



## Making visible: Interrogating the performance of food sharing across 100 urban areas



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### ABSTRACT

Interpersonal sharing of food has been an omnipresent feature of human civilisation from hunter-gatherer societies to the present, both as a mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations. While the evolutionary dynamism of this food sharing is relatively well documented, critical scholarship has tended to examine contemporary food sharing practices beyond family and friends through case studies of individual initiatives. A broader view of food sharing practices is absent. In addition, there has been little examination of the role that emerging information and communication technologies (ICT) are having on food sharing, despite claims that such technologies offer transformative potential to achieve more secure, sustainable and just food systems. In response, this paper presents a novel landscape level analysis of more than 4000 ICT-mediated urban food sharing activities operating across 100 cities in six continents. Adopting conceptual insights from the intersection of social and economic practice-oriented approaches, the resulting food-sharing database progresses understanding of, and makes visible, the ways in which food (and food-related skills, stuff and spaces) is being shared across diverse urban settings. To conclude, it is argued that the database plays an important productive and performative role in mapping and comparing diverse food sharing economies. Importantly, it provides a springboard for further explanatory research to fine-tune our understanding of the evolution, governance and sustainability potential of urban food sharing.

### 1. Introduction

At the second meeting of the Milan Urban Food Pact in 2016, the Director General of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) José Graziano da Silva, called for cities, big and small, to help construct urban food systems that will be sustainable and resilient in the face of changing climates. Aligning with the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals to end hunger and create sustainable cities and communities, the Pact brings together mayors from across 130 cities to identify solutions to current and future food challenges in an increasingly urbanized world. In this quest, illustrative examples of innovative responses to local food challenges abound, including food-sharing initiatives beyond familial and household settings such as surplus food redistribution and community gardens, with urban areas emerging as living laboratories for sustainable food transition experiments. However, little is known about the cumulative nature of these urban food initiatives at a city, nation or aggregate level as large-n comparative analyses are rarely developed. This means that the full range and consequence of diverse food initiatives remain largely invisible to

city governors, urban citizens and to the growing communities of practice in the urban food arena. As a result, the overall potential of such initiatives in terms of transforming urban food systems onto more sustainable and resilient trajectories is hard to discern, the international learning from experiences is limited, and novel interventions in the foodscapes of one locale are easily dismissed as interesting but rather inconsequential niche experiments in the face of systems dominated by multinational agri-food organisations.

This problem of invisibility has already been noted by those researching grassroots sustainability innovations (Davies and Mullin, 2011; Seyfang and Smith, 2007) and diverse economies more broadly (Gibson-Graham, 2008), including diverse food economies (Cameron and Wright, 2014). However, significant challenges around ascertaining and aggregating the performance of diverse food sharing initiatives beyond one locale remain, particularly in emergent and dynamic arenas such as urban food sharing. Confronting these challenges head on, this paper reports and reflects on the findings of an experimental process of ‘making visible’ the practices and economies of urban food sharing initiatives that are utilising specific forms of ICT (information and communication technologies)

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across 100 cities, drawn from 43 countries and six continents. The focus on ICT-mediated urban food sharing emerging out of claims that we are living through a fourth industrial revolution characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres (Schwab, 2016).

Beginning with a brief summary of the meaning, history and evolution of the social practice of food sharing, this paper presents a typology of food sharing which helped define search terms for identifying and interrogating urban food sharing initiatives and subsequently the construction of a database. A reading of the database is then provided that explores the performance characteristics of food sharing practices. This includes their spatial orientation (*where* food sharing initiatives are located) and *why* they were established, *what* is being shared within them and *how* that sharing takes place. Explicitly embracing the weak theoretical stance promoted through diverse economies research (Gibson-Graham, 2008), it is argued that this descriptive process is a necessary and productive initial step in understanding the contribution food sharing makes (and might make) to broader urban foodscapes (Mikkelsen, 2011). Ultimately, this paper has two functions: (1) It presents the findings of a novel international study of ICT-mediated urban food sharing and (2) it reflects critically on the limitations of the study, outlining key research questions still to be answered and illustrating how co-ordination between multi-scalar and multi-disciplinary studies will be needed to understand how food systems in urban areas might become more resilient and ultimately more sustainable.

