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FIELDWORK IN ONLINE FOODSCAPES

How to bring an ethnographic approach to studies of digital food and digital eating

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Introduction to digital food and digital eating

Digital technologies increasingly mediate how producers and consumers seek, share and interpret food and food-related information and eating practices. In the last few years, scholars have started exploring the growing digitalisation of food and eating and the emerging implications of these novel products, processes, and practices. This literature has theorised the digitalisation of food through the lenses of ‘digital food cultures’ (Lupton, 2018; Lupton & Feldman, 2020), *Digital Food Activism* (Schneider et al., 2018a), and ‘digital food’ (Lewis, 2019). Reviewing this and related literature we propose to make a distinction between studies of digital food and studies of digital eating. We define studies of digital food as those that focus either on novel food substances or on digitally-enabled and data-focused production and distribution processes of foods. We define studies of digital eating as those that focus on novel eating practices enabled and maintained through mobile, sensor-based and digital technologies. Whereas studies of digital food attend to the digitised histories, economies and trajectories of new food items, studies of digital eating focus on altered subjectivities and the roles that eating and its digitally mediated practices play. Thus, studies of digital food focus primarily on what people eat as a result of digitised and datafied innovation and production processes, while studies of digital eating aim to understand how people eat differently (or not) when using digital technologies, platforms and devices and the resulting information.

Having distinguished between digital food and digital eating, we suggest that the next step is to conceptualise what ‘the digital’ means in digital food studies. The digitalisation of food and eating is a multi-directional, interactional process. While digitalisation shapes food and eating, multiple actors, platforms and structures also shape what ‘the digital’ means, is and does. These include, among others, users and developers, digital and analogue devices, food procurement and consumption spaces,

and often-unseen policy and research environments. Our chapter therefore reviews methodologies that have been used in recent years to investigate the digitalisation of food, with particular focus on the strengths and limitations of each method in examining 'the digital'. We conclude with examples from own work on digital food activism. Drawing on these examples, we delineate a proposed ethnographic approach to understanding digital food and digital eating. Such an ethnographic approach, we argue, can problematise reductionist understandings of 'the digital', capture the porous boundaries between 'digital' and 'analogue' food, and reveal the 'symbiotic agency' (Neff & Nagy, 2019) of people, food and platforms.

Challenges of studying digital food and digital eating

As researchers in the social sciences and humanities have shown over the last decades, studying food and eating offers a unique and rich lens on the intersections of self and society. As an emerging phenomenon, digital food and digital eating have been theorised by only a few scholars in the past years. This begs the question: has nothing much changed from pre-digital to digital times that warrants more research interest both within the field of (critical) food studies and beyond? We suggest that there are currently two main strands of analysis: analysis that emphasises socio-cultural, economic and political factors shaping food consumption and eating habits in which the digital does not feature prominently; and emerging analysis that emphasises how the social, cultural, economic and political are inextricably inter-related with processes of digitalisation and datafication (for more detailed overview see next section). Currently, the overlap between these two strands of analysis is limited, with the exception of the work of selected food and media studies researchers, who have been the first to study how food and eating are represented on social media, blogs and micro-blogging platforms (de Solier, 2018; Leer & Povlsen, 2016; Lewis & Phillipov, 2018; Rousseau, 2013) and some early publications on digital food cultures and activism as mentioned in the previous section.

Research interest in this topic is likely to grow and broaden in the future – facilitated by books such as this one – as digitalisation and datafication affect different spaces and practices. For instance, there is an increase in precision or 'smart' farming, which utilises sensory devices to collect agricultural big data; the development of blockchain technology to trace food provenance; and the uptake of mobile apps that track users' food consumption or caloric intake. These examples illustrate how food and its production, distribution and consumption are increasingly translated into digital data. Research on digital food and eating enables in-depth understandings of how people's everyday practices and identities intersect with new and emerging digitally-enabled technologies of production, distribution, and consumption, as well as with digital technologies of interaction and communication.

