

Food as Communication Communication as Food



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Beyond mere sustenance: Food as communication/ Communication as food

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Now the first and greatest of necessities is food, which is the condition of life and existence—Plato (*The Republic*)

When Williams (1958) identified culture as “ordinary,” he was elucidating the potentially transparent nature of those everyday elements that form the very backbone of our existence (p. 4). One example of this “taken for granted” culture of everyday life is food, which while consumed on a daily basis, often is considered as mere sustenance. It is, at once, associated with both a common and an ordinary enterprise. However, food is much more than just a means of survival. It permeates all other aspects of our lives from the most intimate to the most professional practices. It also is a key factor in how we view ourselves and others, is at the center of social and political issues, and is a mainstay of popular media.

From high-tech kitchen gadgets to magazines to the *Food Network*, over the last few decades, we have witnessed a rise in food-focused consumption, media, and culture, such that there has been what we could label a “food explosion.” It seems as if food, and the discourses surrounding it, are all over the place from Jaime Oliver’s ventures into American school lunchrooms to news stories about urban gardening or buying organic products at the local farmer’s market. There is a heightened awareness of food’s significance within contemporary society and culture and, as such, there is a further need to explore it.

Although the subject of food has been widely studied within the fields of anthropology, sociology, and cultural history, it has not been addressed very often within the field of communication. In her 1970 essay, Henderson asserted how and why food, and our practices associated with its production and consumption, should be viewed as a form of communication and called for scholars within the field to take up food as a serious form of study (pp. 3–8). Few scholars have answered this call, and while other disciplines have made food a focus, communication largely still lags behind. However, as Lindenfeld and Langellier (2009) suggest, over the last few years there has been a rise in food-related conference panels and presentations within the discipline thus, “marking the growing interest in food studies” (p. 1). Yet, in addition to being an emerging area of study, there are several major reasons why we can view food from the perspective of communication and/or use food as a means for further understanding communication theories and practices.

Broadly defined, communication is the process by which we understand the world and our attempts to convey that understanding to others through both verbal and nonverbal language. In this way, we can view food as a form of communication because it is a nonverbal means by which we share meanings with others. As Roland Barthes has written, food is

a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society. (cited in Counihan and Van Esterik, 2008, p. 29)

Paralleling Barthes, scholars such as Claude Levi-Strauss (1983) and Mary Douglas have asserted that we can view food as adhering to the same practices as language because food is a code that can be seen to express patterns about social relationships (cited in Counihan and Van Esterik, 2008, p. 44). Spurlock (2009), in “Performing and Sustaining (Agri)Culture and Place: The Cultivation of Environmental Subjectivity on the Piedmont Farm Tour” also proposes that: “Because of their ability to signify, mediate, contest, and represent ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ foodways are deeply rhetorical and performative” (p. 6).

A primary reason that we should view food as a form of communication is because it is directly linked to both ritual and culture, where ritual is defined as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 27). Nowhere can this serious life be viewed more closely than in rituals involving food. It is at

the center of our most important events such as birthdays, weddings, funerals, and holidays. Food not only is a part of rituals, but also there are several festivals solely focused on particular food items such as the Gilroy Garlic Festival or the Hilton Apple Fest. Within ritual contexts, food often acts symbolically by representing or “standing in” for expressions such as life, love, grief, or happiness. Even within our daily experiences, the ways that we eat and dine with others can be categorized as ritualistic because they involve repetition, expected behaviors, and roles for both the participants and the food (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Therefore, if food is used ritually, it also can be viewed as a form of culture even in its “ordinary” state.

Following Williams’ (1958) work, if we view food as a common facet of our daily lives, and we see culture as “ordinary,” then certainly food is a means by which we create cultures. In *Food is Culture*, Montanari (2006) asserts this perspective by claiming: “Food is culture *when it is produced...when it is prepared...when it is eaten...*” (pp. xi-xii, italics in original). That is to say, throughout every step of our encounters with food, we shape it in one way or another whether it is through selections of certain foods versus others, cooking processes, and/or the ways in which we consume it. Spurlock (2009) also maintains: “Through its absences and presences in everyday life, food and foodways highlight the moral, aesthetic, and ethical concerns of a given cultural milieu” (p. 7). Moreover, food acts as a conveyor of culture *precisely because* we use it as means of communication.

