-up, or manipulated negatively, by the media in the West. Media makers use a number of unethical techniques to undermine people. The effect of this can be traumatising, and people get burned out and stop engaging with media. Activists have some strategies for resisting media abuse but generally have low expectations about anything good coming from it. Larger social forces affect why fat activists get stitched-up in the media. There are a lot of social repercussions that arise from widespread media dismissal of alternative voices concerning fat, and some potential tactics for change.*

The situation for many fat people has become untenable. Fat activists are struggling for change, for new ways of living fat, because without that change we fear that we will die. When we decide to go public with our ideas, to engage with media, we are engaging in a life or death fight. But to people unaware of this struggle, fat is a story of eating fewer calories and exercising more, it is a trivial affair exacerbated by stereotypes that position fat people as funny, pitiful, disgusting. Fat people are therefore ludicrous when viewed through this devastating lens, and this is why we make sensational media subjects and are often in demand by exploitative and ill-informed media makers.

At the same time, fat activism offers powerful insights about human embodiment, social justice, health, and much more. Through their ignorance, affiliation with weight loss, and exploitative approach, media workers are missing out on great stories that have the potential for profound human benefit. These public informers are simply not doing their job and I am frustrated with the limited, clichéd and hateful portrayals of fat activism they are producing, which do not represent the movement as I know it. As media continues to go through intense change as a result of new digital technologies, journalists and producers need substantial stories more than ever to survive in a competitive marketplace. There is great unfulfilled potential for developing mutually supportive relationships between activists and media makers, but this requires shifts in practise and approach, on both sides.

At the end of May 2013 I invited fat activists within my social networks to participate in a survey about how they are treated when they engage with media makers. I was inspired to do this following years of my own dismal experiences in the UK, where I live, and elsewhere, and because some friends of mine had recently been stitched-up by a TV company. I knew we weren't alone. Fat activists have been getting stitched-up in public for as long as there have been fat activists. Llewellyn Louderback, author of *Fat Power*, one of the first books about fat activism, told me that one of the reasons he did not continue to be speak publicly about fat was because of the shoddy treatment he received by some interviewers when his work was first published (Louderback 1970, Cooper 2011). Since then many fat activists

have had difficult encounters with media, some of which is documented (Freespirit 1983, Freespirit 1986, sizeoftheocean 2013). I wanted to explore how media workers abuse their power in reporting fat, and encourage people to share their strategies for negotiating encounters with media. It is my belief that better representation would not only benefit activists, but reinvigorate journalism in this field and help develop more expansive ways of thinking about bodies. I hoped that publishing the results of a survey could help change things. I also wanted to reflect on my own professional identity as a freelance journalist alongside the social positioning and ethical implications of that role.

Fatspolitation is a significant part of media output in the UK, especially at certain times of year when weight loss corporations intensify their marketing to exploit people's body anxieties. This is not surprising given that weight loss corporations contribute advertising revenue to media corporations. This paper is not about fat people's media portrayal in its broadest sense, there is a growing body of interpretive literature about that within Fat Studies (see, for example Brown 2005, Sarbin 2005, Saguy and Almeling 2008, Rich 2011, Graves and Kwan 2012, Ganz 2012, Contois 2013). Instead it is about a particular kind of representation, it is concerned with what happens when fat activists criticise obesity discourse in public, often in news media. This type of media representation is significant because fat activists are the fat people being represented and they can have a direct effect on this representation. It is also significant because fat activists' critical voices are dangerous: they threaten weight loss corporations, they threaten valuable advertising contracts and they are also threatening to media that relies on that advertising. This type of representation therefore offers many tensions. No wonder Big Media (established, dominant, corporate, mainstream media outlets that have a large audience reach) consistently reproduces the belief that there is only one way of understanding fatness, that anti-obesity rhetoric is unavoidable and that fat activism is an absurd endeavour. In denigrating fat activism, Big Media is protecting its interests.

What follows is a write-up of the survey responses. I start with a brief note about my methodology and go on to discuss the sample. Most of this paper is concerned with the answers to the survey's main questions:

- How did they [media] stitch you up?
- What effect did [your treatment by the media] have?
- In terms of representing fat people and issues relating to fat activism, or critical approaches to 'obesity', what advice do you have for media makers?
- What advice do you have for other people thinking of talking about fat in the media?
- What else would you like to say?

Towards the end of the paper I discuss some of the implications of the survey results in terms of practical possibilities for change.

This is a piece of community research and, like all research, is a product of the researcher's interests rather than a snapshot of reality. It may resonate with readers

in some places but not all. I hope that it is useful but, in reading this paper, please note that it is not a universal blueprint for managing media invitations. There are no hard and fast rules that will ensure a successful outcome, each encounter is different, and fat activists' experiences will vary according to factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability, class and so on. Further work is needed that addresses the effects of these intersections on fat activists' media engagement.

This piece of work is aimed primarily at supporting fat activists as people in the public eye. It is also aimed at people who work in media industries, activists more generally, and anyone interested in the dynamics of media production, representation of minority views, and mass communication. I hope that researchers will take note of my methodology and consider the political ramifications of their work, and I encourage activists to consider developing their own research agendas. In this way, this paper is also aimed at advocates of Research Justice and those interested in knowledge production beyond the traditional boundaries of academia.

## **Methodology**

By methodology I mean the methods I used to collect the data, and the philosophical assumptions and practical reasons behind my decision to use those methods.

The purpose of the survey was to find out about and share people's experiences of talking about fat in the media, particularly instances where people have felt cheated or misrepresented by media workers. By media I meant a broad range of public platforms.

I introduced the idea of the survey with a blog post about my friends' experience on TV, and my own history of being misrepresented as a fat activist (Cooper 2013). I hoped this would contextualise the kinds of stories I was looking for.

My choice of methods was based on practical considerations. I used an online survey generator to collect data, namely SurveyMonkey. I worked with relatively few resources: I was just one person producing this work, I am on a low income and I am not supported by a university or research institution. SurveyMonkey's free service limits the number of questions users can ask, but it is sophisticated, and enabled me to reach a lot of people. I also made use of resources such as flexible working conditions, my computer and its software.

I publicised the survey through my online social networks, left it open for a week, and closed it to new entries when I felt that I had reached the limit of the amount of data I could handle.