We argue that the general lack of empirical research on the digitalisation of food and eating highlights several challenges attendant to designing studies that explore food and eating in the digital era. From a theoretical perspective, research on digital food and eating requires engagement with relational approaches (e.g.,

Actor-Network Theory, new materialisms, relational geography), which are not yet mainstream in food studies. Conceptually, digital food and digital eating challenges taken-for-granted binaries of the digital and the analogue, consumption and non-consumption. Methodologically, digital food and digital eating, as a constantly evolving phenomenon that spans human actors, food products, and technologies, across different spaces and geographies, necessitates innovative dialogues between quantitative (aggregated) data analysis and qualitative understandings of individuals' lived experiences. Moreover, as digital food and eating involves multiple actors and platforms (which may have little in common with one another, in both ideology and infrastructure), research on digital food and digital eating requires both comprehensive knowledge of the phenomenon as a whole, and the identification of – and granular focus on – platforms and practices that can best elucidate emerging trends. The next section considers how different methodologies have the potential to address these challenges and advocates for an ethnographic approach to digital food and digital eating. We argue that an ethnographic approach is ideally positioned to examine complex socio-technical phenomena situated in multiple systems and settings.

Bringing an ethnographic approach to the study of digital food and digital eating

Across the social sciences, scholars have used diverse methods to study digital food and digital eating. These include network analyses of big data generated on social media platforms, content analyses of user-generated digital media texts, online focus groups and interviews, and participatory action research, among others. We will discuss some of these methods later in the chapter. Our main interest, however, is exploring how to bring an ethnographic approach to digital food studies, and we therefore begin this section with a discussion of ethnography.

What do we mean by an ethnographic approach? There is no single definition of ethnography, underscoring the complexity of this method, as well as the diversity of disciplines that use ethnographic approaches. Broadly speaking, ethnography aims at the detailed inductive investigation of a phenomenon. As such, ethnographic research involves extensive engagement with a selected study site, or with a few selected sites; indeed, Hine (2015) describes ethnography as a bodily-oriented, circumstantially active and experientially focused methodology. Importantly, ethnography is comprised of multiple data collection methods, including participant observation, semi-structured or unstructured interviews, surveys, archival research, and participatory research. This methodological complexity captures the ethnographic view of social phenomena as complex and as situated in multiple systems and contexts (see also Charmaz & Olesen, 1997; Reeves et al., 2008).

Ethnography requires adaptation when studying digital phenomena and practices. However, rather than defining digital phenomena and practices as different from analogue ones and warranting separate methods, Hine advocates for an understanding of the Internet as an embedded, embodied and everyday phenomenon and

suggests that researchers “look both inward and outward in search of ethnographic holism” (Hine, 2015: 53). By looking outward, ethnographers focus not only on the Internet itself but also on its multiple contexts, embedding the Internet within multiple institutions, devices and practices of daily life. Hine also encourages ethnographers to look inward in search of embodied experiences of using the Internet in everyday life. Other researchers have advocated related approaches for doing qualitative digital research in anthropology (Horst & Miller, 2012) and in sociology (Lupton, 2015). Digital anthropologists and sociologists consider digital devices as material culture and users’ digital engagements as expressions that reveal shared values and forms of sociality.

How has ethnography contributed to digital food studies? Ethnography has a long tradition in critical food studies, where it has been used by anthropologists, sociologists and geographers to illuminate socialities of food and eating, relationships between eating and affect, and societal changes in food practices (for an overview see, for instance, Lupton, 1996; Poulain, 2002/2017). These analyses have called attention to networks of eating (Abbots & Lavis, 2013), which include not only individual eaters, but also food producers, distributors, retailers, and regulators, alongside the food products themselves. Through ethnography’s focus on lived experiences of eating, food scholars have developed critical accounts of how individual and social eating practices dialogue with macro-level infrastructures (e.g., Abbots et al., 2015; Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Carolan, 2011). As such, ethnographic work has shown how networks or assemblages of eating extend from the individual, embodied event of consuming food to the wider political-economic structures that shape the landscapes of food growing, manufacturing, and marketing (e.g., Forney et al., 2018; Le Heron et al., 2016).

Despite the important role ethnography has played in critical food studies, ethnographic research in digital food studies is still not widespread. To date, there has been little ethnographic research on the relational co-constitution of food-body-society with and through digital media platforms and devices, with a particularly glaring lack of engagement with the infrastructures of digital media platforms and how they shape emergent eating practices (but see Didžiokaitė et al., 2018; Ruckenstein, 2015, for studies of dietary or calorie tracking). One exception is the research of sociologist Michael Carolan (2017b), who has recently studied how digital platforms ‘shape the foodscapes we imagine and enact’ (Carolan, 2017b: 818) and also explores the ‘types of active selves’ that interactive assemblages engender based on thick description of two case studies, FarmDrop, a food distribution platform for London-based producers and consumers, and Farm Hack, a US-based group of farmers who promote open code, hack digital locks built into software of farm equipment, and share the information with each other. Carolan defines two types of active selves: active citizens and more-than-active citizens. The latter group, to whom he refers as ‘activists’, aims to disrupt established routines and everyday practices. The digital platform, then, plays an active role in defining particular types of agency around food.

