

## GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

# Special issue on E-Politics of Food from Online Campaigning to the Aesthetics of Food Porn

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Food is central in and to our daily lives; its production, consumption, manufacture and processing is enmeshed with complex issues including poverty, scientific knowledge, and sustainability. Food also remains controversial in how we conceive of our identities and how construct others. In an age of austerity or prosperity, food can reflect our changing values and be symbolic of our orientation towards our immediate and distant worlds. As we create new online rituals of imaging food and archiving daily memories, food assumes a renewed focus in our digital culture. Looking beyond the aesthetics of food, we as editors of the special issue wanted to explore how and why food can become the focal point of conflict and thereby politicized.. The politicization of food issues has wide social, economic, and cultural significance. It can draw attention to policy failures, perceived threats to a society or existing practices that serve to define a cultural identity. What has changed is the proliferation of online platforms that allow more organizations and individuals to engage with the politics of food; enabling a wider dissemination of these views; and the potential for an expansion of conflict, nationally and transnationally.

The first article in this special issue is concerned with the creation of new online rituals of imaging food and archiving daily memories. Yasmin Ibrahim explores this through the changing concept of food porn, arguing that the capture, styling and sharing of food images via smartphones has moved beyond aesthetics, to inviting the gaze of others, and renegotiating the unattainability that food porn signifies in the mainstream media. In the process, new social conventions and rituals of sharing are being created. Ibrahim traces the origin of the term 'food' or 'gastro porn' to concerns in the 1970s about professionally taken food images used in popular television and glossy magazines that made use of pornographic features to present, such as, rich desserts as visually sensuous. The concept of food porn draws attention not so much to the content but to consuming the unattainable from a distance; to food as a performative medium dissociated from eating; and to the permanence of images that transcends the transitory, perishable nature of food. With the shift to digital cultures, Ibrahim argues, food porn has retained many of these original visual, performative and unattainable dimensions. Yet, smartphones and other mobile devices also create distinctive new cultures and the democratizing of food porn is one of these, with amateurs now able to capture food porn in new ways centered around individual social

capital and a form of ownership of the image in the sense of this ‘porn is mine’. Amateur food porn is also about new rituals that not only mark everyday meal times but also celebrate and commemorate the occasion, inviting the gaze of others and creating memories.

Ibrahim argues that ‘food porn online did not emerge in a vacuum’; these everyday rituals of imaging have their roots in the development of consumer culture and our socializing into accepting new stylized food images as part of that culture. She draws attention to how the advent of the cheap, mobile Kodak camera meant people could capture key moments in private and public spaces on image. Print capitalism facilitated the mass circulation of content including advertising, and in the tabloid and television age food imagery became part of a spectacle, “‘groomed’ for consumption’ through the lens but never ingested. The expansion of the fast food industry facilitated the global circulation of food cultures. In the social media age, food imaging signifies the production of self and the diarization of everyday life. User-generated content (UGC) is integrated into commercial platforms through social network sites and video-sharing sites that foster interactivity and connectivity. Digital cultures blur the boundaries between producer and consumer into the prosumer, a trend further facilitated by the proliferation of articles on how to improve images taken on a smartphone to meet the insatiable appetite of the Internet for content. The construction and commodification of self and food are intertwined online. Ibrahim concludes that the image economy taps into our need to preserve ourselves beyond the transient.

The second article by Anita Howarth looks at austerity food blogs as a focal point of conflict over food poverty and the policies towards it in austerity Britain. The ideology of austerity is rooted in a belief in the primary importance of cutting the public deficit, and the Conservative-led government has interpreted this in terms of reducing benefit cuts and legitimized these cuts in terms of individual culpability explanations of poverty and the stigmatizing of impoverished benefit claimants. Howarth conceptualizes austerity food blogs as written by those forced to live hand to mouth, and a hybrid form of digital culture that merges narratives of lived experiences, food practices and political commentary, providing valuable insights into the subjectivities of modern poverty and an alternative view of the causes of poverty to that espoused by the dominant ideology. These blogs have become prominent at a critical juncture where rising levels of food poverty, welfare reform and the age of austerity have converged and new charity-run food banks have emerged to provide emergency food relief for those who cannot afford to feed themselves. Howarth looks at how an exemplar of these blogs, ‘A Girl Called Jack’, challenged the dominant ideology of austerity through accounts of its effects on individual lives and struggles to survive.

