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The Internet, Capitalism, and Food Activism: Helping Students See the Connection

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The Internet, Capitalism and Food Activism: Helping Students See the Connection

Overview and Rationale

In a *New York Times* Review of Books entitled “The Food Movement, Rising,” Michael Pollan argued that food in America is invisible. Despite interacting with food at least three times a day, Americans do not have to think very hard about where their food comes from, or what it is doing to the planet, their bodies and their society. As a food activist, I believe this to be a true claim. But, as a media critic and pop culture teacher, I know that people do pay attention to food. A simple search for “food” on Netflix will garner an interested viewer no fewer than 15 films. The food industry is capitalizing on the social networking crowd’s desire to document even the most mundane experience on Facebook and Instagram by plating food in photo-ready arrangements (Breselor, 2010). Indeed, it seems food is both invisible and visible: the Internet helps people plug in to the broader social experience of eating while society at large misses opportunities to participate in more meaningful conversations about the food movement.

I view the food movement as an unconventional site of politics—one that is about more than food. It involves community, identity, pleasure and is about carving out a new social and economic space removed from the influence of big corporations (Pollan, 2010). However, central to the material reality of eating food are access, health and affordability (Click & Ronit, 2010, p. 301). This combination of politics and community means that a classroom discussion about food politics is an important one. In particular, in classes devoted to media criticism and literacy, a discussion about food politics allows students to explore the potential and pitfalls of media’s role in promoting food politics.

Just like any ideological discussion, sometimes students need to be eased into the argument. In particular, students are used to seeing their relationship with food as one of leisure rather than one that is political. Therefore, this lesson builds on students’ experience with food and helps them see the need and space for a food activism. The lesson, which can be adapted, starts with basic, popular press readings that review how the Internet is changing the way society eats. The introductory material highlights how things like Instagram feeds, social media food sites (like Yelp or Urban Spoon), and Twitter are being used for everything from restaurant promotions to diet documentations. Once students have an understanding of how food is a mainstay in our culture, the second part of the lesson introduces the notion of food as a political issue. This second segment, which is heavy on media examples, allows for a discussion about the food movement and the relationship between the free market and food activism. In particular, the readings in that unit provide a discussion about how market capitalism both allows for and constrains consumer choice (Thomson, 2009). This well-rounded discussion gives way to the third section of the assignment. At this point, instructors will show students an in-depth media text about the food movement and allow students, through targeted reflection questions, to draw their own conclusions about the connection between food, politics and the Internet.

Lesson Plan: 5 (50 minute) class periods

(The lesson plan below has been used in both a large lecture class of 105 and a smaller class of 30 students. In both instances, the class was a 300 level course filled with a variety of majors)

Day One

If an instructor's goal is simply to introduce students to how social media has changed the way society eats, s/he could just use the readings, discussion questions and assignments listed here. The goal of this type of lesson would be to help students understand how and why the food industry has adapted to mediated society.

Objectives:

- Introduce accessible reading that allows students to grasp the “way we eat” as a (mediated) society
- Encourage students to think about their relationship with social media and food
- Generate a variety of examples within the classroom community

Reading Suggestions:

[How the Web is Changing the Way We Eat](#)

[Tall Tales, Truth, and My Twitter Diet](#)

[Food Trucks Use of Social Media](#)

Classroom Examples:

[Taco Bell Instagram Commercial](#)

[Twitter Diet](#)

[Innovative Food Truck Social Media Campaigns](#)

[Top 5 food Hashtags](#)

Discussion Questions:

- What are some ways you use social media to document your relationship with food?
- Do you think restaurants understand the link between social media and food culture?
- How does capitalism impact the usefulness and/or allure of social media?
- What is the impact of food being so “visible” within our society?
- Is there a class divide among those who consume food “pornography” and those who do not?