I wanted to invite people to talk about their experiences in their own words in order to provide a rich picture of what it is like to be a fat activist engaging with media. This is a basic premise of qualitative research. So, after gathering some demographic data and asking some basic closed questions about the types of experiences people had with media, I asked some open-ended questions where participants could describe

what happened in their own way. I stripped out identifying details from this data and analysed it with some software called hyperRESEARCH to draw out themes and common experiences. My analysis forms the basis of this paper.

Because I am not part of an educational or research institution, I was not required to approach any ethics boards for approval of the study. However, to people taking part, I explained the purpose of the survey clearly, outlined my process, the benefits and risks of taking part, offered people the option of dropping out at any point, and ensured participants' confidentiality. I have used pseudonyms throughout.

## **The sample**

Sample refers to the group of people who responded to the survey.

28 people responded to my invitation to participate in the survey. I did not know everyone who participated, but they are connected to me through fat activist networks. Inevitably, this limits the demographic spread of the data, and 28 is a small sample, but it represents a peer group's experiences of engaging with media as a fat activist and gives a flavour of the kinds of encounters that arise. I encourage others to build on this work by gathering or generating more data from different demographics about fat activism and media work.

The sample are currently residents of the following countries:

USA 13 (46.5%)  
Australia 6 (21.5%)  
UK 5 (18%)  
Canada 1 (3.5%)  
Denmark 1 (3.5%)  
Bi-national (UK and USA) 1 (3.5%)  
No response 1 (3.5%)

Most of the participants were based in the USA, which reflects the readership of my blog and possibly indicates that there are more outlets with which fat activists are engaged than elsewhere, this might be because the movement is more of a known quantity and more present in media. Participants from Australia and the UK dominated the rest of the sample and one other European contributed, perhaps reflecting the English language bias of the survey. Overall, the participants represented the heavy Amerocentric and Western slant of fat activism as it is popularly understood, and which I have critiqued elsewhere (Cooper 2009).

I did not gather information about the sample's identities because free surveys using SurveyMonkey allow for only a limited number of questions and I could not fit this in, neither was I in a financial position to buy a paid account. There are good arguments to be made about the differing experiences of engaging with media workers as fat activists in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, class and so on, and I

encourage other researchers to take up this work. Meanwhile, readers should not assume that the sample consisted of straight, white, middle class men.

27 of the respondents thought of themselves as fat, one did not. This is significant because fat people, and fat activists, rarely get to tell their own stories, as the participants and I are doing here. Our voices are more often mediated in research by normatively-sized academics, for example, or through medical discourse.

The questionnaire was aimed at people who have had some experience of talking about fat in the media. The sample was largely polarised between relative newcomers and people who have a lot of experience of media engagement: 35% had had 1-5 experiences, and 32% had lost count of the number of times they had spoken to media.

I listed a wide range of media types: academic journal, advertisement, film, magazine, newspaper, photographs, radio, social media, television, website, wire service, zine. Engaging with media invariably meant being interviewed by someone. I wanted to include lots of different kinds of engagement. Newspapers were the most predominant outlets, with 75% of the 28 respondents saying they have appeared in them, and television came in second place, with 62%. This suggests that fat activists are being courted by Big Media, and that fat activism is being recognised as part of a bigger discussion about fat.

In thinking of their appearances in media, most respondents felt stitched-up some of the time (39%) with 20% most or every time. A minority, 10%, said that they had never felt stitched-up. These answers underscore the ambivalence that participants express in later answers, they have mixed feelings about their media appearances. People self-selected to participate, one of the drawbacks of using online surveys, so it could be that they are not typical of all encounters between fat activists and media. Nevertheless, the purpose of the survey was not to record how often people feel stitched-up, but to examine what happens when it does.

### **How did they [media] stitch you up?**

In their answers to this first question, the sample referred to many different kinds of media encounters, but also recalled a number of common strategies used to stitch them up.

Initial contacts from media workers, often researchers, were characterised by assurances given to inspire trust and confidence, though not everyone is drawn in by this, as Selena says: "I've had reality shows try to get me to help them recruit fat activists, but their assertions about interest in our 'message' was unconvincing". Nevertheless, if fat activists raise the issue that they have been treated poorly in the past, media makers often assert that they are different to other producers during the process of negotiating an appearance or an interview; they lay on the charm at this stage. Sara said that the programme makers for a TV show in which she appeared promised:

"[...] they wanted to do something different - that they wanted to represent a different perspective, that we'd be 'taken care of'."

But these early promises are often empty or unsustainable, and are easily broken when activists appear onscreen, on air, or in print. Rosa says that they: "had a promise of one thing and the reality was something else." Fat activists turn up for a live debate, for example, to find that the subject they had agreed to discuss has been changed at the last minute. This may be typical of the fast pace of modern media, and how higher-level editorial decisions affect the people providing the actual content, but it is nevertheless disconcerting and undermining to experience. Neither participant below reported that apologies or concessions were made when this happened. This practise gives the impression that one fat-related subject is the same as any other, and that the debates are interchangeable.

"Media telling me we're going to discuss one topic, say the so-called 'fat tax,' only to have the topic turn out to be something entirely different, say 'the cost of obesity to the NHS,' when I arrive at the studio." (Antoinette)

"It was a current affairs television show. I was told that the story would be about childhood obesity and stigma. In reality, the story mainly featured a bariatric surgeon who wanted to operate on teenagers." (Kate)

Swapping subjects at the last minute also implies that fat activists do not have areas of special expertise, and are similarly interchangeable.

