More than Food Porn: Twitter, Transparency, and Food Systems

Abstract: This article explores the ways in which social media, specifically Twitter, can provide transparency to local and national food systems. Those interested in and invested in food systems should focus more attention on the mundane, but easily dismissed, photos and tweets that populate Twitter, Instagram, and other social media feeds, especially those from chefs, mobile food vendors, and fishermen and women. As evidence, the article includes excerpts from interviews with and observations of chefs, food cart operators, and fishermen and women operating in the state of Rhode Island.

Keywords: social media, Twitter, food systems, transparency

There is absolutely a need but [social media] can be too much as well. There is a line and you need to watch bombarding people. It seems that in order to be successful you need to brand yourself. Just because you’re the loudest doesn’t mean you are good, just the loudest. But you have to have a voice. I remember doing postcards when we first began! Can you imagine! I would go to the post office! The thing about us is we don’t say everything that pops into our head. It is just when we are open. Not a stream of consciousness all day long.

—KATIE, PERSONAL INTERVIEW

These words from the co-owner of a popular restaurant in Providence, Rhode Island, capture her approach to social media. At the time, she and her husband were operating a French restaurant, as well as a hot dog and sausage walk-up kitchen and a food truck. In 2012, they “retired” the truck to focus on the walk-up sausage kitchen and French restaurant. I had moved to Kentucky and was alerted to the food truck’s retirement when I noticed a “for sale” tweet regarding the truck.

As a former customer of the food truck, I was disappointed in its retirement; however, as I reflected on my interview with Katie regarding her use of social media, specifically Twitter, I found myself considering the ways in which social media can do more than “bombard,” “brand,” or announce open/closed. Beyond such obvious communication uses, it seems that social media, such as Twitter and Instagram, hold more potential and possibility for all of us interested, invested, and implicated in our local and national food systems.

In an age of ubiquitous photography (Hand 2012; Rubinstein and Shlissel 2008), with the increasing ability to share the banality of our lives, it may prove easiest to simply dismiss the abundance of food photos and tweets online, specifically on social media such as Twitter and Instagram. As Eve Turow, author of A Taste of Generation Yum, accuses, “You’ve seen it, and likely you’ve Tweeted or Faceooked or Pinned or Instagrammed some sultry image of food. Just admit it. 11 million posts are tagged with the word #food on Instagram. You’ve probably posted one of them” (2015: 38). Jack Dorsey himself, one of the co-founders of Twitter, asked reflectively, “Why would I want to join this stupid useless thing and know what my brother’s eating for lunch?” (Sarno 2009).

In what follows, however, I will explore the potential for social media, particularly the micro-blogging service Twitter, and food-related images to offer a unique lens into our food systems—a lens that pushes us beyond branding, bombarding, and open/closed announcements. Moving beyond “food porn” as an overly mediated and inauthentic representation of food, this article focuses on the transparency of our local and national food systems facilitated by social media. As such, the article illustrates and complicates Twitter’s role as a “sanitized backstage pass” (Murthy 2013: 42), noting that likes, retweets, and follows have become the currency for bolstering a personal brand, and “it may not even be possible to opt out” (Tulathimutte 2013).

In order to explore how and in what ways social media provides a means for the general public to gain a “backstage pass” into our food networks and infrastructure, this article focuses on Twitter and its adoption and use by various American food vendors and chefs. In particular, what follows relies on interview and observation data, as well as textual analysis, I gathered from participants in the food networks of Providence, Rhode Island, to illustrate the ways in which such tweets, including photos, may educate, or potentially...
educate, the local and national publics. In order to frame such an argument, the rise of social media and mobile communication devices will be documented, leading to a focus on Twitter as an exemplar of such social media activity. This background will be followed by examples and descriptions pulled from participants I interviewed and observed as part of a larger research project investigating the mobile and social technologies employed by members of the northeastern United States food network. Such local data illustrate and, at times, complicate trends and commentary occurring at the national and international levels of current food systems.