## 2. Food sharing

The sharing of food is a longstanding feature of human civilisation, both as a mechanism through which sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social relations (Kaplan and Gurven, 2005). Its evolutionary dynamism is relatively well documented at the kinship level, particularly in relation to the apparent decline of eating together at home in some western societies (Julier, 2013; Weinstein, 2005). Meanwhile, attempts to understand how, why and to what end people share food more broadly have a long lineage across archaeology, geography, psychology, anthropology and beyond. As Jaeggi and Gurven (2013: 186) note, '[f]ood sharing is a fundamental form of cooperation that ... is particularly noteworthy because of its central role in shaping human life history, social organization, and cooperative psychology'. Behavioural anthropologists in particular have concluded that while many other animals actively partake in food sharing, 'the patterning and complexity of food sharing among humans is truly unique' (Kaplan and Gurven, 2005: 1). However, the patterning and complexity of contemporary food sharing especially that occurring beyond the home and in urban, industrialised settings has received the limited attention to date. Given that such sharing has been further differentiated in recent decades through the mediating capabilities of smart and mobile information and communication technologies (ICT) that are reshaping how people connect, interact, exchange and acquire knowledge, skills, experiences, goods and services, this is an area ripe for further investigation (Hearn et al., 2014).

First, it is helpful to delineate more precisely what is considered as food sharing for the purposes of this paper. Given the manifold ways in which sharing is understood, combined with a desire to begin with a broad examination of food sharing across the urban food system, the Oxford English Dictionary definition of sharing is adapted to focus explicitly on food:

*having a portion [of food] with another or others; giving a portion [of food] to others; using, occupying or enjoying food [and food related spaces] to include the growing, cooking and/or eating of food] jointly; possessing an interest in food in common; or telling someone about food' (Oxford University Press, 2014<sup>1</sup> emphasis added).*

This definition illustrates the social practices of *doing things together* around food, including but moving beyond simple commensality; the practice of eating or drinking together. Sharing then is not just what people do, it is a co-ordinated entity 'a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 1996) and a performance - a process of doing - through which sharing as an entity is perpetuated and potentially reshaped. Such a definition also allows attention to a wide range of things that can be shared, from the material stuff of food (e.g. unprocessed crops and seeds), to products (e.g. processed food or tools for growing and cooking) and services (e.g. systems for the provision of redistributed food), as well as capabilities (e.g. growing or cooking skills) and spaces (e.g. fields, allotments, gardens, and kitchens). It also admits, although does not prescribe, a wide variety of scales over which sharing might take place; what Agyeman et al. (2013: 2) refer to as 'territories of sharing'.

Focusing on what is shared and how it is shared provides a useful skeleton structure for demarcating realms of food sharing and this was used to develop an initial typology illustrated by Table 1., which illustrates the type of urban food sharing initiatives included in such a definition. For the formation of the database this typology was used alongside attention to organisational structures (for-profit, not-for-profit, social enterprise, cooperative, association, informal), modes of sharing (gifting, bartering, collecting and selling) and form of ICT (website, facebook, twitter, app) being used. The methods adopted for identifying such characteristics are outlined more fully in the mapping section of this paper.

### 2.1. Food sharing as social practice

While the benefits of adopting a practice orientation in relation to eating, cooking or growing food is relatively well-established (Davies, 2014; Warde, 2013; Delormier et al., 2009; Campbell et al., 2012; Meah, 2016), this approach has not been applied explicitly to food sharing. Yet, as outlined above, food sharing is undertaken for and with others; reshaping relations with both human and non-human entities and tangible and intangible resources (Hall and Ince, 2018; Agyeman et al., 2013). It is, as a result, replete with habits, routines, tools and technologies; essentially an archetypal practice that is both entity and performance. Food sharing embodies routinized ways "in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world in understood" (Reckwitz, 2002: 250). It is "a 'type' of behaving and understanding that appears at different locales and at different points of time and is carried out by different body/minds" (ibid), with the performative element of food sharing practice occurring around its enactment. It is only through the performance of food sharing that the interdependencies between elements of food sharing (that is food sharing as an entity) are sustained. Individuals are the carriers of a food sharing practice which may itself evolve, with new forms of sharing appearing and others disappearing over time and across space as elements and performances are reconfigured. In essence, food sharing is a complex assemblage "of body-minds, things, knowledge, discourse, and structures carried by agents such as individuals, organizations and institutions" (Jones and Murphy, 2010: 371) and understanding it as such provides a frame for integrative analysis that can accommodate attention to the gamut of rules, tools, skills and understandings embodied within it.

Adopting a practice approach enables examination of broad social and economic processes through the consideration of the actions and meanings associated with everyday activities such as food sharing. Indeed, the approach has been mooted as a useful bridging concept between researchers primarily associated with either social or economic concerns, particularly within human geography. As documented by Jones and Murphy (2010), there are many examples of studies where practices are used to help explain phenomena within socio-spatial economies. Certainly, there is much to be drawn from the rich epistemic history of practice-oriented studies that will be relevant for analysis of

<sup>1</sup> On-line dictionary available at: <http://www.oed.com/>.

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