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Proposed paper

Title: Food, Sustainability and Digital Platforms. Understanding the role of social and technological innovations in sustainable consumption

Authors: Alice Dal Gobbo, Francesca Forno, Natalia Magnani
Department of Sociology and Social Research – University of Trento (Italy)

Abstract

1. Introduction.

In recent years, food has become a central topic in political and public debates, with awareness of the negative social and environmental impacts of the conventional agri-food supply chain growing among citizens, who also pay more attention to the healthiness of their diets.

The way in which food is nowadays produced, distributed and consumed has significant consequences for the environment, affecting soil fertility, water and air quality, the state of the climate and the loss of biodiversity. As well as impoverishing food culture and the landscape, estimates show that contemporary global food system contributes to around 25% of global CO₂ emissions. Such negative externalities are strictly related to a certain mode of "western consumption", based on a resource-demanding logic of low prices, high availability of food and high waste – which characterises especially urban areas.

Food is therefore one of the key areas in which sustainable transitions are to happen. Simultaneously, the choices available to consumers are highly connected to the ways in which food is produced and circulated. At the crossroads of these challenges, we have witnessed an increase in the commitment to so-called "alternative food networks" (AFNs). Furthermore, technological advances have allowed the emergence of digital platforms dedicated to food. Both are often said to be more socially and environmentally sustainable than conventional, supermarket-led food chains.

Despite the growing range and diffusion of physical and digital food provisioning alternatives, at present very little is known about their real impact on consumption practices. This makes it difficult to understand whether they may represent new opportunities to promote sustainable diets. In this paper, we will present and discuss initial findings emerging from a study aiming to explore how socio-technical innovations in food provisioning platforms can drive/facilitate sustainable food consumption in households and the adoption of more sustainable diets.

2. Methods.

Our discussion emerges from preliminary findings from the Italian part of a larger study, including five different countries: Norway, Italy, Sweden, Ireland and Germany¹. The project aims to produce in-depth knowledge about the ways in which different modes of food provisioning (online/offline, alternative/traditional) interact with contemporary European sustainability initiatives to promote sustainable transitions in food consumption.

The study approaches the topic through the lenses of Social Practice theory. Focus is neither on behaviour as driven by individual choices nor on the “macro” level of institutional/technical transformations of food infrastructures. Rather, taking a “meso” level approach, we look at everyday food consumption performed in the home as enabled, structured and naturalised by socio-technical systems, cultural norms, socially preferred organisation of time and space.

In order to better understand practices in their ordinary contexts, the team has opted for in-depth, participative and multimedia interviews, including observation of those spaces and objects that, within the home, are most related to food and eating. Semi-structured interviews are prompted by photo diaries that participants are asked to provide beforehand, showing instances of different phases of food consumption: planning, provisioning, storing, cooking, eating, and disposing.

Interviewees (n. 40 in total per country) are selected among users of different types of food provisioning platforms promoting sustainable food consumption. As far as Italy is concerned, we have decided to select participants from the area of Milan, a particularly significant case within the Italian landscape. The data on which we draw come from the first in-depth interviews conducted there.

3. Results.

the interview part of the project seeks to understand in what ways are sustainable food practices and sustainable diets enabled or hindered by different kinds of food provisioning platforms. Here, attention is paid especially to the material, socio-technical, organisation of shopping, eating, cooking and disposing. We also reflect upon the ways in which socio-cultural drivers to sustainability interact with other habits, temporalities, rhythms and spaces that make up everyday life.

Online platforms might seem to provide more sustainable ways of consuming food, as they supposedly simplify the buying environment, making choices more reflexive, parsimonious and less influenced by external factors such as marketing. Is this true? More centrally, platforms have the capacity to directly connect producers and consumers, hence shortening the commercial chains that are partially responsible for waste and unsustainability of contemporary food systems. To what extent is this reflected in everyday practices? And is platforms use sustainable in the long run for buyers?

4. Discussion and Conclusions.

Understanding how innovative physical and digital food provisioning systems work may be of extreme importance to favour an ecological transition. Our paper critically reflects on the chances but also the challenges that different food provisioning systems embody in terms of making everyday food practices sustainable. While much work has been done in the area of critical and responsible consumption, also in relation to food, the effects of socio-technical innovations in this field have not been investigated much. The research we are carrying out seeks to fill this gap.

¹HORIZON 2020 ERA-NET CO-FUND on SUSFOOD2. Name of the Project: PLATFORM: Sustainable Food Platforms: Enabling sustainable food practices through socio-technical innovation. Coordinator: Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences. Project website: <https://platforms.oslomet.no/>

We conclude with a few reflections about the scope of the study itself. Despite its many strengths (its mixed-methods approach, its innovative perspective on food, sustainability and socio-technical innovation), there are some caveats that are worth keeping in mind. Online food platforms are not transparent to the external observer; furthermore, the digital revolution – praised in the past as one of the drivers of a transition to sustainable development – is starting to show its very much *unsustainable* side-effects. As far as food platforms are concerned, there is a need to investigate the ways in which families' consumption relates to wider socio-economic and material infrastructures and their more or less sustainable trajectories of change.

5. References.

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6. Contact information

Alice Dal Gobbo: alice.dalgobbo@unitn.it (*corresponding author*)

7. Short Bios

Alice Dal Gobbo (PhD) is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento. Her main research interests centre around sustainable transitions and everyday life.

Francesca Forno (PhD) is an Associate Professor at Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Trento. Her research interests focus on sustainable consumption and political consumerism.

Natalia Magnani (PhD) is a Assistant Professor in Urban and Rural Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento. Her research interests include rural development, sustainability, social capital, actor-network theory and recently sociological approaches to the energy transition.