The Rise of Mobile Communication Technologies and Social Media

It seems more than coincidental that running parallel to the latest food movements is a rise in social networking via mobile communication devices and social media. In Food and Social Media, Signe Rousseau (2012: 5) writes, “If there is one area that has been revolutionized by social media, it is in the world of food—or more accurately, in the virtual spaces that accommodate the communication of, dialogues about, and attention to food. Social media do what food does best: they bring people together.” Despite her international perspective, Rousseau’s commentary is echoed by critics focused on the American dining scene. In particular, Michael Pollan, an American journalist, activist, professor of journalism at the University of California at Berkeley, and author of The Omnivore’s Dilemma, remarked on the “interesting” trend that the “strikingly powerful interest in all things having to do with food coincides with a progressively more mediated digital life” (Turow 2015: 39).

To support anecdotal evidence readers may hold about the increasing appearance of communication technology in everyday life, recent data highlight the increasing ownership of mobile communication devices in the United States, as well as the popularity of social media (Duggan et al. 2015). As of October 2014, 64% of American adults rely on a smartphone (with 92% of the adult population owning a cellphone) (Smith 2015). In particular, 75% of online American adults use social networking sites; among these online adults, Facebook is the most popular, with 72% reporting use as of August 2015 (roughly one billion users) (Duggan et al. 2015). Specifically, Twitter use has doubled since November 2010, with 16% of online adults using Twitter (over 271 million monthly, active users), while Instagram witnessed significant growth in all demographic groups (Duggan 2015). Further research highlights that a growing number of Americans are using their cell and smartphones for more than making calls. Some of the more popular activities are taking pictures, texting, accessing the internet, emailing, and downloading apps (Duggan and Rainie 2012). Moreover, smartphone owners are also showing an increase in “just-in-time” use for activities such as coordinating a meeting or deciding whether to visit a business, such as a restaurant (or mobile food provider) (ibid.). Most recently, research shows that a growing number of American cellphone users find their use of cellphones at social gatherings as a way to be more social, not less. As such, younger cellphone users have no issue with the use of cellphones in social situations, especially in public places, including formal and informal dining contexts (Rainie and Zickuhr 2015).

Such widespread use and adoption of smartphones and social media shows no signs of slowing down and has impacted nearly all aspects of society, including American food systems. Both on land and at sea, farmers are “shucking” old stereotypes, introducing and relying on mobile and social media in their everyday routines. As Erin Byers Murray, author of Shucked: Life on a New England Oyster Farm, commented at a recent public reading, “You won’t see an oyster farmer without his or her iPhone these days.” Marcus Johnson, executive chef and owner of a fairly new restaurant in Boston, Massachusetts, echoed Murray’s comments by pointing to photos and texts received from fishermen at sea early in the morning. Within local and national food systems, these technologies and their adoption by diners, farmers, and chefs, to name a few, have led to a growing commentary on phones and food, with popular culture weighing in on such trends. For the purpose of this article, however, the focus will remain on the increasing adoption and use in local food systems, specifically by food providers in Rhode Island, and how such use may provide a lens into the “backstage” of food systems at a national level.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the free microblogging service Twitter. Although its overall adoption remains smaller than other social network and media applications such as Facebook and Instagram, Twitter offers an exemplar case for witnessing the potential for increased transparency into our food systems. As Dhiraj Murthy (2013: xi) writes, “Twitter affords a unique opportunity to re-evaluate how communication and culture can be individualistic and communal simultaneously.” Moreover, Twitter represents a dynamic communication platform: “Self-presentation on Twitter takes place through ongoing ‘tweets’ and conversations with others, rather than static profiles . . . The potential diversity of readership on Twitter ruptures the ability to vary self-presentation based on audience, and thus manage discrete impressions” (Marwick and boyd 2011: 16).