Digital food activism: Digital platforms as actors in networks of eating

Given the paucity of ethnographic work in digital food studies, why do we advocate for an ethnographic approach? Our call for ethnography is inspired by our recently published edited volume, *Digital Food Activism* (Schneider et al., 2018a), which explores digital platforms as influential actors in networks of eating. The volume analyses how emergent forms of food activism – enabled and shaped by digital platforms – remap networks of food politics, production, distribution, and consumption, transforming relationships between consumers and industrial and policy actors. Several chapters in our volume explore these processes through an ethnographic lens, at times zooming in on locales as small as a supermarket or a backyard, to understand larger societal and economic forces at play. These chapters reveal the potential that ethnography holds for digital food studies alongside the challenges involved in developing an ethnographic approach to ‘the digital’. We provide a brief review of ethnographic contributions to our volume before turning to one example from our own research on digital food activism in the next section, to highlight how ethnography has been used to study digital food activism, in comparison to other methods mentioned in the beginning of this section.

In *Digital Food Activism*, the ethnographic chapters focus on illuminating how small groups of consumers, producers, retailers, and hackers engage with digital media to effect change in the food system. Employing a range of ethnographic approaches, these chapters develop nuanced understandings of how digital food activism is enacted in users’ everyday practices and encounters. In her chapter on digital food hacktivism, Melissa Caldwell (2018) draws on multi-sited participant observation as an attendee of food hacking events, based in the United States, Eastern Europe and Russia. Caldwell explores how a newly emerging cluster of food hackers, citizen-scientists, and entrepreneurs creates disruptive food experiences through digital technologies. She finds that activists’ playful and experimental attitudes to food implicate social justice concerns about equity, safety and access to knowledge, and that digital materialities and spaces allow for the development of participatory food communities that challenge notions of property and expertise. Likewise, Sarah Lyon’s (2018) chapter elucidates how people engage with digital technologies to challenge relations of power in the food industry. Drawing on several field methods, including surveys of coffee producers, focus groups, and multiple unstructured interviews conducted across coffee-growing communities, Lyon focuses on how producers in agro-food networks – in this case, growers of fair trade/organic coffee in southern Mexico – use digital technologies to become more competitive in the specialty coffee market. Lyon develops an account of how coffee growers use online record keeping and social media to improve traceability and share their experiences with consumers and funders, arguing that growers adopt/adapt digital media to assert their political agency and promote food sovereignty. In another example, Ryan Foley (2018) draws on a year of intensive participant observation and interviews with an Italian social co-op, to question the boundaries that separate digital

food activism from digital food marketing. Having worked with the co-op's marketing team as part of her ethnographic research, Foley explores how the co-op uses Facebook in ways that intertwine products and ideologies, revealing the tensions and paradoxes that imbue the 'selling' of conscious consumption.

While Caldwell (2018), Lyon (2018), and Foley (2018) use different methods in their ethnographic studies, their chapters all highlight how an ethnographic approach can provide nuanced understandings of people's complex, sometimes contradictory, engagements with digital media, and how this, in turn, can illuminate digital food activism on a wider scale. However, as other chapters in our volume show, ethnography is not the only methodological pathway toward understanding people's engagements with digital food activism. Eva Giraud's (2018) chapter on anti-capitalist food activism is grounded in participatory action research. Giraud writes that, in contrast to ethnography, participatory action research entails skill-sharing and knowledge/resource co-production, blurring the boundaries that separate activism from research. As an active participant in Veggies, a UK-based grassroots organisation, Giraud finds that producing activist food media implicates power 'frictions', particularly now that activists use mainstream commercial social media, like Twitter or Facebook, and that these 'frictions' reveal how activists creatively negotiate multiple digital media to reach diverse audiences and consolidate their identity. Along similar lines, Tania Lewis (2018) draws on participatory research with permablitz activists in Melbourne, Australia, to trace the co-production of internet-enhanced food activism across locales, finding that when permablitz groups document their activities online, they provide local models of action that can be adopted by geographically distant communities. Additionally, contributors to our volume have shown how more 'traditional' social scientific methods, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups, can be used to understand people's engagements with digital food activism. Drawing on participant diaries and semi-structured interviews, Katharina Witterhold (2018) develops an in-depth case study analysis in which she demonstrates how young German women's everyday food practices reveal crucial differences in motivation and political potential between types of consumer activists. Another example is Deborah Lupton and Bethaney Turner's (2018) analysis of an online focus group in which they asked Australian participants to reflect on the possibility of consuming 3D printed foods. Finding that participants discussed 3D printed food as unnatural and potentially abject, Lupton and Turner show how consumers, activists, and technology companies develop definitions of food – what it is, and what it can be – in ways that mobilise specific, and sometimes clashing, values.

