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### Statement from

#### Kathryn Montgomery, PhD

Professor, American University  
Co-author, “Interactive Food & Beverage Marketing:  
Targeting Children and Youth in the Digital Age”  
Available from [www.digitalads.org](http://www.digitalads.org)

*Note to Journalists covering tomorrow’s FTC/HHS Forum on Marketing, Self-Regulation, & Childhood Obesity: Professor Kathryn Montgomery of American University is a panelist who will summarize her recent research on digital food marketing targeting children and youth. In the expectation of several industry announcements, she is releasing this statement:*

The public—including policymakers and parents—must assess any new industry promises by at least three critical standards: First, self-regulatory measures must protect all children, including teenagers. We cannot address the nutritional health problems facing America’s young people by narrowly focusing attention only on the youngest segment of the youth population. Adolescents are at even greater risk of consuming an unhealthy diet than younger children. Teens spend more of their own money on food, make more of their food choices independently of their parents, and do more of their food consumption outside of the home. Food marketers can now target teens through an explosion of new digital venues—including social networking platforms, peer-to-peer video, instant messaging, interactive games, and cell phones—completely bypassing any parental oversight. And because the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) protects only children under the age of 13, adolescents are also subjected to some of the most extensive behavioral marketing in contemporary media.

Secondly, industry guidelines must address the full range of new and emerging digital marketing practices. Marketers know that today’s children and teens are increasingly away from TV sets and are part of the “always connected” lifestyle. With the explosion

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of digital media we are witnessing a further expansion of food marketing, designed to intrude into every possible “touchpoint” of a young person’s daily life. Digital technologies enable companies to track every move, online and off, compiling elaborate personal profiles, and aggregating that data across different media and over time. Such an environment makes it very difficult for children to maintain health. Unless the industry promises to halt the intrusive “one-to-one” marketing of unhealthy foods, we will never be able to effectively address the serious obesity crisis facing America’s children and adolescents.

Finally, while the food and advertising industries deserve praise for any new steps they take today, these announcements are coming at a time of unprecedented intense legal and political pressure brought by health advocates, regulatory agencies, and Congressional members from both parties. As we’ve seen repeatedly in the past, self-regulation is always reactive. Adjustments are made to certain controversial practices in order to placate critics, deflect pressure, and preempt government regulation. But when pressures have subsided, and the public spotlight has been diverted elsewhere, industry policing may be relaxed. When there is a great deal of money to be made, as there is in the children and teen market, practices are likely to return to business as usual, or new ones created to circumvent public scrutiny. Industry guidelines will only work if there are government laws and regulations enacted to enforce them.

Kathryn C. Montgomery is Professor in the School of Communication at American University. During the 90s, as President of the Center for Media Education, she led the campaign to pass the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). She recently co-authored a report with Jeff Chester on [digitalads.org](http://digitalads.org) “Interactive Food & Beverage Marketing: Targeting Children and Youth in the Digital Age,” sponsored by the Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) and the Center for Digital Democracy (CDD). Her book, *Generation Digital: Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet* — just published this week by MIT Press — documents the growth of digital media and marketing in the lives of young people.

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