To many, the overlap between Twitter and food manifests itself most explicitly among mobile food vendors, such as food vendors.
truck operators, allowing for brief tweets announcing locations or menu items to followers (Caldwell 2012). For example, a Rhode Island–based food truck specializing in French food tweets, “Lunch on George st corner of Thayer st!! Organic prime rib roast au jus today!! Come get some while they last! And many more new stuff!” Unlike with Facebook, diners interested in a particular food truck need only follow the truck for such updates. In addition, Twitter users can view tweets from a food truck without following the truck, allowing a more public and less exclusive sharing of information—a “context collapse” of audience (Marwick and boyd 2011). Audiences can go from a few to many quickly; as one food truck operator warns, “With social media, if you put a bad meal out . . . the word does get out” (Parker 2013). Such social and mobile media allow immediate feedback from diners, both positive and negative, and can even spur conversations and relationships.

Yet, while Twitter use may be a necessity in the food truck business, its adoption by others in local and national food systems, such as chefs, follows a similar pattern, utilizing a range of tweets, from announcements, updates, photos, and customer interaction. In particular, Twitter proves most useful for this investigation because the platform allows and fosters a layered model of communication (see Figure 1). Tweets can range from the interpersonal, such as an @ reply to a single person, to the public by using hashtags to contribute to and join widespread and emerging conversations (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Bruns and Moe 2013; Schmidt 2013). Moreover, with its open follower networks and the ability to retweet, Twitter allows for the crossing of communication layers—or a “context collapse” in which audiences can vary. In addition, the application functions effectively on mobile devices and desktop computers, while also crossing platforms (witnessed in the ease of Instagram users sharing their photos on Twitter). Such qualities not only make Twitter popular among the general public, including diners, but also make the application ideal for food providers, whether they are in a food truck, on a dock, or in a kitchen.

Twitter and Transparency: An Inside Look

The growing prevalence of social media and smartphones in food systems and networks by vendors, providers, growers, and diners is clear. Unfortunately, the mention of food and social media tends to encourage eye rolls and condemnations of “food porn” or “Eat it, don’t tweet it.” In turn, the banality of much social media activity involving food results in the dis-
missal of Twitter, as well as other social media services (Murthy 2013). As Clive Thompson, author of Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better, points out: “Who cares what you ate for breakfast?” That question has become a cliché of Internet criticism, the go-to response to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter” (2013: 209).

The remainder of this article unpacks that dismissal by digging into the banal tweets and photos of those working in a northeastern United States food network (although, as witnessed in the data, what might be labeled “banal” differs by audience and context). The sharing of these data supports Murthy’s (2013: 28) claim that “documentation of the banal can be of direct historical value.” Moreover, such an exploration can document how social media may contribute to a more transparent food system for the general public. Indeed, a growing number of chefs, food truck operators, and farmers aim to educate the public by offering lenses into their work—a middle ground of sorts between branding, bombarding, and announcing availability.

The data and participants represented in this article reflect a larger research project exploring various stakeholders in the Rhode Island food system (including chefs, nonprofit employees, food truck operators, community organizers, etc.). Over the course of a few months, interviews, observations, and textual evidence were collected throughout the state of Rhode Island. Due to its relatively small size (1,045 square miles of land area), the state is fairly easy to traverse and represents a dense and limited sample size. However, the state also contains a tremendous amount of contrast between the coastal beaches and grassy, flat inlands. In turn, Rhode Island has embraced the local food movement, witnessed in the growth of farmers markets, food-related nonprofit organizations and business incubators, as well as award-winning restaurants, due to, in part, Johnson and Wales University’s culinary program. As Rhode Island seeks to pull itself out of economic stagnation (the state has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country), many stakeholders point to food as the key to future economic success. In other words, “Food will help RI grow.” In that spirit, I now turn to examples illustrating the potential for Twitter and transparency. Initially, I offer an in-depth analysis of a mobile food provider, and then I supplement and expand on that profile with briefer examples.

**Twitter and the “Back End” of a Mobile Food Cart**

Sitting in a west-side Providence, Rhode Island, coffee shop and bakery talking with Veronica, the owner and operator of a mobile food cart specializing in pudding pops (see Figure 2), one cannot help but notice her connection to the city with the regular waves and hellos from fellow coffee drinkers, as well as the consistent notifications vibrating from her iPhone.