In his foundational work, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, Carey (1992) argues: “communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23). If we follow Carey’s (1992) argument, then surely food is one of the most readily-available symbols that we have at our disposal, which can be viewed from both the perspectives of communication and culture. In other words, we often use food to communicate with others and as a means of demonstrating personal identity, group affiliation and disassociation, and other social categories, such as socioeconomic class. In this sense, “food is a product and mirror of the organization of society..., a prism that absorbs and reflects a host of cultural phenomena” (Counihan, 1999, p. 6). Food functions symbolically as a communicative practice by which we create, manage, and share meanings with others.

Perhaps one of the most common ways that we utilize food is in the construction of our personal identities. As Brillat-Savarin (2000) claims in *The Physiology of Taste*, “Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what

kind of man you are” (p. 3). In other words, we regularly define “who we are” according to both the foods that we eat and those that we refrain from consuming. For example, a person may identify as a “vegan,” a “carnivore,” an “omnivore,” or simply as a “foodie.” We have a direct, visceral connection to food, and it is often linked to emotion and memory or serves as a source of comfort for some people.

Besides our individual connections to food, we also use it as a means of communicating our identities to others through our processes of preparation and eating. This relationship is situational because we may use food or associated behaviors in different ways depending upon the social situations in which we find ourselves. For example, consider how a person might present his or her identity on a first date, a business luncheon, or at a family gathering. This person may purchase certain foods rather than others in order to reflect a class status or position of authority. Moreover, a person may also abstain from eating too much or may utilize formalized etiquette on the date and at the luncheon, whereas at the family gathering, she or he may not feel the need to prescribe to the rules of etiquette at all.

As well as constituting our own identities, we use food as a means of identifying with others. Food connects people, both physically and symbolically, when we sit down to dine together (Visser, 1991). Similarly speaking, rhetorical scholar Burke (1969) argues that you persuade a person only so far as you align your identity with hers through the use of language (p. 55). Extending this rationale to food, we also identify with others based upon the types of food that we eat such that we may feel a common bond with people who have similar eating habits to ours. Following the previous example, a person may identify himself as a “meat-eater” or “vegetarian” and therefore associate with people who have the same interests and/or views about food consumption. As a result, our selections of food are more complex than simply whether we order wine with dinner or eat a salad instead of a hamburger.

It is through our processes of sharing or discussing food that we can view it as a form of discourse. Much of our notions about food, and its relationship to the natural world, are conveyed and learned through the sharing of narratives and stories. In this sense, we could argue that food serves as a socializing mechanism by which we come to understand our cultures, our societies, and the groups to which we belong. While this aspect occurs on a small scale, discourses about food also are prevalent within larger social structures such as government, media, and popular culture. Often, these discourses come into

conflict with each other because they offer myriad perspectives about food and issues related to it.

As discourses, all of these dialogues about food, and its associated practices, operate as “sites of struggle” with significant social and political implications (Fiske, 1997, pp. 5-6). While we consider politics as having an institutionalized center that expounds power, our everyday practices also have political dimensions (De Certeau, as cited in Highmore, 2002, pp. 68–73). In other words, we need to conceptualize politics as located beyond the realms of political campaigns and voting. As Cooks (2009) argues in “You are What You (Don’t) Eat? Food, Identity, and Resistance: “For those of us interested in embracing our identities as political and in seeking openings in the tactical moments and performances of everyday life, eating and cooking offer important sites of preservation and imagination” (p. 108). Political struggles also occur over how we make sense of our everyday experiences by using various discourses to describe them (Fiske, 1994).

Within contemporary society, much of the political work that occurs takes place in the practices of our daily lives such as discourses about our relationships with food. For example, in “Unhappy Meals,” Pollan (2007) suggests that our relationship to food is simple because all we really need to do is “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants,” and we will be healthy (p. 38). Similarly, while he parallels Pollan on many food-related issues, Glassner (2007) takes an alternative view of the recent backlash against fast food by claiming: “I come to neither praise fast food nor to bury it, only to question its easy portrayal as the root of all evil” (p. 146).

