



## What is nutrition communication and how can it be implemented well?

The interview with Jun Prof Dr Tina Bartelmeß from the University of Bayreuth is about nutrition communication. What is nutrition communication, what is the role of media, how can nutrition communication contribute to people eating healthier and how can different people be reached are some of the questions discussed.

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KUestions is a video podcast format produced by the Akademie für Neue Medien (Bildungswerk) e.V. and the University of Bayreuth for the project Ernährungsradar. Experts are interviewed on various topics in the context of nutrition and report on the current state of research. The interview was conducted by Matthias Will from the Akademie für Neue Medien (Bildungswerk) e.V. and Clara Marx a Master's student of Lebensmittel- und Gesundheitswissenschaften (Food and Health Sciences) at the University of Bayreuth.

### Recommended literature on the topic

Bartelmeß T, Godemann J (2022). Exploring the Linkages of Digital Food Communication and Analog Food Behavior: A Scoping Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 19(15):8990. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19158990>

Godemann J, Bartelmeß T (2021). Ernährung als kommunikatives Phänomen. *Forschungsfeld mit Potenzial*. Ernährung im Fokus, 01/2021.

Godemann J, Bartelmeß T (2021). Ernährungskommunikation. *Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven – Theorien – Methoden*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27314-9>

Godemann J, Bartelmeß T (2018). Gesellschaftliche Verständigung über ein Totalphänomen. Zum Verständnis nachhaltigkeitsbezogener Ernährungskommunikation. In: Phyl, T. (Hrsg.). *Zwischen Ohnmacht und Zuversicht. Vom Umgang mit Komplexität in der Nachhaltigkeitskommunikation*. DBU Reihe Umweltkommunikation. ISBN 978-3-96238-042-7

Godemann J, Bartelmeß T (2017). Ernährungskommunikation und Nachhaltigkeit. *Perspektiven eines Forschungsfeldes*. *Ernährungs Umschau*. 64 (12), M692-M698. <https://www.ernaehrungs-umschau.de/print-artikel/13-12-2017-ernaehrungskommunikation-und-nachhaltigkeit/>

## English translation of the German interview transcript

Matthias Will: Dear audience, welcome to another interview as part of the Ernährungsradar project. The University of Bayreuth and the Akademie für Neue Medien are working closely together to shed light on the topic of nutrition from different angles. I'm Matthias Will from the Akademie für Neue Medien.

Clara Marx: And I'm Clara Marx from the University of Bayreuth, studying Lebensmittel- und Gesundheitswissenschaften (Food and Health Sciences) in the Master's programme.

Matthias Will: The topic of nutrition is present on all channels, in TV programmes, radio shows, newspapers, but also on channels such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram etc. Numerous experts give their tips and proclaim their messages. But what does clever nutrition communication actually look like? That's what we want to discuss today and our guest is Tina Bartelmeß. She is Professor of Nutritional Sociology at the University of Bayreuth. Professor Bartelmeß, nice to have you with us today.

Prof Bartelmeß: Yes, thank you very much for inviting me.

Clara Marx: Welcome. I would like to start right away with a categorisation, because we are going to talk about nutrition communication today, but not everyone necessarily knows what that means. So I would like to ask you to explain what is actually meant by nutrition communication?

Prof Bartelmeß: Yes, that's the question I'm dealing with or have dealt with. Nutritional communication has traditionally, historically, always been understood as expert communication. In other words, it was assumed that there were certain experts or institutions in society that disseminated nutritional recommendations and this was seen as the definition of nutritional communication. We have players such as the DGE, the German Nutrition Society, or today the BZfE, the German Federal Centre for Nutrition. And of course the experts at the medical level, doctors for example. And we look at the whole thing at a societal level. In other words, what you have just mentioned: There are various channels through which different players communicate about nutrition. On the one hand, this refers to the media level, i.e. today we have social media in particular, where everyday actors communicate about nutrition, but also to the interpersonal level, which is not necessarily mediated by the media. And basically, nutrition communication in our society actually takes place wherever nutrition is communicated.

Matthias Will: There are studies that show that more than 50% of adults in Germany are overweight, despite all the information brochures and educational campaigns. What is going wrong in nutritional communication?