![Figure 2](http://example.com/popup.png)

**FIGURE 2:** The PVD Pudding Pops mobile cart ready to hit the road. Reproduced with the permission of the tweeter.

After graduating from an Ivy League university, Veronica found herself teaching high school art following a postgraduation trip to Italy. This position, or rather her dislike of this position, led her to escape to Vermont for an “idyllic retreat,” including working in food co-ops, gardening, and a landscape design firm. This landscape design firm introduced her to the idea of edible gardens, which, along with a stint in a chocolate shop, planted the seeds of a future business model. And so, while escaping for months in Argentina, she mapped out a business plan with the parameters that it must be a specific northeastern city and related to local food. According to Veronica, “Don’t know how I got stuck on local food but I noticed food trucks were happening. They were happening in Boston and New York City and I thought Providence needed some. And I knew cost of living was low enough to support beginning a business. I used a lot of local resources . . . such as [local colleges] free counseling.” From the start, Veronica saw her business as tied to and reflective of the place within which it would operate.

Soon enough, Veronica found herself acquiring the mobile aspect of her business:

I had been working for New Harvest Coffee and they said we know someone with a used bike cart and you should look at it. I looked at it and said, I will buy this now. And that was it. . . I thought about trailer cart, I didn’t think brick and mortar or truck because that was a little too ambitious for me. And then you just put one foot in front of the other . . . now I need to paint it, now I need an umbrella, now I need a logo . . . and it just happened.

But before anything more could happen, Veronica needed a food product to sell from her mobile bike cart. It also needed to be a food product that was mobile and amenable to her location and transportation device—a bike cart. She explains, “I thought I would do scoopable pudding. Pudding was catching on in New York and I was a lover of pudding . . . I thought I would do pudding pops only in the summer. But, I realized this was crazy.
as one person—I just needed one product line. So, I cut the pudding part out.” Through trial and error, Veronica created her product: “I didn’t have a recipe; no culinary or kitchen experience; I just like to eat. I had a general sense of what things go together visually. The pops were horrible at first. People were buying on good faith that I would get better and that they were financing that project; I was shocked and excited by that.”

Admittedly a non-geeky person in general (a “tech dinosaur” in her words), Veronica admits that she has warmed to the idea of smartphones and mobile communication. To her, such devices and connectivity are vital to a one-person business, especially a mobile food-based business. In her words,

You are doing it all the time. You are always on. Look at that thing [points to iPhone on table]. It’s there—it’s face up. Always there. But, it doesn’t faze me. I sleep with it next to my bed. I’m a total connected weirdo. Like, it doesn’t elicit stressful feelings for me. Not even reassuring. It’s just there. It is part of what I do. And that’s like my reality. And if I really need to get away from it, I leave it inside and I go into the community vegetable garden and hang out with my vegetables, who do not say anything, ask me anything, or tweet at me. There are places I can go where I am totally fine without it.

On her decision to adopt a smartphone, Veronica explains, “First, I knew I needed to be available. I knew I needed to tweet my location. That was essential and I knew I couldn’t tweet my location from a shitty cellphone. And, you get a lot of work done on this. There are a fair amount of misspellings, but you get it done.” Despite a desire and need to be “always on,” Veronica does have her limits: “I like to be connected but I hated the idea of being available all the time. And I still try to be firm on boundaries. If someone is pushing my availability buttons, I just go like, hey buddy, I already work 80 hours a week, we don’t need to make it 80 and a half. Like leave me alone.” Even in face-to-face communication, one can see Veronica’s tension in being “always on.” Numerous times, she responded to my questions in a hushed voice and avoided (or acknowledged) fellow diners in the coffee shop. She admitted that a city can feel really small at times, and that her “pops” persona may not always be the one she feels like showing.