She argues that ‘Jack’ broke the silence the stigma of poverty often imposes on the impoverished by making the private trauma and vulnerabilities of a mother struggling to feed her son public and visible. In so doing, the blogger Jack Monroe invited the pity of readers and their proximity to her subjectivities. Her narratives challenge government explanations of poverty as reductionist, drawing attention to structural, systemic and individual causes of it. Her political commentaries also directly resist the stigmatizing of benefit claimants and food bank users by government ministers as factually inaccurate, uninformed, and out of touch. However, it is the food practices she developed from the learned experiences of trying to eat healthily on a £10-a-week food shop that earned awards and acclaim for Monroe ‘revolutionizing budget cooking’. Howarth argues that these practices constitute survival techniques necessitated by the shift in British lifestyles over 30 years towards a reliance on ready meals and a loss of basic skills in cooking. ‘Jack’ resonated powerfully, attracting mainstream media attention, a sizeable social media following, and the labeling of Monroe as a “social media” celebrity and the “face of modern poverty.” However, as Howarth argues, these are problematic labels. Monroe did disrupt dominant stereotypes of benefit claimants and personalize food poverty, making it proximate for many who had no direct experience of it; but in making her vulnerabilities public and vis-

ible she opened herself up to ideological and personal skepticism, criticism and outright attack across the political spectrum. Her polarizing of opinion highlights not only the deep ideological divides in Britain over austerity and the welfare state, but also more profound questions as to what modern poverty is and who the poor in today's society are.

Christopher Holmberg is concerned with the blogosphere as a space of political conflict over knowledge and the polarization of debate between establishment science and the alternative science of fad diets. In particular, he looks at how three prominent promoters of the low-carb high-fat (LCHF) diet in Sweden have used their blogs and professional status as medical experts operating outside mainstream science to challenge official nutritional guidelines in ways that undermined public confidence in those provided by the national health authority. The diet is more radical than its popular precursor, the Atkins diet, and Holmberg found that the controversy surrounding the LCHF diet escalated after the exoneration of one of its proponents by the professional medical body in Sweden. The accompanying report provided no medical support for the LCHF diet, but mainstream and social media framed the uproar as disagreement between different scientists, and the public concluded the diet had equivalent status to the official nutritional guidelines. Holmberg locates his analysis of the public controversy over LCHF diets within a postmodern medical paradigm of declining public trust in expert systems and the legitimacy of scientific authority. While social media have expanded the popularization of science, facilitating the wider circulation of knowledge and the active searching out of information, there are also risks as knowledge moves beyond the bounded spaces of textbooks and scientific journals. Unconventional scientists, Holmberg argues, typically publish on social media rather than in specialist publications, thereby circumventing traditional peer review. Convergence facilitates a collective culture that brings together people otherwise on the periphery and the public, who increasingly define public interest, and place judiciously crafted and critically reviewed evidence on a par with that of activists, pseudo-scientists, or dissident scientists. Holmberg argues that in the postmodern context truth is afforded a relativism with multiple meanings and ways of knowing, thereby making it difficult for the public to evaluate the reliability of sources. Furthermore, with the proliferation of information and uncertainty over many food issues, individuals cluster around like-minded views.