Prof Bartelmeß: That's a common question. Communication isn't everything, of course. There is a widespread assumption that we tell people how they should eat and that this leads to them doing so. But this is basically based on a knowledge deficit hypothesis, which is not acceptable. It has been repeatedly established that it is not enough to simply teach people how to eat healthily, but that it is also important to consider the contexts in which people eat, in which they act. And institutional nutrition communication, i.e. what I just mentioned, this epitome of expert communication, a lot is being done here and really great formats have been developed. But the specialised institutions are of course not the only ones responsible for ensuring that people eat healthily. There are points of criticism. Nutrition communication has also been criticised for failing, including scientifically, and there are various starting points where something could of course be changed. One key point is that communication is too cognitively orientated and too individualistic. This means that the assumption is made: The more information, the better or more desirable the behaviour. And this individualistic view is somewhat based on the so-called ABC paradigm, i.e. we change the attitudes, the behaviour changes accordingly and then also the choices, i.e. what people then select and do. I think that this is actually one of the points where something may be going wrong, but I would still like to emphasise that a lot is already being done and new ways of communicating nutrition are being tried out. You just can't look at it in isolation. There is no direct impact of communication on behaviour.

Matthias Will: Let's put it in positive terms: What are the most important points for successful nutritional communication?

Prof Bartelmeß: This question is also difficult to answer, but there are a few points of reference mentioned in the literature where it could improve and then perhaps succeed. Above all, communication must be appropriate to everyday life. This means that it's not just about conveying knowledge, i.e. content in the form of knowledge, but also adapting it to the specific situations and circumstances in people's everyday lives. On the one hand, this means that we should perhaps focus on the turning points in people's lives where nutritional information can become relevant. These are points such as pregnancy, for example, where it has been established that there is an interest in nutritional information. And this is when many people's lives change and there is also a desire to somehow make nutritional behaviour more healthy or more sustainable. This can be targeted. Or, for example, with students who have their own household for the first time, information can be disseminated in a targeted manner. Or, for example, migrants who move to Germany and are confronted with the nutritional environment for the first time and have to find their way around. Such turning points can be focussed on.

Clara Marx: Do you perhaps have a specific example of where nutrition communication has already been successful?

Prof Bartelmeß: I don't have a very specific example because there are few evaluation studies on this. However, there are certain communication contexts where we can assume that communication is taking place that is successful in some way, i.e. that leads to people orientating their actions towards it. And these are primarily communication contexts that take place on social media, where this expert-layperson relationship becomes a little blurred and it is not experts who communicate about nutrition, but people who are perhaps in a similar situation to the one that is currently affecting the recipient. And the communication takes place on a completely different level and with a different intention.

Clara Marx: And what role do the media generally play in nutrition communication?

Prof Bartelmeß: I would first distinguish between the traditional, public media, which of course play a very important role, especially when we think about reporting on television and in the press. I believe that this communication is essential for nutrition, especially with regard to sustainability and climate change, because the media fulfil a specific function in society. This means that aspects of topics are illuminated and made visible that would not be on their own. Especially when we think of climate change, the connections between our eating habits and the effects in other parts of the world, which we would not notice or to which we would not attribute any importance in the context of nutrition if the media did not report on that. So I think this is a very essential function of the media in our society, which is also very important. Social media fulfil a completely different function and have a different meaning for people in their use. It's not just about information management when using social media, but also about relationship and identity management. I see the function for nutrition above all in utilising these new levels, i.e. these identities and relationships, and also making them usable in order to reach people differently with regard to the topic of nutrition.

Matthias Will: But how can consumers keep track of all these offers? There are also contradictory channels and messages.

Prof Bartelmeß: That is of course very difficult. There is also the hypothesis that we are flooded with information, especially in relation to nutrition. Of course, this also applies to all other topics that are communicated in the public interest. There is an incredible amount of information, there is also misinformation, which is also a critical point that goes hand in hand with social media. There are many different interpretations, also with regard to nutrition. For example, if we simply take healthy eating as a topic of nutritional communication, then we find numerous interpretations of what this actually means. I think it's very difficult these days to choose what is scientifically proven. You need reliable sources of information where you know that the information is really verified and is also updated, which is again very important, especially in relation to nutrition. We know that recipients perceive information selectively. This means that people consciously select information based on what is important to them. This can lead to people selecting the wrong information or being receptive to information that is perhaps not scientifically reliable. However, I think that this information overload does not actually take place for the individual because this selective reception

takes place, but rather that it is difficult for media professionals to deal with the wide range of interpretations on offer.

Clara Marx: Are there perhaps any points of reference when I, as a viewer of a programme like this, have to decide: Is this good information about nutrition, is it safe or not? So is there anything, like an imprint, that I can look out for? Or do you have certain points of reference?

