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Digital Food Activism - a book review

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By Michelle Pentecost



DIGITAL FOOD ACTIVISM

Tanja Schneider, Karin Eli, Catherine Dolan and
Stanley Ulijaszek



[Digital Food Activism](#)

[Tanja Schneider](#), [Karin Eli](#), [Catherine Dolan](#) and [Stanley Ulijaszek](#) (eds.)

Routledge Series in Critical Food Studies, 2018, 234 pages

A Swiss academic scans the barcode on her plastic water bottle. The bottle touts itself as 'Swiss mountain water', but the app that decodes the barcode quickly dispels that image: the company is a subsidiary of a large American conglomerate.

A shopper quietly adds an extra label to a product on the shelf, warning other consumers of its genetically-modified contents. She printed the label herself, and watched a YouTube video on how to apply the label without attracting attention in the supermarket aisle.

Two researchers present an image of 3D printed food to a focus group. The food is a geometrically shaped snack bar that has an off-white colour, and is made of ground-up insects. The image provokes disgust for most people, while a few wonder whether alternative foodstuffs like this could be the answer to world hunger.

Tanya Schneider and colleagues' new edited volume on Digital Food Activism is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which new digital and technological formations are making possible new forms of food activism. Drawing on examples ranging from apps that help consumers to identify brands in conflict with their own values and ethics, to the possibilities and surprises that 3D food printing might afford, the volume extends existing scholarship on digital activism, food activism and their intersections. The volume's overarching research question is broad in its remit: 'How do diverse actors, including activists, computers, mobile phones, digital network infrastructures and platforms, enact new relationships between food, its producers and consumers, with implications for food activism and food governance?' The volume engages with two bodies: the 'materio-metabolic' and the 'informational-discursive' (see contribution by Lezaun), and it is the productive tension between these that makes for a thought-provoking read.

The 234-page volume is comprised of 9 contributions, book-ended by an introduction and wrap-up by the volume editors. As the latest addition to the Routledge Critical Food Studies series, this book asks important questions about food activism and food governance in a digital age through careful research on new collectives and networks, from the high-tech to the ordinary and the mundane. Browsing through the impressive contributions, two broad themes become apparent: first, that digital food activism is fraught with contradictions; and second, that these contradictions harbour unexpected political outcomes. Ryan Foley's ethnographic portrait of an Italian cooperative, for example, reveals the paradoxes of 'marketing critical consumption': that is, the use of large corporate social media tools such as Facebook to market a discerning form of consumption of sustainable produce. Eva Giraud finds similar tensions in her study of anti-McDonald's campaigns, where the frictions of 'anti-capitalist' action and digital food activism become apparent when informal hierarchies in activist networks emerge, based on ideological commitments such as veganism for example. Perhaps the most uncanny contradiction is that documented by Deborah Lupton and Bethaney Turner: the gulf between the utopian ideal that 3D printed food is a solution to food scarcity, and the reality of consumers who shudder and gag at the thought of a printed insect bar, however protein-rich it might be. The suggestion made by some of Lupton and Turner's participants that

3D printed food would be suitable for 'the poor' inverts the notion of technology as an aspirational commodity. At the same time, as Tania Lewis argues in her chapter, the new consumer responsibility fostered by the wealth of digital information about products overlooks the substantial environmental impact of the necessity of technology for modern day life.

Underlying the contradictions wrought by new ways of protesting or campaigning around food are questions of politics and social justice. As Amy McLennan, Stanley Ulijaszek and Mariano Beguerisse-Diaz caution, digital platforms are assumed to be a democratizing force; yet digital space remains relatively unregulated. Without regulation, digital content does not reflect a breadth of information and opinion, but rather reinforces the prominence of some voices over others. For example, in their analysis of actors creating Twitter content on diabetes, MacLennan and her colleagues show how techniques from network science can be used to understand which content has the greatest influence. Tesco, the UK supermarket giant, emerges as having a surprisingly prominent global presence in the diabetes Twittersphere, prompting important questions about the actors and agendas that shape online diabetes discourse. Similarly, Sarah Lyon observes the differential access of publics to the internet in her fieldwork with small scale Fair Trade/organic coffee farmers in Southern Mexico, with implications for fairness and justice in the chain from small-scale farmer to Fair Trade distributor. For the farmers, internet access offers a direct line to consumers and distributors thousands of miles away, and yet in practice imagined opportunities for connection are not realised.

Another key tension dealt with in this volume is the potential for collective action that digital platforms appear to offer, but can sometimes subvert. Alana Mann's piece on 'hashtag activism' around the right to food in Australia highlights that digital networks or communities that form around a particular hashtag issue may or may not share a collective identity based on these formations. Collective identity formation is not necessarily an aim or given outcome of new digital food activism: as Melissa Caldwell notes in her ethnography of 'food hackers', experimentation and improvisation are central to the hacking philosophy, privileging a participatory, even emancipatory, politics. Food hacking, disrupting both food and technology, may well permit new possibilities, but the volume's recurring question is whether and how digital food activism produce new inclusions and exclusions, and what new and unexpected politics emerge as a result.

Methodologically, the volume points to creative possibilities such as combining network analysis and social theory or using participatory action research to blur the line between research and activism. This work also raises concerns about the cautions required when using digital platforms as a research database. Amid new public concerns about privacy,

surveillance and the use of digital data, food connects a vast number of actors along digital chains of production and consumption: 'the harvest' is now both the physical produce and the data acquired from farm to table.

For those interested in media studies, food studies, science and technology studies, or those hacking at these disciplinary divisions, this volume will provide much food for thought, digital and otherwise.

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