Assignment Suggestions:

- If you use Twitter in the classroom or maintain a class weblog, encourage students to post other examples of food hashtags, commercials or Instagram feeds for the class to see and discuss virtually.
- A “Day in My Food Life” reflection blog post or mediated essay that encourages students to document how they interact with food (see below)

Day Two

Objectives

- Provide a basic definition and understanding of food politics based on Pollan’s “The Food Movement, Rising”
- Encourage students to see food as more than leisure
- Discuss the pros and cons of the food movement—including the idea that it is a privilege to be able to buy organic food and to spend a long time cooking and preparing food

Suggested Reading

- Introductory chapter of *Food Matters: A Guide To Conscious Eating* (Mark Bittman)
- [The Food Movement, Rising](#) (Michael Pollan)
- [Is a Food Revolution Now in Season?](#)(Andrew Martin)
- [Voting With Your Fork](#) (Pollan)
- Big Food and the Body Politic of Personal Responsibility (Thomson)

Classroom Examples

- [Portlandia- In the Restaurant](#)
- [TED Talk—What’s Wrong With Our Food System](#)
- [Ghallagher Geico Commercial making fun of “local”](#)

Discussion Questions

- Define the “food movement(s)” or “food politics.”
- Pollan talks about the food movement(s) only being unified by little more than a recognition that industrial food production is in need of reform. What problems does that present for food activists?
- Related, (in *Food Revolution Now in Season*) Pollan claims that the movement is not “ready for primetime.” What does that mean? Do you agree?
- What are some examples of food activism you have seen? (buy local, slow food, etc)
- What are the pros and cons of these movements?
- Explain the economic cycle/trap of fast and cheap food.
- In what ways does Bittman talk about the corporate nature of food?
- Drawing on Thomson’s discussion of personal responsibility, what obligation does the marketplace have to provide cheap, accessible, healthy options for consumers?

Days 3 and 4

Watch *Food Inc.* in class (See discussion guide below to use throughout the film for talking points and/or reflection essays). If an instructor wishes, s/he could have students stream the movie on Netflix or at the library. Then class time would not be spent watching the movie. The discussion guide could be given to each student with the expectation s/he will watch the movie and turn in the sheet. However, given the sensitive nature of the film, I would encourage instructors to use some class time to process the material shown.

Day 5

If the instructor has chosen to teach both units (social media's impact on food culture and the politics behind the food movement), this is a good way to tie the two themes together. However, it is not a necessary third step.

Objectives

- Allow students to reflect on all they've learned regarding the politics and leisure of food.
- Encourage students to understand how they can use their knowledge of social and traditional media to raise awareness of food issues.

Discussion Questions

- What information from this week's lesson was new to you?
- Do you think the food movement is "unconventional" as we read about? Or are most of the political changes still being carried out in conventional places (Washington D.C. or corporate America)?
- How can social media help spread information about the food industry and/or the food movement(s)? Think back to the argument that the food movement is "not ready for primetime."

Activity

- Social Media and Food Politics Group Activity (See below)

Food Inc. Discussion Guide

1. **Our (capitalist) society seems to value things like “common sense,” “personal responsibility,” and the “free market” when it comes to consumption and food. How does capitalism interact with people’s food options?**
 - The Latino family illustrates how capitalism and the free market often make some food choices impossible given accessibility and affordability issues. So, while it may be the family’s responsibility to choose healthy foods, the system makes it difficult.
 - The family whose young son was killed by tainted meat used common sense and ate responsibly but did not know the meat had been recalled because the company withheld that information.
 - In order to make organic food mainstream, which is shown to be some farmers’ overall goal, they need to put organic products on the shelves of Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is willing to sell organic products, but this is not because company decision makers are committed to sustainable, organic food politics. Rather, it is because they see it as a way to make money.

2. **Whose responsibility do you think it is to inform us about what is in our food? Is it our responsibility to find out? The producer’s responsibility to make it more clear? The media? The government? Why do you think so?**

The movie makes a case for any and all of these answers.

3. **Give an example from the movie that illustrates the cheap/fast food cycle.**

One example would be the Latino family who is shown shopping in the grocery store (struggling over the price of produce) and ordering in a drive thru. The family makes very little money, which means all that they can afford is the “cheap and dangerous” food that Pollan references.