With a smartphone and a mobile food cart, Veronica quickly established herself on various social media: She adopted Facebook and Twitter at the same time. And I think I was more into Facebook initially because you can post more content in a bigger picture way. It’s a little easier to navigate than Twitter; the pictures are scrollable in a way that is more something that people are already used to. And no one cares about you on Twitter until you have a presence. You are just lost in the sea of other Twitter people.” With 1,620 followers, Veronica is clearly not lost in the twittersphere at this point.

But she admits that much of her social media popularity relies on the mobile food community of the city. She adds, “But now there are more trucks and new trucks are getting brought in by the older trucks, so they tweet each other’s stuff. People care for each other in that abstract digital strange way. But it is an actual act of physical caring, a nurturing, but it is on the internet.” Veronica summarizes the ways in which tweets can cross the meso- and macro-layers of Twitter communication, finding an audience outside of just one’s follower network.

Despite her hesitations, Veronica is a regular user of Twitter, with her tweets then fed through her Facebook page. In its spontaneity, Twitter allows Veronica to tweet in the moment, but her tweets also reflect a carefully crafted plan:

Social media is supposed to be spontaneous, or it like can be, it gives the ability to be, or this device helps you do that. Press releases are written ahead, they should be—the old guard. The central one is the Twitter feed, because it feeds into website and Facebook. That is the easiest connection scenario or made most sense to me or easiest . . . I use Pinterest also because it looks super hot. There are other image aggregations but they are ugly as sin. It makes me upset to look at them. I do not see the value in Instagram. I don’t see the value for me. If you want a photo filter, I’ve got Photoshop. There is nothing I can’t share on Twitter that I can share on Instagram. There is already a lot of overlap between Twitter and Facebook. If there are funny photos that get lost on Twitter in the feed from Facebook, I put them in an album and share them. There is already a cross-pollination.

Relying on Twitter as her main medium of sharing allows Veronica to quickly post photos and interact with others spontaneously. In addition, the micro-blogging application encourages her to support and interact with her community. Further, she can move beyond her immediate community by crossing platforms and communication layers. The tweets range from pops updates, location changes, timing, traffic issues, and random insights/commentary (see Figures 3 and 4). Moreover, she moves beyond the audience of food trucks and tweets at a local farmers market. In turn, the farmers market retweets her tweet to its follower network, allowing access to a macro-level audience without the use of hashtags.

For example, Veronica tweets her location “and how I’m feeling about it. In case you wanted to know. What I’m trying to do is be more aware of other people’s tweets. Like I only re-tweet or like things if I really like them. I try not to do it in a business-minded way because it is not sincere and will bite you in the ass at some point...I have a brand and it is an extension of myself so I control it.” She continues with describing her thoughtful approach to Twitter:

Not just location or how I feel but hijinks and experiences during my travel. How many tires you blew. Your role is to share content or create...
content and share other content that you feel is good. Because that supports the content you are creating. It makes you a well-rounded person with actual thoughts than a robot tweeting your location or specials—it has to be more than that.

On her appreciation of Twitter, Veronica explains:

I love the short format. I really hate reading long things. And Twitter, what’s really fun about it is the distillation of thought. You get it down to the very fine key words, buying a letter here or there. I go through a few drafts in my head if I’m not making the cut. And, you have to get it cut down or it isn’t going out. What are you actually trying to say. Where are the extra words and get them cut—then I tweet that.

Such commentary on her recursive and reflective writing process contradicts the labeling of literate activity on Twitter as “babble” or “inconsequential chirpings.”

Clearly, Veronica approaches social media with a distinct perspective on its uses for her and her business. She also shows an appreciation for the affordances of each social medium—what it can and cannot do, as well as what it should and should not do. Despite her attempts to avoid pre-planned tweets or manufactured content, Veronica does illustrate a thoughtful and well-crafted approach to using social media, specifically Twitter. She claims, “I’ve become a little more savvy. Like I know more tricks, technically speaking. But personality—if anything I’ve gotten a little . . . rougher.” Her three-pronged approach to using Twitter classifies tweets as location-specific, new content, or shared content, as well as crossing the meso- and macro-layers of her and others’ networks.

