



Member Spotlight: Andrew Flachs on the Value of School Lunch Programs

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Andrew Flachs, an associate professor of anthropology at Purdue University specializing in food systems, climate, and farming, is demonstrating the power of media to drive policy conversations. As a current participant in the [SSN Media Fellowship](#), Andrew recently [published a timely OpEd](#) in *The Indianapolis Star* highlighting the critical role of school lunch programs in supporting local food systems and community health. He then worked closely with SSN's policy team to translate his research into direct outreach to state policymakers — sparking important conversations about evidence-based reforms. SSN spoke with Andrew about his journey into public scholarship, what he's learned through the fellowship, and how he's using his scholarship to make a tangible impact beyond academia. The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.



Q&A

What has been your personal journey to public scholarship?

Andrew: I work on issues of climate, food and farming, and the environment, so there are a lot of fairly straightforward opportunities for me to start intersecting with people in the policy space. I learned about SSN at a workshop at Purdue in 2019. I was curious to know more about the organization because at that time I had just written a paper where I conducted a GIS analysis of where young new farmers were located who were growing food for human consumption on a pretty small scale and selling it locally. So it seemed like a good opportunity to support them with an upcoming farm bill, but I'd never done that before. It all came together in that moment where I had a research project and they showed us in this workshop how to write a policy brief.

Overall, working at a place like Purdue, which is a land grant university, and working as an ethnographer with people who do this real world stuff, none of whom read scientific papers, I thought this would be another way to get their stories out there and be accountable to the people who are doing the things that I study.

This year, you are participating in the SSN Media Fellowship. What got you interested in that fellowship and what has that experience been like?

Andrew: I wanted to push myself to do more of this kind of public writing and outreach, and this seemed like a great opportunity to do that and to be accountable for it. At universities we're not always given a reason to write up that one extra op-ed or write up an extra policy facing piece because that's not how the reward structure is set up. But this was a great opportunity to make myself do it and I figured I'll also learn how to do it so I can then teach others or to just pick up some good tips for self-promotion.

Through this fellowship, it's been great hearing from other people's experiences and we've had these media workshops where I've been able to learn some of these things. But I think more than anything, the fellowship just gave me that incentive to keep trying to write these public facing pieces. It's a reason to do it and to say, 'Well, I wouldn't maybe ordinarily write this op-ed or contact these people, but now I'm part of this program and now I've got a reason to go out and do that.'

As part of this fellowship, you recently published an op-ed on school lunches in [The Indianapolis Star](#). What prompted you to write that piece?

Andrew: I'm in the final stages of writing a book about local food systems, and one of the consistent threads in that has been this opportunity for small farmers and local food systems to intersect with larger state programs like school lunches. This is something that I also personally feel strongly about, having gone through public schools and eaten public school lunches a lot, and now my kid goes to a school where she's part of a school lunch system.

With some of the restructuring around public dollars, this is one of those items that has come up for discussion and there are serious questions about how we fund that. It seems to me through my research, but

also my experience as a parent, that we've got a strong choice here where we could use some data and some scholarly voices to say that there is a lot of compounded benefit that comes from a program like school lunches. Because this is something that I happen to know a little bit about as a researcher, I was really happy to find a way to put that argument into a public facing forum.

You've since worked with SSN's policy team to use that op-ed to reach policymakers directly. What have those conversations been like so far?

Andrew: SSN's policy team has been super helpful in giving me names of people I might reach out to and the context for reaching out. They also helped me to develop talking points, get a sense for what these conversations would be like, and how to follow up, because this is a different group of people than I'm normally used to talking to. As a result, I've been able to have a couple of phone calls with policy folks in the state senate and at the institutional level where the op-ed was a great starting point. I was then able to build from there and send out some resources and just show these people working on policies around school lunches and local food systems that there's a lot of great data that can back them up.

During these conversations, the policymakers have been able to tell me about some of the things that they're working on and how their piece of legislation fits into their larger system. I learned a little bit more about the rules of how you introduce legislation at the state level, which I was not super familiar with, but obviously is incredibly important if you want to get something actually done.

And it's also been an opportunity for me to just say, 'Hey, thanks for the work that you're doing. People are paying attention. I'm paying attention. What are some of the things that I could do to help out in these efforts? If you are trying to make a case similar to the one that I'm making in this op-ed around some of the benefits that school lunches provide, how can my data or these other data be put to good use and how can we make better evidence-based decisions?'

Sometimes it's just a matter of making the right kind of case to the right kinds of people. For something like local food and schools, these are things that aren't solely partisan issues, lots of people are involved in them across all kinds of ideologies. So that means that everybody, to use a food metaphor, has a seat at the table on this one.

Based on these experiences, do you have any advice for other scholars who may want to engage in similar ways

Andrew: You should do it. It was much more straightforward than I thought it would be. I think we're so used to long timetables in academia, where you submit something and then you get reviews in eight months, and then you might turn that around in another two months and everything just takes a really long time. When it comes to op-eds and policy outreach and following up, things move a lot quicker. That requires you to be on top of your facts, but it also is really refreshing because if there's a big issue and you've got an informed thing

to say about it then you can get in touch with somebody and they do want to hear from you. All of those things were pleasant surprises.

I think it's not always clear if people are listening to academic arguments and research, but op-eds and phone calls that follow up on them are great ways to start that. I definitely wouldn't have done it without the fellowship, it wouldn't have been a top priority or maybe even occurred to me, so I'm grateful for that. What I've taken away from this experience is that there are terrific ways for people to get some idea out there and then to follow up on it, especially if it's got some sort of public hook, which a lot of our work does right now.

Besides this fellowship, what's coming up next for you?

Andrew: My book will be going into production in the summer and it is tentatively called Feeding the World as if People Mattered. This is a story of groups of people around the world who are getting involved in their local food systems in ways that don't necessarily earn huge amounts of money or produce huge amounts of things, but basically enable us to live well as communities in a larger sense. And so the question there is really, what's the point of some of these farms? Is it to grow as much corn and soybeans or cotton as possible? Or is it to enable people to stay in their hometowns and have a really nice rural way of being during these uncertain times? And if that's the thing that we're going for, then these farm systems are actually really good at keeping that possibility for a good life going.

ANDREW FLACHS

Purdue University



Flachs's research focuses on the sociocultural and socioecological aspects of local and global agriculture systems. Overarching themes in Flachs's writings include the lived experiences of agricultural technologies; the value of local management knowledge in managing complex agro-ecologies; and the socioeconomic impact of revivalist or alternative food systems. At Purdue University; Flachs works with agricultural extension to help build community partnerships and understand how new technologies and programs serve the needs of farmers and eaters.