Aside from conflicting views about our own eating habits, there are also discursive struggles over local versus global food production and consumption. In “The Pride and Prejudice of ‘Local,’” Yardley (2010) explains that recently chefs in Portland, Oregon figuratively and literally “came to blows” over a local cooking competition in which one of them used pig from Iowa as the main ingredient for his menu while the other privileged local products only (p. A11). Additionally, while debates continue over the question of genetically-modified foods, “the European Commission will formally propose giving back to national and local governments the freedom to decide whether to grow such crops... which many Europeans derisively call Frankenfoods” (Kanter, 2010, p. B4). Therefore, it is through these multiple discourses that political decisions are made whether they are on individual, local, or global scales. We strongly need to consider the political potential of food because food has the power to

influence us and “can condense in themselves a wealth of ideological meanings” (Weismantel, 1988, pp. 7-8).

If food has become increasingly important within our processes of communication as a means of expression, manifestation of identities, form of discourse and ritual, hallmark of social relationships, *and* if food is ubiquitous, then it is for these *very* reasons that we need to more closely consider how food and its practices operate as a means of communication. Furthermore, there is a need for communication scholars to apply our unique methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of food. In this sense, we believe communication studies can offer new insights into how food provides much more than nourishment, or mere sustenance, because food demonstrates a whole host of social, cultural, and political phenomena.

In this edited volume we bring together scholars with diverse research foci and an array of perspectives on food and communication to examine and explore this emerging area of study. Given the various ways that food acts as a form of communication, we propose in the chapters of this book to provide definitive and foundational examples of how food operates as a system of communication and how communication theories can be understood when viewed through the lens of food. In this sense, this book is not only about food but also about communication theories, practices, and effects.

Readers will note that selections in this reader encompass traditional approaches to communication including rhetorical, interpersonal, phenomenological (ethnographic), media and popular culture, environmental, organizational, intercultural, and critical/cultural perspectives. The selections, however, are organized according to an overall consideration of *how* food communicates messages, then focus on *what* those messages communicate related to identities, values, environmental concerns, and overall contexts. This communication focus is traditionally understood as communicator/message/relationships/culture and society. International and intercultural perspectives are integrated throughout, rather than treated as separate phenomena.

Section One

Food Discourse:

Media, Messages, and Food as a Communicative Practice

Using a variety of approaches including marketing/strategic communication, critical media studies, rhetorical analysis, and cultural/historical studies, the essays in this first section explore how food functions symbolically as a

communicative practice. They also address how food, and its surrounding aspects, often function as “sites of struggle” within popular media and wider cultural discourses. By analyzing the ways in which food films engage with and (re)produce discourse while simultaneously erasing the complexities of that discourse, Lindenfeld examines the role of food films in communication studies and offers a rationale for why scholars need to further pursue this course of study. Thomson’s essay explores how breakfast cereal companies market themselves to children and the relationship between kids’ performativity online to these products. In Chapter 3, Karaosmanoglu addresses cooking and eating practices by way of Istanbul’s nostalgic culinary books in relation to the memories of the city. Using the example of home-building practices in an Australian monastery, Wessell and Jones’ chapter suggests the ways food can operate as a system of communication and how it can be used to understand different theories and approaches to communication.

Section Two

Communicating Selves:

Food and the Construction/Communication of Social Identities

Increasingly, food has become a means by which we create and manage our identities and how we view the identities of others. The chapters in section two analyze the ways in which food communicates notions of self and the various social categories to which we belong, ranging from socioeconomic class to nationality. It begins with Greene’s essay in which she analyzes how the Slow Food Movement uses social style to construct both an identity for the organization and its members. Lucas and Buzzanell, in Chapter 6, consider the role of collective memory of hard times in “Irontown,” a small mining community in the U.S. Rust Belt. Through the analysis of six focus groups, Cosgriff-Hernández, Martinez, Sharf, and Sharkey, in Chapter 7, examine conversations about nutritional beliefs and choices, as well as differences between life in Mexico and the United States. In her essay, German argues that a cookbook created by Mina Pachter and other anonymous women during their camp internment in World War II rhetorically can be viewed as an act of resistance. Parasecoli’s essay ends this section by examining how representations of men around food in films can establish, question, reinforce, reproduce or destroy cultural assumptions about masculinity and gender relations.