As described above, various qualitative methods, including ethnography, participatory action research, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and diary analysis, can help us understand people's everyday engagements with digital food and digital eating. The challenge, however, is how to develop ethnographic approaches that allow us to zoom in on digital platforms themselves and the interactions between users and platforms, and thereby understand the logics and values that underlie the development and operations of digital food infrastructures. Returning to *Digital Food Activism*, two chapters that focus on Twitter-based activism stand out in

offering possible pathways toward understanding social media platforms. In a chapter that explores how Twitter is used in diabetes-related discourses, Amy McLennan et al. (2018) combine network analysis and iterative thematic coding to understand which Twitter accounts are most influential, and which types of content are tweeted most frequently. Through this mixed methods analysis, the authors explore Twitter as a space where users may share values and coordinate action, whilst highlighting the lack of transparency about power and influence that inheres in the infrastructure of the platform. In a chapter on Twitter's role in food insecurity activism, Alana Mann (2018) employs the Twitter Capture and Analysis Tool Set (TCAT), to conduct a frame analysis of Twitter coverage of an Australian food security campaign. Mann focuses on hashtags, mentions, and handles as 'issue framing devices' and shows how Twitter elements such as hashtags, handles and mentions can serve as issue-framing devices, arguing that digital media platforms play a role in constituting issues and issue publics. Taken together, these two chapters develop a valuable account of digital food activism that centres on the logics of a social media platform, calling into question the presumed democratisation of knowledge and activism in/through social media.

Digital food activism: The case of Buycott

In our own research on digital food activism, we employed a variety of qualitative methods to examine the co-constitutive agency of people and platforms. To date, our research has focused on three case studies: a wiki platform, a mobile barcode-scanning app, and an online-centric food activism organisation. We have employed different methods to research each case, adapting our approach to the platform and to the organisational context underlying it.

For instance, to research (the pseudonymous) HowToBuyWiki, a non-profit organisation developing an open-source wiki platform dedicated to product transparency, we mainly focused on interviews with the organisation's six active members (Eli et al., 2015). We triangulated these interviews with formal documentation of the organisation's workshops and meetings, provided by the organisation's members, and also spent some time on the platform itself, studying how information was presented both visually and textually. Through this case study, we gained insight into the tensions between consumption and care, democratisation and expertise, that weave into the development of a digital activism platform.

In our case study of foodwatch, a non-profit organisation that uses social media and e-newsletters to promote consumer action around food-related campaigns, we chose to focus on the organisation's main communications tool - weekly e-newsletters (Schneider et al., 2019). Through a thematic analysis of 50 e-newsletters, we explored how foodwatch positions itself in the food policy landscape, identifying interlinked strategies through which foodwatch establishes its own expertise and authority.

Our third case study of Buycott is the focus of this section. Buycott is a barcode-scanning app that promotes political consumption through user-generated

campaigns, under the banner of ‘voting with your wallet’.¹ In studying this app, we relied to a considerable extent on textual analysis (Eli et al., 2016). However, our continuous engagement with Buycott enabled us to develop a co-presence that facilitated gaining an understanding of the development of Buycott. The Buycott case study, thus, provides useful insights into the practicalities of studying digital eating, which we describe in more detail in the next paragraphs.

