

# *The politics of eating bits and bytes*

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## The Politics of Eating Bits and Bytes

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Learning what and how to eat is now a thoroughly digital affair. Learning what can be done with and through food is *also* now utterly digital in the food activism that has quickly colonised cyberspace. But what does this collection of 1's and 0's in the programmed form of mediated food politics mean for relationships to food, to activism, to the digital? What about our relationships to each other and to the natural world around us, to food knowledge and foodie 'things'? What about our understandings of ourselves and our own shifting, sometimes stable, connections to food and its digitised cultural politics? Can these unique collections of bits and bytes really change not just who we are and how we mediate food and food activism but actually modulate the material 'worlds of food' (Morgan et al, 2006) in meaningful and substantive ways?

Exploring, playing with, bending, twisting, re-arranging, and critiquing these questions is at the heart of *Digital Food Activism* and its empirically-rich and theoretically-precocious take on the 'ontological experiments' that frame the contemporary online world of food politics. Filtered through the multi-variate lenses of food hacking, humorous food resistances, subaltern digitalities, 3D fabricated foods, community organising and online permaculture assemblages, this volume is the first of its kind to work through the tensions, openings and boundaries created through the cultural politics of food activism in the digital age.

Digital food activism—and the multiple forms it takes, as this volume shows us—offers up what, in discussing food media more broadly, Christine Barnes (2017) refers to as 'moments of possibility'. The moments of possibility embedded in digital food activism work as 'knowledge transfer devices' designed to get audiences to think differently about food and change behaviours to create more diverse food systems. These digital spaces, in other cases, facilitate materially-significant networks to and from the 'real world' through activisms that include the human hands behind the keyboard and mouse, to the minds and bodies of those putting their hands in the dirt and more ethical food on their plate. Thus, online and offline resistances converge to co-create each other through fits and starts, through seamless connections, through the overt and the implicit, indeed, through the *multitudinous* ways that food's multitudes (Mol, 2008; Leer and Povlsen, 2016) are replicated each and every day in the 'connective action' of digital food activism.

Yet, this seeming democratisation of the foodscape is constrained by 'moments of *impossibility*', the antonym of Barnes' conceptual intervention. Equal and opposite instances of 'not doing' or 'not being able to do' are also embedded within digital food activism. They work to constrain activists and eaters through the boundedness of what various techno-social platforms can and can't do, the inequalities of content creation and access, and the overarching imperatives of capitalist value generation that embed profit at the centre of digital platforms. Various forms of digital food activism are bounded by our ever-shrinking attention spans, the labour it takes to filter digital information from noise to signal and the growing difficulties of gaining the eyeballs needed to construct food activism. In these duelling moments of im/possibility, digital food activism offers up a 'meditated biopolitics' of food (Goodman et al, 2017)

that include within them sometimes fleeting, sometimes ‘sticky’, moments of contestation, hope and the possibilities of building ‘other’ food worlds. But because of how our digital universe is structured, digital food politics must also acquiesce to hegemonic algorithms, partake in Big Capitalism and even, presumably, shape the continuing echo-chamberisation of politics. These paradoxes and conflicts inherent in digital food activism—and the political, social and ecological stakes they raise—play out in various ways in the brilliant chapters that make up this book.

A second set of tensions analysed here are those contained within the transparencies that some formats of digital food activism enable as part of their promise for better food worlds. Indeed, the transparency afforded by the digital’s new ways of knowing food, nature, growers and other eater activists, entangles us in global food networks like never before. These connective actions deploy the digital as a force for ‘good’ in ways unimaginable by early food movements who had to work through hand-made flyers at dusty health food stores. But of course, transparency in food assemblages is not all that new. For quite some time, scholars—some of whom are contributors to this volume (i.e. Dolan, Lyon)—have pointed out the ways that things like ethical food labels work to show us the story ‘behind the food’ in bids to facilitate more moral food economies. What is new then about digital food activism’s bid for transparency? Surely, if anything it is about the ease of share-ability, the replicability and transferability of this information, its mobility, its possibilities of rich, thick description and imagery and its almost instant ability to create (relatively free) global networks in the media ecologies of the digital.

However, even with digital food activism’s offer of a techno-social transparency surrounding the food we eat, or *should* be eating, it is possible to miss critical concerns right in front of our eyes. For example, last week I ate a banana—brought to me by my friendly, multi-national food corporation—that was tagged as originating from farm ‘55116’ and that urged me to digitally ‘visit’ the farm from whence it came. I took the bait and entered the farm number on a webpage—entitled ‘Dole Earth’ for obvious reasons—and came face to face with Columbian banana farm 55116. I was then treated to an interactive farm tour of all aspects of the banana harvest and, not surprisingly, what Dole is doing to protect workers and the planet. Andrés Jimenezu, one of the farmworkers featured in a video, told me what it was like to work on a Dole banana farm, when, of course, he is not running or inspiring other fellow workers to take up the sport. Through this form of digital transparency, I now know more about the farm and farmworkers who brought me my banana than I do about the farms that I pass by on my way to work, the cashiers I say hello to at my local supermarket or the drivers who sometimes deliver my groceries. In this, digital food activism can bring the distant close and make it visible, but it can, somewhat ironically, make the close seem more distant and *invisible*. As various chapters in this volume point out, transparency is selective and particular in ways that both open up pathways of hope and possibility but also close down others through the relentless application of technology, capitalism and the limits to knowing. As the book shows, we must be wary and vigilant of the political economies of digital infrastructures and the economies of attention, creativity and geography that produce the online food cyberscapes we can both see *and not see* in the affordances of digital food activism.

Questions still abound of course, some taken up in the volume, others inspired from its contents. First, how do online food activism and their socio-material ‘parliament of things’ (Latour, 1993) become the durable stuff of the everyday? Put another way, what are the processes by which the ontological experiments of digital food activism work to break us out of our existing habits, choices and engagements with food to facilitate new food ontologies about what is ‘right’ and ‘good’ to grow and eat? Habits and tastes, much like our current state of politics more generally, are individually enduring and hard to break away from at a time when the sustainability of the food system is in serious question and new modes of knowing and doing are required for a liveable post-Anthropocene. Second, how does

digital food activism re-inscribe inequalities, begin to open up opportunities to flatten them or perhaps do both at the same time? Guthman and Brown (2016) certainly have strong opinions about the ways consumers' digital engagements maintain existing inequalities with farmworkers in California. But, their overt dismissal of digital food politics is too simplistic. Rather, digital food activism evinces what I have called the 'relational contingencies' of food (Goodman, 2016). This approach to food acknowledges the need for analysts to not just critically investigate food's progressive *and* conservative cultural political economies, as many chapters do here, but, simply put, the *specific* and *contextualised* impacts of digital food activism matter in *contingent* and *relational* ways worthy of deep and nuanced scrutiny. Finally, how does digital food activism challenge us to not just re-think what food is, as argued here, but also what activism is, can and should be? Does the simple existence of digital food activism, whether or not it is shared, liked and favoured, mean progressive work is going on? Does the mere desire to disturb, change and innovate the food system mean new spaces of digital hope are being formed in their wake (cf. Sexton, 2017)? The manifold, connected online—and offline—types of food politics analysed in this volume require us to not just begin to think about what forms political and material activism can and might take but how this committed activism shapes our collective ability to change our food worlds for the better. In this, *Digital Food Activism* is the perfect starting point for any and all researchers focused on studying not only the digitalisation of food and food activism but this book is essential for those wishing to analyse food politics at this decisive moment of the Anthropocene.

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