Topics may change at the last minute without malice on the journalist or producer's part, but by far the biggest problem that fat activists face when speaking to media is selective editing that reinforces the media makers' fatphobic, sensationalist or ignorant agenda. This is the equivalent of presenting a debate or discussion where the outcome has already been decided, as Catherine explains here:

"The problem is not what we say, or don't say, but that many media makers, sadly, are desperate to hear what they already expect to hear about fatness. Even a carefully explained argument many well fall on deaf ears." (Catherine)

Media producers edit selectively to bolster their own agenda in a number of ways, via the use of quotes, or editing footage, or simply inventing ridiculous things, for example:

"I was quoted out of context." (Catherine)

"Usually they just twist my words and either make me seem pathetic or suggest I'm 'glorifying obesity.'" (Brenda)

"They just chopped the more valuable commentary for the sake of marketing bytes[sic]." (Donna)

"I would be edited down to a tiny (or no) sound bite that dilute or diffuse my message." (Sofia)

"On one occasion I was misquoted by having what I said taken out of context and moved around so it appeared that I was saying that trans women have it easier than fat people when what I actually said is that each group has its own unique oppressions even when they overlap." (Moxie)

"There was a promo for the programme in which a bouncy castle collapsed on a few of the other contestants. This was due to the fan coming out of the castle and not because there was too much weight in there. The programme suggested that they broke the castle." (Naomi)

"One newspaper journalist made things up. I did mention that I had had things thrown at me whilst riding my bike. They made up that I had had a sandwich thrown at me. I have never had a sandwich thrown at me." (Tina)

The use of simplistic anti-fat messages, or visual clichés such as headless fatties (Cooper 2007), are an important part of this selective editing, as is the framing of fat activists through other editorial choices, for example:

"Shitty headlines or photo caps [...] using a shit-tonne of puns and cutesy euphemisms to describe me or the show or event that I was promoting." (Chelsea)

"Lots of joking, punning headlines and visual fat jokes in illustrations of otherwise decent articles." (Selena)

"And I was one[sic] badgered by a foreign media crew to stand in front of a Fatburger." (Sofia)

"They may take surreptitious photos if they can, they may well take the least flattering photo they can. If you are nowhere near food when the photo is taken, then maybe they will Photoshop it. They can make things up, they can twist your words and intent, they can basically portray you however they want to portray you." (Tina)

Antoinette refers to this happening even when she has taken steps to avoid it:

"Television posting pictures of headless fatties behind me, when I have requested, in writing, that such images not be used in association with my appearance."

I will come back to the negotiations that fat activists make in dealing with media appearances later on.

A key presentation method that undermines fat activist voices is the use of the expert to represent the dominant view of obesity and act as a supposedly objective voice of reason and authoritative confidence. This positions the fat activist as someone without expertise, unreasonable, lacking in professional identity or power. Chelsea describes this process as: "Adding in interview subjects 'from the other side' to talk about how unhealthy fat is". The expert invariably brandishes high medical status within obesity discourse, or benefits professionally from the exploitation of fat people in other ways, perhaps as a member of an anti-obesity Non Governmental Organisation, or a representative from weight loss industries (they are not mutually exclusive). The experts are never fat themselves, fat people are objects of their organisations and institutions but never leaders or managers. The experts' normative embodiment reproduces the idea that expertise around fat is not to be found from fat people, and that the problem of fatness is both proposed and to be solved by thin people. In this context, fat people are reduced to their bodies instead of being seen as full human beings with intelligence and agency. As Steve states: "Most commonly they made the interview about me and my body instead of my expert opinion."

Fat activists who participate in media are often positioned as part of a debate against such experts, but this format is contentious. Media makers use debate to instigate a conflict between what they perceive to be polarised positions. Because of this polarisation, productive dialogue and consensus is rare; the debate instead is a gladiatorial spectacle for a bloodthirsty audience, it is a fight that produces winners and losers rather than dialogue. Debate implies a balanced discussion, but this is not an evenly balanced encounter; Antoinette reports that she has been matched "with 'debaters' who are not in any way qualified to speak about fat people," for example. Debate itself is embedded within classed, gendered and colonial constructions of civilised discourse within which the uncivilised (the angry activist) are put on the defence and destabilised. Whilst activists have the advantage of first-hand experience in these debates, they are otherwise disadvantaged against the institutional and social power of the expert, their usual contender, power against which they may already have experienced lifetime struggles. It is not always clear in advance who the fat activist will be debating, this may be down to the fast pace of media production, it could also indicate that the media makers want to unsettle the debaters in order to get more exciting results; Antoinette explains that media makers have made her wait "until the last possible minute to identify my 'sparring partner(s)' making it challenging to prepare for the discussion in advance". On other occasions she describes being used in a debate to attack those perceived to have less power than her, such as "some poor fat woman, or formerly fat woman, with low self esteem". Although they create this situation, media makers refuse accountability for it, positioning themselves as neutral facilitators. But this is disingenuous, since they have orchestrated and planned the meeting, and they have done so for reasons that may involve ratings, advertising revenue, or other factors that ensure their survival and success.

The stitching-up of fat activists consists of: empty promises made to fat activists, drawing them into productions about which media makers have little ethical investment; dubious editing; disrespectful framing; the recruitment of problematic



experts to incite a sensationalist debate; and overall lack of care. This creates a full package of misery for fat activists hoping to reach an audience for their ideas. This is described here by Sara, whose own recent appearance involved the producers:

"replaying the same old anti-fat simplistic messages and framing the whole thing as anti-fat, conflating health and fat and eating, and attacking us. Then, editing selectively and removing certain voices." (Sara)

It is as though the media makers cannot resist undermining fat activism – "I've often had articles that say great things about what I'm doing and then throw in a little fatphobic dig. Mostly minor stuff" (Rachel) – and misrepresenting it "as some kind of 'excuse to be lazy and gluttonous'" (Brenda).

Not surprisingly, much of the sample had undergone a character assassination at some stage of their engagement with media, where their integrity and personhood as fat people was publicly attacked

"There was also a *Daily Mail* article written by a journalist who wasn't even present at any of the Miss BBW[Big Beautiful Woman] 2012 prep or show and still made us out to be monsters, greedy and always eating. Yes there was food there at the prep but were we supposed to go hungry being there for nine hours?" (Naomi)

"Publishing photos in media without my consent (several times) let alone compensation." (Aphra)

"[The *New York Times* reporter] insisted on trying to get me say that I believed the [quack weight loss gadget] would work. I explained to him how absurd that was, given my long history as a fat advocate. I thought I had cleared it all up and then I see he printed the article with my 'quote' in it anyway." (Aileen)

"BBC sending out images I shared with them alone, of a brutal assault, to all media, causing me to lose control of my own story and images, representing me as a helpless victim of fat hatred, rather than the fat activist I am. [...] Most of the newspapers, magazines, online zines, radio stations, and television programs who ran 'my story' never bothered to speak with me. They stole my images and pretty much fabricated what they wanted to say." (Antoinette)

"My piece was supposed to be fat positive and I had it in writing, and only after watching it that I was terrified and upset at the manipulation of my image for the sake of comedy and for the sake of shock." (Rosa)

Fat activists do not consent to this treatment when they agree to participate in media production, yet there are few perceived rights of reply or remedy once the article or piece has been published or broadcast. As Aphra experienced, "I demanded a retraction, and they only corrected my title."