Initially, our research of Buycott involved participatory engagement with the app. In 2013, following media coverage of Buycott’s campaigns for the labelling of genetically modified (GMO) foods and against Koch Industries, we decided to study how consumers engage with Buycott in everyday decision-making about food. We began by joining Buycott campaigns and using the app to scan the products we bought or already had in our homes or offices in Switzerland and the United Kingdom respectively. These auto-ethnographic explorations proved crucial for gaining first-hand experience of learning how to do app-mediated political consumerism. It also led to many questions (e.g., how exactly does the app work and based on which data? Who checks that the user-generated information is correct?), interesting revelations (e.g., a small Swiss mineral water producer being owned by a U.S. headquartered beverage corporation), and frustrations (e.g., certain products not being recognised and the request to manually add them to the database). It also occasionally led us to reflect about our consumption practices – as one of us described in a short blog post (Schneider, 2013) – thus leading us to engage in specific boycotts and buycotts, as the script of the app intended. On other occasions, though, the app provided us with ambiguous, unreliable, and conflicting information, which was of little practical use.

Our study continued, and in parallel to our own participatory insights about Buycott, we found that, on social media and app review sites, consumers were employing discourses that diverged from Buycott’s own (stated) project. In 2014, our focus shifted to exploring how consumers understand the ethical, political, and informational ramifications of Buycott. As we described in our article on Buycott (Eli et al., 2016), although Buycott’s project was envisioned – and discursively constructed – as participatory, this participatory script did not apply to many users, who engaged with the app as recipients, rather than contributors, of information, leading to conceptual and practical gaps. Later in 2014, a new aspect of Buycott emerged, and our case study shifted again. In the wake of the summer war between Israel and Gaza, a Buycott campaign titled “Long live Palestine boycott Israel” came to the foreground of both media and user attention.

Through following the unfolding of this campaign, we recognized that the case of Buycott was no longer about the mismatch of users and scripts, but about “dynamic co-constitution, involving the triad of the news media, citizen-consumers, and the ICT platform” (Eli et al., 2016, p. 66). We therefore decided to focus our case study on Buycott’s two defining campaigns – “Long live Palestine” and “Demand GMO Labelling” – and collect data focused on the triad we identified: all news media texts (published online, April 2013 to August 2014), user-generated posts (Buycott Facebook page, iTunes user reviews), and texts generated by Buycott’s official team

(the Buycott's website, Facebook page, Twitter accounts). We conducted a thematic discourse analysis of these texts, with particular interest in understanding tensions between media and user framings of Buycott and the identity that Buycott's developers constructed for the app. Through this approach, we developed an analysis of how multiple discourses co-construct and also delimit 'moments of possibility' (Barnes, 2017) for consumer action. In our paper based on this analysis, we explored how, in dialogue with Buycott's focus on individual consumer action conducted through barcoded items in retail spaces, users' discourses materialized political issues within products. For example, when referring to the "Demand GMO Labelling" campaign, many users wrote that Buycott informed them about products that contained GMO, thus translating a campaign for GMO labelling as a campaign that exposed "toxic food" (Eli et al., 2016: 70). Likewise, when writing about the "Long Live Palestine" campaign, many users imagined that boycotted products were directly linked to Israeli land or were used to fund weapons. In both cases, we found that users substantiated campaigns on Buycott through tangible consumer products, thereby transforming the app itself into an ethical commodity to be consumed.

As we wrote up our findings about all three case studies and compared the different cases, new questions related to Buycott emerged – questions we were able to answer neither based on further media or website analysis nor based on our participatory engagement with the app. The questions centred on Buycott sources of funding, its plans for the future and how Buycott and its team members dealt with information that consumers entered about products and the campaigns consumers launched. For instance, how did the Buycott team verify, whether the information was correct? Were all campaigns approved and did the Buycott team check whether the "to-be-boycotted" products or companies were correctly linked to specific campaigns? This led us to approach the start-up and request an interview with the founder, Ivan Pardo, in early 2017, which he agreed to give via Skype. Asking him about the consumers' and producers' reactions after the launch of the app, he shared with us that consumers' reactions were always positive, whereas "the response from the brands was more or less silence" and that companies rarely engaged with them directly. Pardo stated, "I know that they know that we exist but they mostly don't acknowledge us". However, there was one exception: brands occasionally contacted Buycott by email if some of the user-generated information was not correct, asking for a correction. Overall, the interview provided answers to our questions (cf. Eli et al., 2018) and complemented our previous insights, however, the question we got asked most during conference presentations – does boycotting/buycotting have an impact? – is a question we still could not provide a conclusive answer to; perhaps in part due to the brands' silence as a response to the consumers' actions.