But, and most relevant for this article, Veronica also views social media’s potential beyond the sharing of content and making of connections for her business: “My new movement now is making people aware what goes on behind the scenes. When I’m asked to do a backyard bbq for thirty guests, I say no I will not and let me tell you why; you have to understand why that is unreasonable and unacceptable. You have to—because there is [sic] two hours of logistics on each end and you’re taking me off the street to make money . . . to pay my rent.” In this way, Veronica views one aspect of her business and of her social media use as a window into the food system for customers and into the exploitation within current food systems. She argues, “For food trucks and farmers there isn’t another revenue stream—I think Twitter can bridge the gap; I think social media is the thing to...without sounding like my life is so hard...you need to understand the reality of this industry and support it or don’t be a jerk.” That exposing of reality, or the banality of Veronica’s business, offered in tweets and photos, can be a bridge connecting not only customer/diner and chef or farmer, but also the individual to the many, to the larger network surrounding a food truck purchase.

This is where Veronica finds the paradox of social media’s impact on the local food system and our relationship to it: “It just gives you a window in, like that’s what it does. Where you previously had less connection with your food. You know on any given day the chef can tweet what is coming from where and you can literally draw a physical connection line between the farm and what you are eating. And just the shareability, the quickness.” Regularly, Veronica tweets about the “back end” of businesses such as hers. For example, Figure 5 captures a tweet related to transparency, with a comment on paperwork and the back end of her business, as well as an image.

Such tweets with photos are common, especially involving her computer as she handles the day-to-day details of her business. However, she is quick to note that Instagram photos into a chef’s kitchen, much like tweets about the dangers of transporting a mobile food cart along busy roads, may even be part of the problem. She contends,

The more information we’ve got there, but we still do not have the information or gaining ground into the intricacies of the food trade. But part of it is the magic—it is our job to make it look easy. It is my job to show up in sunny clothing with a smile on my face and a funky hairdo,
cracking jokes and sell you pops and make it look so f-ing easy. You are not supposed to be aware of the back end but maybe you should. Because you are marginally aware of the back end on other stuff, why shouldn’t I have that. So, as much as Instagram is giving a window, maybe it is that format, that pedestal, or elevation, that food porn thing that does not allow those connections to be made. Like this doesn’t just happen—many steps, many producers and suppliers and many hours of thankless labor for you to eat that stupid ass burger.

In her own words, Veronica is attempting to unpack “food porn” and offer some insight into the context of food and food photos. Seeing photos of paperwork or computing may not be as exciting as a carefully crafted dinner plate (or popsicle), but such photos do begin to show the “many steps” required to support local food systems. In particular, for mobile food vendors such as Veronica, vendors lacking the budget or staff for public relations and marketing, social media offers them a powerful outlet for sharing the “back end,” or exposing the “magic.”

chefs, butchering, and twitter

Echoing Veronica, David Wagman, the chef/owner of a popular Providence restaurant and national board member of Chefs Collaborative, sees social media as allowing and fostering a direct connection to diners; in particular, he wants to share how special the work of a chef is, especially the behind-the-scenes happenings. Regularly, David posts photos to Instagram and Twitter celebrating dishes before they head out to diners (using the hashtag #fromthepass). David admits that some diners come in bearing photos on their phone, holding them out to a server, stating, “I want that!” Some of these photos, just shared by David, even surprise the servers, unaware of what is happening in the kitchen at the moment—perhaps, the ultimate kitchen transparency.

Beyond photos of finished dishes, David is part of a growing number of chefs using social media to share a particular aspect of the “back end” in local food networks. Unique to David and these chefs is their sharing of photos of butchering whole animals. According to David, if a diner wants to eat something, such as meat, “you should see everything. This celebrates the food, the animal. It is one way to solve the disconnect many have with their food.” David regularly tweets the butchering or fabrication process, complete with photos (see Figure 6 for successive butchering tweets and Figure 7 for sample photo). Such photos and tweets also include hashtags noting the type of animal, as well as the farm or farmer or fishing boat responsible for the animal.