As well as the more dramatic instances of being stitched-up, the sample reported a pervasive lack of care for them, lack of understanding for the subject, and a feeling that they were not being listened to.

"Some academics using my experiences/photos in their work have treated me as a curiosity or a resource rather than human." (Natasha)

One newspaper journalist emailed a bunch of questions (insightful questions that made me think he did have a clue and some sympathy); I spent a couple of hours writing answers to his questions. He did not reply once. Not even a quick 'thanks'. He did use the material and quoted me in the article he was writing (not unfairly); I stumbled upon it a few months later." (Tina)

"Presenters asking nonsensical questions like: 'Is your husband fat?' wasting time on silliness." (Antoinette)

"Mainly the guy just kept cutting me off." (Grace)

This creates an atmosphere of dehumanisation, where contributors who offer their insights in good faith are treated as fodder. Where fat activists have good experiences when they engage with media, it is regarded more as a matter of luck than design.

### **What effect did [your treatment by the media] have?**

Obviously, none of the participants reported that being dehumanised, humiliated, lied to, used, misrepresented and ridiculed in front of an audience of viewers, readers and listeners was a positive experience.

Personal reactions ranged from irritation, frustration and relief "that it wasn't worse" (Tina) to feelings of anger, betrayal, powerlessness and shame. Other participants stated that they felt violated and depressed, afraid of going out, and that being stitched-up reawakened old feelings of being bullied and of social anxiety.

"This particular example traumatised me. It's been a week and I'm not recovered - I'm forcing myself to leave the house and talk to people. I am burnt by it, distressed, angry, furious, teary, flat." (Sara)

"I'm angry. Angry that we are constantly being expected to justify our existence and our right to live a peaceful life in dignity and respect." (Brenda)

It should be stated that these emotional responses do not exist in a vacuum, they re-traumatise and re-victimise fat people, who already experience elevated levels of discrimination and harassment when compared to the general population (Aldebaran 1974, Campos 2004, Herndon 2005, O'Hara and Gregg 2006). Given this, it is exceptionally cruel when media workers bully and ridicule fat people who have put themselves forward to explain the negative social effects of that same treatment.

For some, a media appearance was the gift that went on giving. Online reader comments are notoriously caustic. Naomi states "I tend to ignore them anyway," whereas Sara "had to hide from the backlash of emails." For Brenda, harassment segued into serious threats:

"But worst of all, drew trolls and abuse to me - I have been subjected to hate campaigns online after appearing in the media where the piece has been unfavourable towards fat people. I have even received death threats."

One participant described how she continued to be harassed by other media makers:

"The second effect was the stream of invitations that followed for months afterwards from TV and radio producers and researchers who wanted me to appear in documentaries about 'why fat people lie so much' (yes, seriously...), or to 'advise' on TV shows that would 'teach' fat people where they were going wrong." (Catherine)

The same participant reported that their experience with Big Media led to them losing professional credibility with the group of people who had supported their research.

"The immediate and most upsetting effect was that the participants in my research recognised my relatively unusual family name and thought that I had stitched them up. I was the subject, quite understandably, of aggressive verbal attack on the discussion forums through which I had recruited them, and they felt very betrayed. It was made worse by the fact that I was moving house on the day the story broke, and without an internet connection, which made it hard to intervene. I eventually contacted the forum moderator to explain and he posted a message on my behalf. Peace was restored and they were very understanding about what had happened, but I felt terrible for them to have been so insulted, and for that insult to be attached to me." (Catherine)

These unpleasant experiences led participants to reassess their availability to do media appearances, and engendered feelings of cynicism, wariness and fear in the community. Some participants have decided to withdraw completely from media work, either temporarily or longer-term. Others have become more vigilant in how their image is used, and within the sample there was some awareness that what fat activists have to say is extremely valuable to media makers and that better treatment could be leveraged on that basis.

"I never allow the media to rush me into participating in their shows. I spend a lot of time in advance checking everything out and writing OUR agreement. I'm selective and firm about my participation. I don't trust the media EVER. I also don't participate in anything I find distasteful - which means I say NO

much more than YES. I am increasingly interested in making my own size positive media." (Antoinette)

"It reinforced what I already thought from news stories about other kinds of activism I'd been involved in – that a person had to be very careful about turning over her image and words to mainstream media." (Selena)

"If I had to do it all over again, I would not do it at all. For all of the best of intentions and altruistic action behind it all, I've been vilified and mocked. I'm too damn old to carry that burden. My projects are few and far between now, with more careful consideration to my image." (Rosa)

Few participants responded to this question with examples of the possible social effects of their experiences. Tina remarked about how fat activists might be reluctant to put themselves forward as public speakers in a context where they are likely to be attacked.

"As such, positive media portrayal of fat rights views (and related topics, like anti-healthism views) is vitally necessary for us as fat people. And yet attempting to do that is terribly damaging for the individuals who bravely put themselves forward to be quoted/photographed/discussed. It's very difficult to see how best to tackle this. I have the sneaking suspicion that it can't be done without painful costs for those who do it (see previous examples of other civil rights movements). \*deep sigh\* Seeing what happens to other fat people who do put themselves in the media, is something that very effectively prevents me from taking part in the media much at all. Ah yes, the ol' silencing technique." (Tina)

The reluctance of fat activists to engage with media is to the detriment of the movement more generally, and prevents the issues from being raised in wider society. This is not to say that fat activists should take abuse by media makers on the chin, the argument here is that unfair and unethical media practice has profound negative consequences and contributes to a spiral of marginalisation for groups of people, including those who are fat, who are already pushed to the edges. But, where fewer experienced fat activists are prepared to speak because they are afraid of the consequences, it means that fat activism remains a fringe activity and is treated as though it has little social relevance. In addition, it means that media makers are more likely to approach inexperienced fat activists whose contributions to a public discourse of fat can lack sophistication and insight.