Prof Bartelmeß: Yes, there are various criteria. This is actually more a matter of science communication, what you can take into account to see whether the source is reliable. Yes, there are various rhetorical practices that are used to pretend that something is scientifically proven. In other words, citing authorities such as scientists or reading on social media: "Studies have shown" or "The latest study from Nature has shown that you can now eat eggs again." There are of course criteria such as: "Look at the source!" "Where does this information come from?", but of course this can all be predetermined. If you're not familiar with the current discourse, it's simply very difficult to make reliable statements. And to really be able to assess this, you would either have to read the studies yourself or have an institution behind it where you know the information is verified and correct.

Clara Marx: Okay, so stay vigilant and perhaps rely on larger organisations like Deutsche Rundfunk first. Something that is more trustworthy.

We've talked a lot about social media and media in general, but we've also seen, especially during the coronavirus pandemic, that some socially disadvantaged people and population groups sometimes don't necessarily have access and perhaps no internet at all. How do you reach such disadvantaged or socially weaker population groups?

Prof Bartelmeß: Yes, it's mainly in the settings where we can find them. This has been very difficult under the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic because people were very socially isolated. Of course, you can still reach them via the public media in situations like this. But if we now assume that we are not in lockdown and people are travelling again, then it is particularly important to go into the settings in person. This means that socially disadvantaged families, for example, are also sending their children to school. This means that appropriate preventative measures relating to health and nutrition or sustainability and nutrition can be implemented in schools or in the workplace. However, I am less concerned with the channels for reaching someone and more with the actual communication and language. And I think that with socially disadvantaged groups, it is always very important to consider what resources they actually have. And it doesn't help much to spread nutritional recommendations and say "Eat 5 a day!", i.e. 5 portions of fruit and vegetables, if you simply don't have the economic means to buy them. And we have now also seen that the prices for healthy food, especially fruit and vegetables, are rising. We have to take into account in our communication that it may not even be possible to put these recommendations into practice because of a lack of resources. And then we also have to make sure that we avoid stigmatising aspects in our communication. This applies to language, but also to visual aspects, for example. In other words, the images we use to communicate about nutrition and what we presume to be right and good should also be reflected accordingly.

Clara Marx: What motivated you personally to conduct research in the field of nutrition communication?

Prof Bartelmeß: The way I approach this field of research is actually still relatively new. I started it seven years ago, in 2015, when I began my doctorate at a professorship for nutrition communication and counselling. That's when I started looking through the literature to find out what we know about nutrition communication and realised that it has actually only ever been the product of scientific research. Science has generated findings, for example on nutrients that would be beneficial to add. And then the messages for nutritional communication were made from this, especially nutritional recommendations or food-related recommendations. Social science research was then perhaps responsible for characterising the target groups. Or communication science research might take a closer look: Which channels are best suited to transporting the messages? And I was fascinated by seeing nutritional communication itself as an object of analysis and firstly deducing from this what we can say about people's actions and also about the attribution of meaning that takes place in nutritional communication. For example, when does nutrition become important in everyday life? What is actually understood by healthy nutrition in society or by

sustainable nutrition? On the one hand, I would like to better understand behaviour from this, but on the other hand, I would also like to derive patterns of interpretation that are more connectable. That still fascinates me. That's now the field of research I'm working in.

Matthias Will: Finally, let's take another look into the future. What specific research projects are you currently working on?

Prof Bartelmeß: Yes, it is still very much rooted in nutritional communication research. In other words, I'm still analysing communication. One focus is analysing social media nutrition communication. And I try to combine this with aspects that are also relevant from a sociological perspective. At the moment, for example, I'm analysing the Twitter discourse on the hashtag #IamAffectedByPoverty. This is also related to the fact that we have a research project that deals with food poverty and, by analysing this discourse, we can for the first time generate insights into the extent to which and how food poverty is actually pronounced in society. There is still relatively little data available on this. And by communicating publicly, this data is now accessible for the first time via Twitter. However, the food poverty project is also about traditional sociological research, i.e. qualitative research with people affected by food poverty, which in turn allows us to derive insights into how we can better reach these people. Another focus, which plays a major role in final theses in particular, is the reconstruction of frames and patterns of interpretation. For example, the discourse on genome-edited food was analysed. It is also about culturally sensitive communication of dietary recommendations. And a third area is the connection between nutritional communication and climate communication research, because I would say it is one step ahead of us. In other words, climate communication research takes a completely different direction and chooses different approaches to raising awareness of climate change in society. I believe that we can still learn a lot from this for nutrition communication.

Matthias Will: Professor, thank you very much for the interview and thank you very much for joining us today. Thank you very much for watching and we would be delighted if you would join us again for our next interview in the Ernährungsradar series.