Holmberg identified a number of key strategies used by the proponents of the LCHF diet to gain credibility and present themselves as experts the public could trust. These include drawing attention to their medical qualifications, degrees and professional titles, whilst at the same time openly positioning themselves as being outside establishment science so free to tell the "truth." Not only did the proponents bypass traditional peer review, they also used self-experimentation and anecdotes provided by people commenting on their blogs. Holmberg found that well-timed events such as the controversial trial and acquittal of a proponent of the diet, shaped opinion formation in social media and multiplied the anecdotal evidence of the efficacy of the diet through readers' comments on the blogs. In response to criticism of their reliance on anecdotal evidence, the proponents have started to move from anecdotal initiatives on social media to enabling the accumulation of conventional scientific evidence through crowdsourcing to finance reliable scientific studies, host conferences and expand the network. Holmberg concludes that in the digital age, the use of information is based on availability rather than accuracy. If different interest groups start blogs that attack peer-reviewed science, and the scientific community does not engage in a similar communication mode, they will miss an important opportunity to educate the public.

The fourth article by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato and Sergei Andreevich looks at issues of sustainable fishing and the role of the 2010–2013 transmedia television campaign, 'Fish Fight', produced by Britain's Channel 4 television station. The authors argue that the campaign was designed to raise public awareness of the practice of discarding caught fish in order to meet

quotas set under the European Common Fisheries Policy and to pressure the authorities to change the policy. They draw on existing definitions of transmedia storytelling as the art of building a storyworld in which each extension makes a distinctive contribution to the overall story. The art has developed in response to the need for media projects that conform to new multiscreen and multiplatform modes, content expansion and audience participation, interaction, or collaboration. Consequently, as Gambarato and Andreevich argue, transmedia storytelling is not about repackaging the same content across different platforms but about audience engagement and participation with a story spread across multiple channels.

The central narrative of discarding fish started with a YouTube video that went viral, which put the concern on the public agenda and was followed by a Channel 4 documentary series shown as far afield as Thailand, the Philippines and Antarctica. These initial outputs were extended to iOS mobile applications, quizzes, and tweets and emails sent by consumers of the story to the European Parliament. These extensions could have led to a campaign fragmented across multiple media platforms, but the television documentary “unit[ed] old and new media” into a coherent narrative based on high-quality documentary production supplemented with the digital capabilities of a website loaded with information graphics and data visualization. The main purpose in using multiple platforms to develop the storyworld was to encourage audience engagement and mobilize the public by supplying them with mechanisms to lobby the European Parliament through petitions, tweets and emailing MEPs. The authors also found that in addition to the original celebrity television host, other celebrities including Prince Charles and internationally acclaimed chefs joined the campaign. Not only was the documentary shown outside of Britain, similar campaigns were launched in other countries including Germany, France, Spain and Poland, thus facilitating a global spreading of the message, and the authors argue that the model helped to mobilize thousands of supporters. The EU quota policy was changed but the vote was far from unanimous. Although many viewed a policy that encourages discarding caught fish as ludicrous, some fishing federations, France and Spain opposed the change because of the potential impact of the changes on fishing communities and industries. There are also issues of whether the new policy is enforceable. Notwithstanding these concerns, Gambarato and Andreevich conclude that ‘Fish Fight’ demonstrated the potential power of multiplatform media production in raising public awareness and influencing policy change with political participation.

All four of the articles in this special issue highlight the centrality of food in our daily lives in different ways. Ibrahim is concerned with food images as a form of digital culture that offers new ways to relate to and connect with others. Howarth explores austerity food blogs as a platform from which to challenge the dominant ideology of austerity, the stigmatizing of benefit claimants, and our imaginings of food poverty. Holmberg raised serious questions about the adequacy of the response by national health authorities to the alternative science of fad diets proliferating on social media. Gambarato and Andreevich highlighted the potential of transmedia storytelling in mobilizing the public to lobby governments to change policy. Food has a long history of controversy and politicization; what has changed—and is explored in these four articles—is the proliferation of online platforms that allow more organizations and individuals to engage with the politics of food; enabling a wider dissemination of these competing views; and the potential for an expansion of conflict, nationally and transnationally.

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