**In terms of representing fat people and issues relating to fat activism, or critical approaches to 'obesity', what advice do you [fat activists] have for media makers?**

"My 'advice' right now is not advice, it's: fuck you, you're lying." (Sara)

Sara's response to this question is understandable given fat activists' anger and pessimism about the treatment they receive in the media and the broader cultures of fat hatred in which it is situated. The survey answers to this question were peppered with the most expletives, exclamation marks, capitalisation and general sense of frustration and urgency compared to the rest of the project. The sample clearly feels passionate that media workers can and should do better in how they represent fat activism, and they offered a series of suggestions that were practical, philosophical and personal in tone.

Many participants wanted to see the people who make media avoid resorting to fatphobic clichés. This might include avoiding using headless fatty imagery, or refusing to stereotype fat people:

"Do not show stereotypical and stigmatising images of fat people like people without faces or people eating, that portray fat people in a kind of freak show/othering way." (Grace)

In addition, it extends to the language used by fat activists, including the words that they choose to use for themselves, and an adoption of the rhetoric of fat activism in order to normalise it:

"Respect the terms of self-description that the interview subjects use; if I call myself fat, just say fat, jeezus." (Chelsea)

"Start calling it the 'weight cycling industry' rather than the 'weight loss industry'." (Grace)

There are other aspects of media production that could be altered. Chelsea suggests that "the person who does the interview should be involved in all the peripheral text (pull quotes, headlines, captions)" so that the continuity of the media encounter can be traced for accountability. This is not so far-fetched given that industry practices are changing and where, for example, the work of writing, editing, uploading material as well as producing accompanying video segments becomes the responsibility of one journalist rather than many. Grace has two further suggestions, the first acknowledges the influence that advertising has on editorial content, and the second is a comment about the well-worn debate format:

"Don't accept advertising from the weight cycling industry so you can afford to be critical of it in your editorial content." (Grace)

"Do not set up debates between (thin or fat) authority figures and fat lay people, that are designed to undermine the authority of the fat person about their lived experience. It is not necessary for a 'balanced' presentation to make every media event a debate when the vast majority of events are pro-weight loss and anti-fat - give some time to the voices of fat people without always following with a 'but you have to try to be thin' closing." (Grace)

Whether or not debate formats are invoked, Chrissie proposed: "There MUST be fat activists/fat activist academics present at ALL these conversations in the media." This inclusion extends to a comment by Grace, who recognises the intersectional nature of fat identity, and the necessity for developing diverse fat activist voices in public in order to challenge all forms of oppression:

"Give more of the media exposure to people of colour, who are being targeted as too fat, too unhealthy, and 'needing education' by racist governments and industry, and whose voices are rarely heard as authorities on their own experience." (Grace)

A handful of participants made similar remarks about practical steps that media makers can make, that is: "Read *Health at Every Size* before even trying to talk to me" (Donna)(Bacon 2008). Grace asserts that media makers should have some basic understanding of research:

"On health studies: Don't report studies that talk about weight loss unless there is at least two years of follow-up data, and report results in terms of the entire group who started the intervention (dropouts and all). Ask and report on whether the researchers studied a special group like people seeking help and don't allow generalization to the larger group. Ask and report on whether researchers controlled for SES [Socio-Economic Status], weight cycling, social support/stigma and physical activity as potential alternate hypotheses for what may be affecting health."

These are comments about the importance of preliminary research for media makers. But it is not enough that they have done this research, they need to communicate this to the audience or readership too, to show that a body of knowledge exists, and not 'play dumb' in front of an audience in order to get a sensationalist reaction, or to patronise their readers.

Jacque comments that "journalism already enters a 'story' with an intent," however, the main practical shift that participants wanted media makers to adopt was simply that of listening. Inherent to the listening was respect for the validity of the topic, space to speak, power-sharing and a belief that critical work on fat is already a hot story that needs little embellishment.

"LISTEN to us. Don't treat us like we are stupid or that this isn't a serious topic." (Kim)

"Allow fatties to set the agenda sometimes." (Antoinette)

"I would ask them to listen rather than hear what they want to hear. Fat activism / critical obesity studies is a great story, if only they'd stop to hear it." (Catherine)

"Ask us what our main message is and let that be said." (Sofia)

The practical act of listening segues into a more philosophical approach that media makers should adopt when representing fat activism, according to the research participants. This is rooted in journalistic ethics, of actions that have a harm-minimisation philosophy at the heart of their public service, as outlined below:

"Mostly, I feel the same eroding journalistic ethics should apply: document and credit your sources, fact check, obtain consent and permissions, be clear about your conditions if they do not allow for editorial review, don't misrepresent your intentions (exploitative), don't hatchet someone's words to misrepresent their meaning and undermine their voice (unethical); and don't dehumanise us by stripping us of our ideas, identities, faces, rights, and, when applicable, dignity." (Aphra)

In this context, media makers should be mindful of the bigger picture with regards to their work: "be aware of the consequences of your actions" (Brenda).

The final set of suggestions for media makers involves developing reflexive practice. This means understanding their own motivations in representing fat activism, considering their relationship to fatness and potential critical understanding of fat hatred, and addressing their prejudices. Selena sums this up succinctly:

"Think of a fat person you know and love when you are writing your story. And think of how much pressure there is for you to stay thin and how much you resent it."

### **What advice do you [fat activists] have for other people thinking of talking about fat in the media?**

Most of the sample had felt that they had been stitched-up at various times, to greater and lesser degrees, but none of the participants said that fat activists should not try and work with the media. However, they offered many caveats and snippets of advice for those thinking of going public.

Activists were urged to have low expectations of what working with media makers might entail and prepare "to be personally insulted," (Steve), for "bullshit" (Chelsea), "for the worst" (Sofia). This was seen as an important initial strategy in a setting where journalists and researchers often make promises during early contacts with activists as part of the work of persuading them to engage. Sara offered the following recommendation: "If you think you're being cautious, be more cautious. Trust no one, even if they seem to be leftie, kind, charming, and a good listener." Grace suggested that people be realistic about what can be achieved:

"Manage your expectations of yourself - even when it goes really well, it is almost always a tiny slice of what you really want to say. Be in it for the long haul." (Grace)

Activists may be geographically and socially isolated from fat activist communities, or other forms of supportive community. They may be new to the movement and feel a great responsibility to speak out, even at the expense of their own safety. My own experience is that I have felt phenomenal pressure to be a spokesperson for a movement, a role that I do not want, and I have been bullied by other activists to do so. This stems from a belief that somebody else should put themselves at risk. They rationalise that engagement with Big Media must happen, because of the potential audience reach, and that the negative side-effects are merely unfortunate. This comes from a mind-set that all publicity is desirable regardless of the cost, but it is unsustainable and is a crucial factor in activist burn-out. It is vital that fat activists understand that they can refuse to participate when approached by media workers. Survey participants reiterated the importance of respecting one's instincts about taking part in a media event. Kate explains: "Don't feel obligated to put yourself out there if you're not comfortable." Referring on (passing on media makers' contacts to others, not releasing people's private details to researchers, etc.) and walking away are legitimate methods of handling an enquiry.