David’s goal is to celebrate not only the fish or hog or lamb but also the process. “I want people to see that so they can feel good about what they are eating and feel excited about it.” Perhaps exposing the “magic” noted by Veronica, David asserts, “People need to not only understand where their food comes from but what it is . . . Sometimes people think it is a little bit morbid, but if you are going to eat a living animal, you need to think about it. If you have a problem, don’t eat it!” I am particularly drawn to David’s focus on transparency in his drive to show diners the “what it is” of food, especially proteins. David admits that not all viewers or diners are fans of this sharing, especially the butchering pho-
tos (as noted earlier, the banal can differ by audience). He experiences some backlash on Twitter, but he sees such sharing as key to transparency and a compliment to the farmer who raised the animal. Such social media use mirrors in many ways the few special seats at David’s restaurant allowing diners to eat at the pass, with clear views of the open kitchen (see Figure 8).

This open kitchen also allows David to host educational workshops for other food professionals, including Chefs Collaborative workshops and events, capturing his commitment to a transparent and sustainable food system (see Figure 9). The use of social media, as well as the physical space of his open kitchen, extends the possibilities of transparency and how such transparency can be shared with diners and other food professionals. Tweets by diners and fellow Chefs Collaborative board members, as well as the numerous retweets by David himself, highlight the communicative possibilities of Twitter. Tweets spread across Twitter and users’ screens as they bounce from the meso- to macro-layer of various networks, including those accessed through the use of hashtags, such as #ChangeMenusChangeLives (see Figure 9).

FIGURE 7: Showing appreciation for the animal and farmer in an Instagram image.
REPRINTED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE TWEETER.

FIGURE 8: Numerous diners rely on social media to connect with and appreciate chefs and restaurants.
REPRINTED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE TWEETER.

FIGURE 9: A growing number of chefs are opening their kitchens as education spaces.
REPRINTED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE TWEETER.

TWITTER AND SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD

Noted in the discussion of David’s use of social media, particularly the attention he pays to farmers and fishermen and women, is his use of hashtags to name and label the fish he is fabricating. A hashtag such as #fluke connects users to a positive, and increasingly popular, example of transparency: tweets involving the labeling of seafood. Recent stories of seafood fraud have left diners, and even some restaurants, unsure of what they are eating or serving. In turn, local seafood groups in the New England area are attempting to ensure that the fish they catch and deliver to restaurants or fish markets are properly labeled.

Brown Family Seafood, out of Point Judith, Rhode Island, is a vocal proponent of sustainable, local, and traceable seafood. Much of their fish is served with a traceable code that can be entered into a box on their home page so diners can “discover the story of [their] seafood.” In addition, Brown Family Seafood relies on social media to share updates on their own catches but also news related to sustainable and traceable seafood. For example, Brown Family Seafood shares photos on Twitter of recent catches, such as fresh fluke (see Figure 10).

Similarly, many sustainability groups share tweets focused on educating diners by asking viewers to guess the fish (see Figure 11). Again, hashtags are used to connect with larger networks involving #seafood. Moreover, specific individuals and organizations are targeted by @replies, allowing the
original tweet to explicitly target those organizations and, with luck, their follower networks. In particular, this tweet asks readers to retweet their answer to the question, with the hopes of accessing unknown audience and follower networks.

And, finally, a popular food review site shares a photo of fluke as a fish sandwich (see Figure 12 for Instagram photo). Such a photo may be dismissively labeled “food porn” but it informs viewers of the fish species and the location of its catch. When this photo is tweeted (and Instagrammed) to the review site’s follower networks, the use of hashtag #fluke can then allow the fish sandwich photo to circulate with the fabrication photos from David’s kitchen. Though geographically separate and unknown to each other, these tweets can all be pieces of a larger conversation fostered by the affordances of Twitter. Ultimately, the general public can learn more about the fish sandwich on their plate as well as the process to get that sandwich from sea to plate.