Two years later, when one of us was preparing an academic talk that drew on our research on Buycott, we checked back to find that the Buycott website and mobile app had been updated. The main change we noticed was a new tab on the website entitled 'Barcode API'. A click on the tab led to the discovery that Buycott advertises itself as providing access to 'The world's largest UPC database', stating that 'our comprehensive product API provides data for over 150 million products from every

corner of the globe'.² A UPC (Universal Product Code), otherwise known as a barcode, offers a unique electronic identifier for products, allowing for scanning and tracking items in the retail sector. Buycott now offers paid plans to access this database: Plan Basic for \$49 a month, Plan Developer for \$99 a month and Plan Startup for \$499 a month. So, the crowd-sourced data that activist-consumers enter to create campaigns and connect brands/products to these products is now of monetary value to businesses, including Buycott itself. When we interviewed Ivan Pardo in 2017, he did not raise the possibility that Buycott might sell access to its vast database. Now it seems that Buycott's crowd-sourced data serves as the basis for a business model, likely to increase Buycott's financial valuation. The consumer-activists entering the data contribute to this valuation; however, their activities, enabled by digital and mobile technologies, are uncompensated. This blurs the boundaries between consumption and production, and one may argue that Buycott users provide free 'digital labour', typical of the digital economy (cf. Scholz, 2013).³

The development we chart above is signified in the succession of company logos that Buycott has been using since it was founded in 2013. When we first engaged with the app, the logo we encountered showed a clenched white fist holding three green dollar bills (\$20 visible on the first) against a black background. Over time this fist changed and became more abstract, holding a light green slip of paper that could connote a dollar bill but also a paper note or ballot paper. The background also changed from black to turquoise. In the logo's latest update, the fist and bills have disappeared. The current logo depicts a white lower-case b against a red background, placing the Buycott brand – rather than the consumer 'empowerment' it claims to facilitate – centre stage.

Based on our research on digital food activism, and the Buycott case in particular, we propose that ethnographic research drawing on different methodological elements, such as autoethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and media analysis, enables co-presence with digital platforms and their interfaces, devices, users and objects over a longer periods of time. This co-presence provides insights into the platformisation of eating, the enactment of data assemblages and shifting accountability relations (cf. Schneider et al., 2018b). When researching the digital economy and digitally enabled practices, long-term fieldwork, which is typical of ethnographic research, may be re-interpreted to mean longer-term ethnographically-inclined engagement with emerging, evolving and elusive digital technologies.

Lessons learned and outlook

There could be a temptation to approach digital food and digital eating with methodologies that explicitly give priority to exploring the 'digital' nature of the chosen phenomena and practices. For example, the research problem of understanding digital food activism could be tackled by employing digital ethnography. But is it that simple? Our research and that of others in this area problematises such a narrow understanding of the digital in digital food studies that exclusively attends to the digital by digital means. Hine (2015) emphasises how the online/offline divide is in

practice not always separate but co-present, and hence argues that researchers should ideally integrate the analysis of online engagements with 'real world' interviews and observations. In particular, Hine urges a cautious interpretative stance, which acknowledges that, in relying on online discourses, we do not have access to the particular spatio-temporal, material, or embodied contexts that framed each user's, journalist's, or the app developer's discursive expressions.

A second lesson is that researchers need to reflect about and address the potential issue of how to manage 'ethnographic distance' before, during, and/or after fieldwork. For example, researchers may regularly use food delivery apps to order food, self-tracking devices to monitor their diet, or post food photos on Instagram in their everyday life. These regular users of digital media face the challenge of rendering the familiar strange, which is essential in ethnographic research. Likewise, researchers who rarely use mobile apps, digital devices or social media platforms in their food-related practices face an equally challenging ethnographic task: to render the strange familiar. Ultimately, we would like to emphasise the importance of researchers stepping out of their comfort zone to defamiliarize themselves and gain a new understanding of a phenomenon.

A third lesson learned is the need for more studies of digital food and eating. The expected increase in digitalisation and datafication affecting food requires social science expertise on these processes and their effects on food and eating. An ethnographic approach can contribute an in-depth understanding of emerging practices and the changing values attendant to them. Moreover, multi-sited ethnographies of the same phenomenon add to a broader understanding of how the same processes of digitalisation and datafication vary but are also related dependent on context (including legal, political, and cultural) and how they are co-constituted. In general, this independent academic expertise is pivotal, we would argue, in the face of a growing corporate digital food economy. Given the prevailing data ownership and use strategies employed by corporate actors, it is likely that digital data will not be shared with consumers or with academic researchers. Data providing insights into what and how people eat could thus be in the hands of a few food producers, restaurants, and retailers – or most likely Amazon – (and those data analysis companies they sell their data to). Social science researchers can therefore play a crucial role in developing alternative (open access) data sources, and interpretations thereof.