"Have other people you can refer the request to if it seems OK but you are not able or inclined to do it so you don't feel like the only person doing the work - and it gives different people a chance to be heard." (Grace)

"If there is some way you can see from the outset that you will be set up to be discounted, refuse the request." (Grace)

Aileen, an activist with many years of experience, provides an important reminder: "Not doing one interview won't make or break the movement."

Where fat activists do decide to participate, survey respondents had particular pieces of advice for background work to consider before accepting. These involve building a relationship with the media maker, working with trustworthy people, researching them and their previous work, asking critical questions of them, considering the reasons for media work, maintaining one's ethics and values.

"Take a deep breath and think about the media involved. Is it controlled by a community that you know, trust, are part of, want to address? Have you watched it, seen it, listened? Is the tone in general consistent with the conversation you'd like to have? Is there a specific reason that you want to do this interview? Have you told the journalist the reason? What was their response? Does it seem likely that the conditions involved will meet your goals? Are you at a moment in your work at which public scrutiny would be likely helpful or harmful? I developed rules: I don't talk about my family. I don't meet media at my home. I try to keep the focus on the thing itself, in my case, usually a book. I try to check in with my own core values when I'm asked to do something that I'm not sure about doing." (Selena)

Antoinette states: "Don't work for free." Fat activists should weigh up this issue when deciding about working with media. Whether or not it is possible to negotiate



payment for participating in an interview or acting as a consultant will vary according to the kind of media with which they are working. In some forms of media, especially academic publishing, the assumption is that participants have institutional support and no payment is assumed, even though academic publishers are often profit-driven. Fat activists should ask if payment can be offered, and negotiate from there but be prepared to hear that there is no budget, or that expenses only are covered, which may or may not be true. Payment does not necessarily mean immediate financial compensation, it could refer to future sales that publicity may bring, for example, or non-financial benefits such as increased visibility or general promotion. The issue of whether or not to work for free raises questions about who benefits from a media engagement, community responsibility and self promotion, fat activist celebrity culture and neoliberal individualism in relation to media more broadly, all of which are beyond the scope of this paper.

One participant mentioned a work-related resource of which she was able to make use, and how this affected her decision to do media:

"In work that I have done since with the media (on other, less contentious topics), I have worked with specific journalists carefully chosen by a discriminating and sensible press officer (I work in a university, so this is an option available to me). This limited the craziness, but I still feel very vulnerable. So be careful." (Catherine)

Not everyone will have access to an institutions' press officer, but there may be other resources available that can help ameliorate the difficulties of developing a public life for your work.

Activists in the sample proposed other strategies once a media engagement has been accepted:

"Get the questions ahead of time, plan your answers, reserve the right to review before publishing and don't be afraid to pull your approval. (Moxie)

"Get everything in writing, see if you have any leverage for final cut or editorial approval (which is extremely rare nowadays, but worth vying for if possible)." (Aphra)

It should be noted that media makers do not always want to release their questions ahead of time. They may argue that this is to enhance a feeling of spontaneity, but it could be that they want to maintain an upper hand. It may be that they do not yet know their questions, or that things are likely to change at the last minute. Whether or not questions will be available beforehand, and will be used during the encounter, cannot be ensured, and will vary according to the type of media involved, but it is acceptable to ask for them.

Even though it can never be fully prevent being stitched-up, preparatory work gives fat activists as much of a firm basis as possible for managing trouble when the

interview actually takes place. Activists should ensure they have a back-up recording or transcript of the interview, "ie your unedited/uncompromised words" (Naomi), so that editing and stitching-up is easier to identify and bring to people's attention if the worst happens. I post my own unedited version of interviews on my blog alongside the published version where I can. This has led to apologies and compensation where I have been misrepresented by unsympathetic journalists.

During the interview, the idea that one should 'stay cool' was valued by the participants in terms of doing media work successfully. Having a professional identity to draw on can help engender respect from the interviewer and enable fat activists to appear more credible. Grace explains

"When I am the eating disorders specialist or the psychologist, people are usually a lot more deferential and they make an effort to get the message right." (Grace)

But staying cool presents some contradictions, for example Steve says that fat activists should not get defensive, whereas Davina says that they should defend themselves:

"Stay on message and don't get defensive." (Steve)

"Be prepared to defend yourself, but always stay calm. Be confident."  
(Davina)

Presumably it is up to the person themselves how they handle defending or not defending. But given that media makers may be seeking to rile fat activists with personal remarks or devil's advocate questioning, defending is a strategy intended to undermine the participant and to produce sensationalist media, so some activists refuse these kinds of events:

"Don't participate in media that is about 'defending' your side or trying to convince someone that you have a right to exist, they don't actually want to listen they just want to exploit your desire to connect, I try to approach any interview as an opportunity to educate from my own personal knowledge. I don't do debates if at all avoidable." (Moxie)

Grace has her own tactic for avoiding defensiveness, and this is simply to listen carefully to the questions and deal with them directly, even if they appear facile, irrelevant and insulting. The drawback here is that it is difficult to disrupt the agenda set by the questioner, or to use the interview to develop a more radical discourse.

"I really try to address exactly what they are asking, contrary to a lot of media training, because I think what they are asking is what a lot of people are thinking, and I want to get them from there to here." (Grace)

Nevertheless, what helps fat activists to feel secure and 'stay cool' is the knowledge that they have valuable things to say and that they are already embedded within communities who seek social change concerning fat people.

"Remember: you're not the underdog, you're the expert who is pointing out serious flaws in science and/or society." (Aileen)

These valuable offerings are not mono-dimensional, they are intersectional and enable activists to bring many different themes to the table, enriching the media encounter:

"For many people being fat is inseparable from other identities like race and class. I like to use media as a way to discuss and highlight all the parts of myself so if they want to interview me because I'm fat ok, but we're also talking about racism and food justice and being poor." (Moxie)

Two participants urged fat activists to resist the lure of being cast as 'the exceptional fatty' or of being groomed for celebrity or spokesperson status.