Section Three

Culture and Society:

Food and the Communication of Social and Cultural Values

Food and our interactions with it communicate, create, and reflect a multiplicity of meanings across a wide spectrum of societies and cultures. As such, the chapters in this section examine the ways in which food often is imbued with social and cultural values as well as how these ideals are established through the use of food and its associated practices. Thompson, in Chapter 10, rhetorically examines how “fast food” and “slow food” operate as tropes in a globalizing world. Through an examination from a cross-cultural/inter-cultural communication perspective of both *what* and *how* people eat at Chinese restaurants in New York City, Cheng’s essay demonstrates that, contrary to what many U.S. citizens might believe, Chinese restaurant culture in the United States is actually quintessentially “American.” Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research, McCullen, in Chapter 12, explains the process through which an attempt to defetishize food production fails by excluding the story of labor relations on farms and, through market interactions and narratives, makes Latino farm workers invisible. In Chapter 13, Mudry describes how discourses of science and quantification were integrated into American nutrition policy, how this integration was abetted by technologies, and how these discourses aligned the USDA nutrition policy with the goals of Progressive reformers.

Section Four

Environmental Issues:

Food Communication and the Natural World

Food is nature’s bounty in peril. In this period of abundant food, especially in the United States, millions of people still starve, suffering hunger and deprivation that some may think is experienced only in developing nations. The chapters in section four regard human action and impact on food in the environment by considering the relationships among humans, food, and the natural world, including food activism, environmental justice, and media discourses about food. In the opening chapter, Brummett uses a homological analysis to make some observations and suggestions about the current state of political discourse using the examples of hunting and gardening. In Chapter 15, Bruner and Meek explore contemporary public discourse surrounding seafood with a focus on the complicated environmental-demands and nutrition-

demands faced by seafood consumers. Todd's essay uses rhetorical analysis to reveal why the "Eat the View" campaign successfully persuaded the Obamas to plant a vegetable garden on the White House lawn. Cramer, in Chapter 17, analyzes discourses of food on the Food Network from a framework that assumes that human relationships with food and, especially, the process of producing and preparing one's own food, is key to understanding or reconceptualizing a relationship between humans and the earth that is more sustainable.

Section Five

Food and Communication in Relationships: Organizational and Interpersonal Contexts

We communicate about food and food choices in various personal and societal contexts, such as family relationships, educational institutions, and organizations. The chapters in this final section emphasize that while interpersonal influences on food choices are often initiated within the family, they also develop in the context of societal values and market structure. Through the use of a focus-group study, Kaplan, James, Alloway, and Kiernan explore how a framework for understanding child involvement and empowerment can be used to develop two family-based nutrition education programs. LeGreco, in Chapter 19, demonstrates how a variety of school meal stakeholders in Arizona use food as a means to communicate agency through three dominant discourses that organize eating. Schuwerk's essay employs qualitative research, conducted in the Southwestern United States, to provide valuable information in relation to organizational culture and its implications on food banking and the community. Singer offers a case study on Monsanto, the U.S.-based multinational firm, to detail some of the ways by which corporate agriscience strategically positions itself in relation to stakeholders on issues of hunger and agricultural development. Finally, in Chapter 22, Walters uses an interpretive approach to examine how high school students construct meaning through interaction with food and the environment to further understand influences on the dietary patterns of youth.

As stated earlier, food provides a rich vehicle by and through which communication occurs. Food is both constituted by a people or culture and it is constitutive of people and cultures. It transcends nation, race, class, and gender, even as it defines them. The possibilities for communication scholars seem endless when food is conceptualized in this way. One fruitful area to consider is the very definition of communication itself. For some, communication is a

process that attempts to create—and sometimes, perhaps frequently, achieves—shared meaning, a process that is influenced by myriad factors such as social and cultural context, participants, motivations, purposes, and goals (or the lack thereof). But as other communication scholars have rightly observed, communication is also the process by which a society or culture comes into being. In this sense, communication has constitutive power and is not merely a process of creating something external—or ancillary to—the makeup of a society or culture. Considered semiotically, communication could also be construed as the process by which objects are infused with meaning or the arena in and through which symbols function. And, for some, communication is its technology—the media through which the process occurs and through which we connect with others. Finally, communication may be understood in its simplest expression, as a conversation. The chapters in this book have considered both food and communication in varied ways, leading us to conclude that whatever definition or perspective of communication is privileged, food remains one of its most flexible and useful models.

It is hoped that this edited volume not only will contribute to studies of food in communication but also will serve as a means for spurring future dialogues on this subject due to its vast array of ideas about food and its relationship to our communication practices. We hope, too, that scholars will reconsider models of communication based on the insights that food and its discourses provide.

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