We suggest that the next step for digital food studies is to elucidate how the multiple actors, platforms and structures involved in digital food and eating shape what 'the digital' means and does. These include, among others, users and developers, digital and analogue devices, food procurement and consumption spaces, and often-unseen policy and research environments. Such an ethnographic approach, we would like to emphasise once more, can problematise reductionist understandings of 'the digital', capture the porous boundaries between 'digital' and 'analogue' food, and reveal the complex 'symbiotic agency' (Neff & Nagy, 2019) of people, food and platforms. An ethnographic lens on digital food and digital eating would thus bring this emerging field into productive dialogue with broader socio-technical and new materialist theories of food and eating.

Dos and don'ts

- Do step out of your comfort zone and seek to defamiliarize yourself, to make sure you have a fresh perspective on the phenomenon you're studying.
- Don't assume that data provided by companies are value free.
- Do take screenshots and make sure that websites are archived.
- Do craft a statement that establishes the value of your research – participants should feel that they have a stake in research that matters.
- Don't assume people will want to talk to you; spend time researching and connecting, preparing your field.
- Do reflect on ethics – not all data collected online are subject to the same ethical considerations.

Now you try

A cornerstone of ethnography is participant observation. This is also one of the most difficult methodologies to teach and to practice. One way of gaining some experience in participant observation within digital food cultures is to follow a food hashtag within a social media platform, such as Instagram or Twitter. Many food hashtags are associated with particular digital food communities, so choosing a hashtag to follow can give you a lens onto how a digital food community represents itself and its food practices, communicates shared values both visually and textually, and reinforces particular norms around food and eating. For this activity, we encourage you to choose a hashtag associated with a food community whose practices or ideologies are mostly unfamiliar to you. Then, choose a social media platform and search for the hashtag. For an hour or two, follow the hashtag and take notes: what words or phrases appear frequently in posts that include this hashtag? What types of images are associated with the hashtag? Does the hashtag appear alongside other hashtags? What tone do the posts have? Are the posts overwhelmingly positive, or do you encounter some debates, and if so, which points of view seem to be at odds? Once your one or two hours of observation are completed, revisit your notes and try to write a short narrative, summarizing what you've learned about the hashtag, and what new questions have emerged through your observations.

Questions for reflection

- What is the difference between digital food and digital eating and what is the focus of each subfield of digital food studies?
- What is the difference between ethnography, digital ethnography and an ethnographic approach to digital food and digital eating?
- What did you learn about digital food activism, as researched through an ethnographic approach, that surprised you? What did you find particularly insightful?

Ethical considerations

Ethnographic research, both analogue and digital, carries several ethical considerations, of which we will delineate a few key areas. Given the complexity of ethnographic research, which relies on multiple sources of data – including participant observation, interviews, archived images or texts, and surveys, among others – it is important to consider the ethical concerns specific to each of these methods. Following a popular food hashtag on a social media platform would not usually require that you seek informed consent, but if you choose to follow a hashtag specific to a small or potentially vulnerable community of users – for example, an online community of people with eating disorders – you will likely need to tell the users about your research and seek community consent to proceed. In another example, although interacting on social media platforms via replies, mentions or direct messaging is often easy and intuitive, if you intend to use these interactions in your research, it is important to remind participants about your study and ask if you can use these interactions. Moreover, an interaction on social media may become the basis for a more formal interview. In this case, even if your interview is conducted online, the participant will still need to provide verbal or written informed consent for the interview to take place. Other ethical queries you will likely encounter during your research will relate to interactions with textual or visual data published by users. Even where these data are published publicly (and not as part of restricted accounts or closed groups), you may need to consider how to use the data on a case-by-case basis, especially if the confidentiality of participants or groups might be compromised by the inclusion of these data in research and, particularly, publication. For additional discussion of the ethics of using social media and blog posts in research, please refer to Hookway (2008) and Lavis (2017).

Notes

- 1 For more information about Buycott see their website: <https://buycott.com>
- 2 <https://www.buycott.com/api> (accessed 20 January 2020).
- 3 Other forms of data collection might occur when using the Buycott website (e.g. tracking) or when using the app, as users need to log into the app.

Further readings

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