"You can only speak about your experience and not as a whole. You are not the voice of a new generation, you are one of many and you stand on the shoulders of many others who paved the way through trial and error." (Rosa)

"While promoting your work, credit the work of your/related communities, as your work doesn't live in a vacuum and people are likely unaware that such a community exists." (Aphra)

As fat activists bring intersectional identities to their media work, they should also remind their audiences and readership that they do not act alone. Demonstrating how one is embedded within different communities and themes humanises fat activists and illustrates the collective and interdependent nature of social change.

Antoinette's proposal that one's appearance is important strikes me as more complex than it first appears:

"Pay attention to your grooming. You need to look like a million bucks if you want to be taken seriously." (Antoinette)

'Looking like a million bucks' is a strategy that this participant finds helpful, but it means different things to different people, is loaded with cultural assumptions, and may backfire. In a media discourse saturated with fatphobia, fat people will never be able to convince audiences that they 'look like a million bucks' and, indeed, many fat activists would want to dismantle the idea that appearance is everything 'if you want to be taken seriously'. Perhaps what Antoinette is getting at with this statement is that what a person wears can affect their confidence and portrayal, and appearance is another thing that is being judged when a fat activist does media work.

I want to critique the idea that fat activists should stay cool, even though the survey participants find this idea valuable. Staying cool is linked to Antoinette's comments about appearance. I suspect that 'staying cool' and 'looking like a million bucks if you want to be taken seriously' are tied to a value of respectability in fat activism, that is, of appearing rational as a means of seeking access to power, or of appearing as though one already belongs amongst the powerful. It might be connected to the avoidance of more painful public humiliation, something that fat people experience regularly, personally and collectively. Aileen refers to the importance of being charming whilst being interviewed:

"Make good eye contact with the reporter. Remember to smile once in a while. Try to get one sound-bite that has some humour in it." (Aileen)

If there is rapport and the relationship with the media maker is sound, and they are trustworthy, charm can certainly go a long way in ensuring a positive outcome. However, in instances where journalists and media producers are intent on annihilating fat activists, charm will not protect anyone from being misrepresented. I would suggest that these tactics are simultaneously located within a bourgeois, liberal sense of politeness and respect for authoritarianism that keeps fat people in their place.

Not staying cool or being charming could be part of a fat activist's response to media engagement. Jackie Wykes, whose experience on an Australian talk show helped instigate this project, produced *Fifteen Seconds of Bitchface*, a video constructed of clips from that appearance (sizeoftheocean 2013). Wykes had been invited to the show as a main guest, but her comments were edited out and she was rendered by the programme makers in this series of clips as an angry, glowering, unreasonable, silent fat activist. In collating these clips, Wykes not only demonstrates her disgust and outrage at being reductively represented, but also the emotional effects of such stereotyping, that is *Fifteen Seconds of Bitchface* is both hilarious and a result of Wykes' pain. In producing the video, Wykes has not remained calm and respectful, she has reclaimed her power, expressed her feelings clearly, and created a picture of herself that is sophisticated and expansive. She has revealed and refused to be complicit with the Machiavellian workings of the TV show's producers, including their fatphobia. The value of staying cool is understandable, but in offering these comments I would like fat activists to appreciate that not staying cool has radical potential, and that those who lose their cool should not be shamed for doing so. This unorthodox piece of advice for handling interviews seems a particularly apt summary of this sentiment: "As Christian Slater said in *Pump up the Volume*, 'Talk hard!'" (Donna).

What happens after the interview can help solidify a good media experience. Preparing aftercare with or without other people and creating space to reflect, rage, delight or commiserate is regarded by the survey participants as part of the work of engaging with media.

"Have a group of people who are cheering for you no matter what happens, in case things go badly, because you can't control everything." (Grace)

"Don't be surprised if you get stitched up. It's happened to the best of us."  
(Kim)

### **Concluding thoughts: representing fat activism in a wider landscape of journalistic ethics and power**

This paper originated in fat activists' own experiences of being stitched up by the media. A survey featuring a sample of 28 fat activists has revealed some of the methods that media makers use to undermine fat activists and their effects on fat people. In order to change the status quo, the fat activists in this survey propose that people who make media use alternative strategies, and they offer many pieces of advice for fat activists considering a public life in the spotlight.

The continuing impossibility of getting fair and accurate media portrayals of fat activism is embedded in a bigger context in which there is a crisis of media ethics that affects anyone, regardless of their status as fat activist. In the following passage, Tina expresses the effects of this crisis on individuals.

"I would like some editorial control in that I would not like them to be able to publish something that I haven't agreed to (e.g. untruth, unflattering photo, unconsented photo). How you actually implement this is another matter – there doesn't seem to be any point in telling mainstream media makers to get pre-print agreement from their subjects, because there are so many unscrupulous journalists who will say whatever it takes to get from their subjects what they want (and I also daresay, some well-meaning more ethical journalists who put things in a way that is accidentally against what was given consent for), and will give agreement and then happily break it. What I'd like, from media makers, is a guarantee (against which one could sue, or haul them up before a press regulator) that they weren't going to exploit. But I don't think such a thing exists. The upshot that I would like to tell journalists who approach, is that there is nothing that you can say that would convince me you do understand, and you do want to represent my side fairly, without misrepresentation or exploitation, because there are so many journalists who would say the exact same things that you would, and would be entirely unethical about the whole thing, just seeing me as an expendable resource that they can use. I cannot tell the difference." (Tina)

This ethical crisis relates to how media is owned and structured, and the working conditions that media makers negotiate, particularly within Big Media. Speaking at the Leveson Enquiry, which is concerned with media ethics in the UK, Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), gave evidence about cultures of bullying in the newsroom that inhibit journalists from taking risky ethical stances with their material (Leveson Enquiry 2012, Stanistreet 2012). Put plainly, people are frightened for their jobs if they do not toe the company

line, a line that is frequently defined by corporate control of information rather than open and ethical journalism. Chrissie's experience illustrates how this might play out in real life with regards to the editorial control of a more radical voice. Her requests for an explicit use of the word fat, a political word, were quietly ignored and rejected by her editor, undermining the message she wanted to put across in her work. Even though there may be a will to produce more challenging work on fat in the media, the broader editorial and business culture may not allow it.