4. **What is one example of “food politics” from the movie?**

- The mother who lost her son to food poisoning
- The Latino activist helping immigrants working in the food industry
- The “crazy farmer” who runs his organic farm and market
- The entire documentary itself

5. **How would you describe the link between the food culture and popular culture?**

This is open for interpretation, but students should be able to draw upon the way popular culture shuts out discussions about food politics and, instead, is dominated by corporate interest.

A “Day in My Food Life” Reflection Essay

Introduction: As we’ve learned in class this week, our socially mediated society encourages people to document their experience with food. We have learned about people who use social media to hold themselves accountable for dieting, and we’ve also seen people who use social media to showcase where and what they are eating. Hopefully these readings have encouraged you to think about how you interact with food. Do you use your social media sites to gather virtually around particular eateries and food? Do you feel compelled to review establishments you frequent? Or, do you use those reviews, Facebook pages or commercials to decide where to eat? Or do you, perhaps, use social media sites to gather good deals or coupons to help make food more affordable?

Assignment: You should put together a 1-2 minute video collection of images and documentation of a day in your food life. You can use any video software you would like (Imovie, Windows Movie Maker, StreamClip, Powerpoint, etc). The video must be creative and clear. It should showcase at least 3 different social media sites. Specific criteria are outlined below.

Content: _____/25

- Highly creative and unique in design so it keeps attention of audience:
- Uses a variety of media/integrated well with a good flow:
- Appealing to the eye and easily understood:

Grading Criteria: _____/25

- 1:30-2:00:
- At least three sites shown in the video:
- Contains title:
- Is rooted in class ideas and makes a statement:

Excellent: 47-50 points

- Video sustains attention, informative, direct, more than minimum, 18 solid examples
- Goes above and beyond guidelines, high quality content, clear purpose, elaborated and supported main points and examples

Good: 43-47 points

- Interesting, keep audience attention, met all guidelines, went above minimum requirements

Average: 38-42 points

- Meets minimum requirements, topic is understandable in some categories

Satisfactory: 33-37 points

- Met most of criteria, not all guidelines followed
- Meets some minimum requirements—lacking in most areas, topic is difficult to understand

Less Than Satisfactory: Below 33 points

- Did not meet criteria

Social Media and Food Politics Group Activity

Introduction: At this point in our unit, you have seen both the political and recreational aspects of our food culture. Our readings suggest that these two things are separate—that we cannot, or do not, use social media to engage in “serious” interactions about food. In *Food Inc*, despite what we learned about the non-traditional components of the food movement, we saw pretty traditional enactments of food politics. People were petitioning their governmental officials or lobbying corporations. Based on what we know about social media, I suspect that it can be used for “politics,” too.

Assignment: Your group needs to select a food issue. An “issue” can be broadly defined as a policy, product, establishment, etc. You will design either an advertisement or a public service announcement to be broadcast through a social media platform (YouTube, Facebook, Vimeo, Vine, etc). The advertisement or public service announcement **MUST** have an overall political message and must clearly set out to change something about our current food culture. Think about the problems laid out in our readings and *Food Inc*. What do people need to be aware of to make changes in society? Or, are there people, places and products already making these changes? Tell us about them! Specific criteria are outlined below.

Content

- **Video used an informative addition to class material. It did not repeat information from the class and was, instead, an extension of what we already knew. It brought up a new products, policy or issue for our consideration.**
- **Message was clear and understandable to the audience**

_____/50

Presentation

- **Advertisement or PSA was interesting, professional and met time limits. It also corresponded with the particular genre (i.e. it looked like a PSA or an advertisement)**
- **Images and text were understandable and visible**
- **Content was creative, interactive and in line with class**

_____/50

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Biography

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Kristen L. McCauliff received her Ph.D. in Communication Studies from the University of Georgia in 2009 where her coursework emphasized rhetorical theory and criticism. As an assistant professor at Ball State University, her work centers upon feminist and media criticism. She has published work in the journal of *Communication Studies* and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. In addition, she has invited book reviews in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* and *Women's Studies in Communication*. She is currently on the editorial board of *Communication Studies* and *Communication and Language*. She teaches undergraduate and graduate classes in communication theory, rhetorical criticism and popular culture.