TRANSPARENCY AND HEALTH DEPARTMENTS

The previous examples highlight the positive aspects of transparency encouraged by social media, such as Twitter and Instagram. Chefs, mobile food providers, and fishermen and women allow diners and shoppers a window into the “back end” or a seat at the kitchen and in the boat. However, transparency can be a double-edged sword for chefs sharing photos and behind-the-scenes happenings. Marcus Johnson, executive chef and owner of a popular restaurant in Boston and former owner of a Providence restaurant, is a regular user of Twitter and Instagram. At one point, Zagat labeled him as one of thirty food accounts to follow on Instagram. This led Marcus to somewhat sarcastically tweet, “Cool, Thanks, Zagat. You got one thing right—I DO want you to know where your food comes from.”

But Marcus’s presence on Twitter also brought his former restaurant and cheese shop some unwanted attention during a recent winter holiday season. Due to some photos he shared on Twitter, according to Marcus, the local health department shut his shop down. He recognizes that he was pushing the limits by posting some photos: “I knew I was playing with fire a little bit. I was posting repeated photos of charcuterie, look at our cure room; but it never went into my mind that the health department was an audience.” In an aim for transparency, the audience for such transparency can
become blurred, especially for Twitter users. Unlike Facebook, no “friend requests” are made and privacy is not an option. Such “context collapse” of a varied audience results in an audience of networks (Marwick and boyd 2011). As previous examples showed, such a networked audience has its advantages but it can also lead to “new tensions and conflicts” (ibid.: 130). In turn, understaffed health departments can and do use social media for the same reason as diners—transparency. Such tweets, photos, and hashtags offer them a front seat for viewing the “back end” from their computers or mobile devices, noting violations and troublesome photos.

Ultimately, in Marcus’s case, he saw the incident as a social media learning experience: “When they came in and did their raid, I talked about that on Twitter too.” While Marcus acknowledges that Twitter is more public than he may have first imagined, with even the health department watching, he tweeted appreciation at the reopening (see Figure 13). Aware of his audience, Marcus targets the local health department by tagging them in the tweet. After that, his followers do the remainder of the work, favoriting and retweeting the original message to their follower networks.

“All that glitters” vs. #hungry

There is a transparency encouraged and supported by social media that may be dismissed and overlooked if diners and food researchers follow popular media’s disdain for “food porn” and smartphones in social settings, such as restaurants. The ability to photograph, share, and tweet the everyday happenings of our lives, when taken as a whole, may offer some glimpse into how the general public is experiencing and representing food systems. Those interested in and invested in food systems should focus more attention on these mundane photos and tweets that populate Twitter and Instagram feeds, especially those from chefs, mobile food vendors, and fishermen and women. This call for a renewed emphasis on the everyday should alert researchers: “The fact that people use social media to share photos of their children and their meals more often than they join in on politically charged hashtag trends should be reflected in the way scholars write about social media” (Brabham 2015: 1). Instead, Brabham contends, researchers focus on “all that glitters” on social media, “the successes and failures” (ibid.), or the bombarding and branding, but not the mundane activities that compose the everyday (such as #hungry on Twitter).

Ideally, those invested in food systems can and will focus on both in their research and practice; as illustrated in this article, Twitter provides one such site for doing so. Tweets cross communication layers in ways unintended by the original author. Such context collapse, in which users imagine audiences, represents a challenge and an opportunity. Ultimately, Twitter, along with other social media, allows the general public a seat at the open kitchen of the local and national (as well as international) food systems and networks, captured by the people, tweets, and photos shared in this article. At the end of the day, the key question remains: How can food researchers study and, in turn, use Twitter (or other social media) in new ways, to share the “back end” and expose the “magic” of our food systems? 🌟

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**Notes**

1. Throughout the article, I rely on Murthy’s (2013) distinction between social networks (Facebook) and social media (Twitter). Social networks are “friend-based networks where maintaining and developing friendship ties are critical” (ibid.: 9). Social media, however, are “designated as broadcast media, whose intention is to publish content to networks known and unknown to the author” (ibid.: 9–10).

2. While the current article focuses on American trends and data, the growing impact of social media and smartphones is not an

REFERENCES