"I write for a free newspaper in [a Canadian city] (unpaid). I was writing a short column on fat acceptance and the editor wanted me to call it 'body acceptance.' I made it clear that, while I believe in 'body acceptance,' it was critical that the word FAT appeared in print b/c I wanted to emphasize FAT ACCEPTANCE! After plenty back and forth, he finally agreed. A few weeks later I did a piece on fat fashion blogging & shopping...they quickly made the final title of the column (without my knowledge) 'Plus size' fashion blogging. I lost that battle but at least within the actual column they left the word FAT in it...in the exact ways in which I first wrote the article." (Chrissie)

In addition to bigger themes of ownership and editorial ethics, the issue of who journalists are and the values they represent are central to why fat activists find themselves marginalised by media. John Johnstone *et al*'s iconic sociological study of 1300 journalists in North America found that news-based journalists tended to be young, male, white and middle or upper-middle class (Johnstone et al. 1976). It is nearly 40 years since that study's publication and this demographic still predominates, media is not a diverse profession (Baracaia 2013). Contrast this with fat people's low socioeconomic status and the unequal power relations that underpin fat activists' media encounters become more apparent (National Obesity Observatory 2013). Indeed, foundational texts in media studies, and many subsequent publications, explore these power relationships far beyond the scope of this paper (Root 1986 and Herman and Chomsky 1988 spring to mind, for example). The likelihood of media makers being able to hear and understand fat activists, or other minority groups and activists, remains under question. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky observe:

"The elite domination of the media and marginalisation of dissidents [...] occurs so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news 'objectively' and on the basis of professional news values." (Herman and Chomsky 1988, p.2)

Put bluntly: despite the predominance of high socioeconomic status, media makers are entrenched in denial that their social positioning has anything to do with their output. This contributes to a belief that the marginalisation of minorities, or the people Herman and Chomsky call dissidents, is natural and just.

Although this paper is concerned with fat activists, a very particular group of people, it is obviously located within larger discourses. Fat people, including fat activists, are part of an intersectional genealogy of minorities suffering media misrepresentation and manipulation which shifts according to broader social patterns in scapegoating, stigmatising and stereotyping. Changing how fat activists are depicted by media makers also entails engaging with wider struggles of marginalisation and representation.

## **Creating change**

I want to close this paper by outlining a handful of possibilities for change.

Firstly, there are possibilities for working with unions to help develop ethical codes for journalists. Indeed, the NUJ Code of Conduct is explicit in setting out journalists' responsibilities around hate speech. Clause 8 proposes that a journalist:

"Produces no material likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation." (NUJ 2013)

All NUJ members are required to abide by this clause, which could easily be extended to members of any minority. Unfortunately not all journalists are NUJ members, and survey participants in the UK reported that at least half of the Code of Conduct's 12 clauses have been broken by journalists who have approached them. Meanwhile, debate about press regulation in the UK, and elsewhere, continues. Post-Leveson, Stanistreet explains that journalists' unions, in particular the NUJ in the UK, can serve an important role in "guarding the guardians" but that they are systematically undermined by press barons threatened by their power, and wider anti-union sentiment (Stanistreet 2012, p.4).

Secondly, there may be a role for a fat activist media watchdog organisation along the lines of GLAAD in the US, or Trans Media Watch in the UK. These Non Governmental Organisations take an active role in monitoring media output in relation to their populations of interest, and seek to transform policy for fairer representation. However, there are questions about who monitoring organisations serve, how power is addressed within them and what constitutes positive images (Kirchick 2013).

Thirdly, research and sharing information within and beyond fat activist community is critical in enabling activists to make informed decisions about whether or not to participate in public life. Research should not be restricted to elitist and exclusive academic spaces, or disseminated in journals behind expensive pay walls. Research Justice, and what is sometimes called the Para Academy, are movements that seek to make knowledge production available and relevant to all (DataCenter 2009, Assil et al. 2013). Research Justice in particular is an ethos of organising and developing community voices in ways that benefit those communities directly. This paper is a product of those values.

Fourthly, it is vital that fat activists share their experiences of public life, and support each other through community learning projects.

"Learn from your media experiences. Talk to others who are doing it and learn from them as well." (Antoinette)

"I appreciated a workshop Lynn McAfee and Miriam Berg held on media strategy, which was not focused on defensive measures, but strategic and scrappy offenses such as how to get a quick sound-bite in to mainstream media. It's a different approach I usually do my best to avoid at all costs, and I appreciated these veterans sharing their experience and strategies." (Aphra)

More experienced fat activists should reach out to those with less experience, especially since neophyte fat activists can find themselves fielding invitations from Big Media at points in their life when they are vulnerable, isolated and have little prior experience of public political life. This paper is one attempt to generate more dialogue and share community findings about media engagement. I hope that it spurs fat activists to have conversations, produce workshops, training, skill-swapping sessions, and materials to engender greater media literacy within the movement.

Finally, perhaps the most immediate shift that might happen is that fat activists learn to recognise the value of their voices and experience to media makers, and use that more systematically to leverage change, including more editorial control.

"If you are in a situation where you can somehow create your own content to be used, then this has better potential to avoid abuse." (Tina)

Perhaps what is ultimately required is that more fat activists become media workers and cultural producers in their own right, take advantage of new technologies and media fragmentation and bypass exploitative, unethical, poorly-informed mediators altogether.



## Afterword

Many thanks to everyone who took part in the survey.

I have produced this work voluntarily, without payment or institutional support. It has not been submitted to academic journals, or anonymously peer-reviewed, and is somewhat rough and ready. I am open to amendments, questions and constructive comments. Please leave them on my blog, [obesitytimebomb.blogspot.co.uk](http://obesitytimebomb.blogspot.co.uk) or direct them to me privately via my contact page [charlottecooper.net/contact](http://charlottecooper.net/contact) I moderate comments, so there may be a delay before they appear.

I have made this analysis of the survey results freely available to anyone that wants it. Please make a donation to [mail@charlottecooper.net](mailto:mail@charlottecooper.net) via PayPal if you have found this work useful, or if you are likely to benefit from it or use it as a teaching aid.



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January 2014  
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