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It's not what you eat but *how* and *that* you eat: Social media, counter-discourses and disciplined ingestion among amateur competitive eaters

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates how social media can provide a platform for contesting dominant discourses. It does so through the lens of competitive eating, demonstrating that amateur competitive eaters use social media sites to challenge and subvert mass media representations of their sport while concomitantly upholding normative notions of healthy eating and bodies. Competitors consider themselves to be skilful athletes that discipline and train their bodies to eat. They regard their eating practices, which are often depicted in the mass media as uncontrolled and gluttonous, as *controlled* ingestion, and present an alternative perspective of their 'sport' – a perspective that stresses health, physical expertise and a fit, trained body over voracity and insatiability. Social media acts as a 'precipitating agency' for the creation of these alternative definitions of disciplined eating, as well as the construction of new digital eating identities. Instead of focusing on the food being ingested and the 'Carnavalesque' practice of competitive eating, we draw attention to the performers' voices and the ways they attend to the mechanics of gurgitation, including methods of chewing, swallowing and stomach stretching, and their ability to manage, regulate and operate ingestivity. As hegemonic discourses align the notion of 'good eating' to discipline, order and restraint, competitive eating is thus revealed to be a practice that mirrors and appropriates, yet also ultimately reproduces, conventional narratives. Social media is, in turn, shown to be a political tool for counter-discursive practices that are produced in dialogue with, and concomitantly uphold and contest, normative discourses of mass media.

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Introduction

This is disgusting... This is... a freaky world in which people chow down 2.89 lb of pigs' feet in 10 min, or 31.5 quesadillas in 5 min.

[Sandomir, 2007]

According to the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFoCE), as many as 80 eating contests are held each year in association with Major League Eating (MLE) (IFoCE, 2013). These heavily sponsored and publicised competitions, together with an assortment of television programmes such as *Man vs Food* have rapidly and colourfully brought this type of eating performance to a wider, global audience, inspiring a number to emulate the practice and format (Congalton, 2009: 176–7). As a result, there is an emerging, somewhat fluid, taxonomy of 'gurgitators' perfecting their abilities to ingest at speed or in quantity. Eaters' status in

the gurgitating community's hierarchy (as professionals, celebrities or amateurs) is determined by their ingestive proficiencies. This can be predicated on either speed or the amount of substance ingested: Performers can excel through ingestive 'nerve', that is by ingesting what are known as 'extreme eats' (for example, 1000 year old eggs or Ghost chillies), but also the ordinary, the cheap and 'unhealthy' (with hot dogs established as a firm favourite). The aim within both broad categories is to challenge an individual's ingestive abilities and their corporeal rejection of items consumed either via return or satiety/repletion. Competitive eating is thus defined as 'engaging in a contest of skill, in this case voluminously and/or rapidly for remuneration, which may or may not be monetary, and includes, but is not limited to money, material objects, visibility and fame' (Rubin, 2008: 250).

In this article we extend the 'skill' aspect of competitive eating to elucidate the ways in which competitive eaters' training and disciplining of their bodies subverts and appropriates established notions of 'civilised' eating. In particular, we are concerned with the ways competitive eaters deploy social media to create spaces of autonomy in which to practice their sport. This focus lets us

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examine how social media facilitates the (re)production of counter-discourses as we interrogate the extent that competitive eaters concomitantly challenge, uphold and reproduce hegemonic discourses of proper, good and right eating that are commonly promulgated through the mass media. We draw inspiration from Guthman's (2011) political ecology approach that, in the context of obesity, challenges the conventions found in media representations and demonstrates how these are socially produced, take hold and close the possibilities of discussion. Likewise, our approach implicates recent work within Fat Studies (Aphramor et al., 2013), Critical Geography of Obesity/Fatness (Colls, 2012; Colls and Evans, 2009, 2013) and the associated discussions on ordered and disordered eating and bodies (see Longhurst, 2012), as we demonstrate how normative assumptions about what constitutes healthy eating and bodies are experienced, countered and reinforced by our research participants. Taking our lead from Guthman, our interest is also in 'opening up the conversation to other ideas' (Longhurst, 2012: 188) and counter-intuitively working against the assumptions on which mass media representations of both normative and deviant eating practices are premised.

We do not, however, focus on the realm of professional eaters and their place in the globalised media, which has already been subject to some academic and popular discussion (Congalton, 2009; Fagone, 2006; Nerz, 2007). Nor do we take the paths of focusing on the foodstuffs consumed (e.g. Phillipov, 2013) or the relationship between eater and audience (e.g. Rubin, 2008). Instead we focus on the perspectives of semi-professional and amateur aspiring eaters who rely on USG (user generated content) social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to generate interest in their skills, and promote their practices. This not only helps ensure that our discussion is shaped by competitive eaters' perspectives – rather than our own preconceptions – but also enables us to illuminate how social media provides the space to engage with dominant discourses (of eating) in ways which both challenge and uphold normative narratives. Thus, we argue, that the competitive eaters with whom we worked contest – through their eating and its social media representation – mass media representations of competitive eating as grotesque and disgusting, while also showing how this contestation simultaneously reproduces normative discourses on food, health and the body that pound discipline and equate thinness with healthiness. We look to demonstrate, then, how social media can provide a platform from which to formulate counter-discourses, albeit in a limited manner.

Models of consumers passively receiving information from a homogenous media have long been countered by active audience theorists (cf Hall, 1980), with Bruns' (2008) idea of 'producers' highlighting the active ways consumers interpret – or produce – media. Conflating production and consumption, 'prosumption' has also recently emerged as a frame through which to understand users' engagement with social media in that it better reflects how they simultaneously consume and produce knowledge (Jurgenson and Ritzer, 2010; Ritzer et al., 2012; Ritzer, 2014; Rousseau, in press). Through this lens, wikis, blogs and social networking sites are the 'ultimate social factories' (Ritzer et al., 2012: 383) that, on one hand, extract value from unpaid labour and on the other, empower users to produce their own experiences free from external control and interference. This latter theme of empowerment and autonomy has been a pervasive discourse of social media, and expressions of agency, choice and freedom are abundant across blogs and networking sites (Chia, 2012). As we show below, our research participants' perspectives reflect this rhetoric as they use social media to convey their freedom to eat and practice their sport as they choose. However, we also look to go beyond discussions of cyber-libertarianism, democratisation and their limitation (O'Neill and Boykoff, 2011; Sunstein, 2007), by demonstrating how the seemingly

counter-discourses enabled by social media are embedded within, and ultimately reproduce, dominant paradigms. As such, we draw on and extend Chia's conclusion that the Internet is 'the scene of contestation and complicity, where subjects' consumptive energies on discreet social media platforms are milled through a digital ecosystem' (Chia, 2012: 424) by elucidating how our participants' views are mediated by normative narratives and their autonomy, curtailed.

The media in all its forms has been subject to some, if limited, discussion in the context of food and eating (Adema, 2000; Collins, 2009; Eli and Ulijaszek, 2014; Slocum et al., 2011). Rousseau (2012a) addresses the politics of the food entertainment industry and the ways media personalities emerge as food activists that, in her words, 'interfere' with people's food preferences. She thus traces the rise of food media and the shift towards eating practices becoming a public concern, arguing that public health issues work to consolidate the authority of food media celebrities. Yet she also points to the ways that consumers are complicit in this production (see also Abbots in press), a process compounded by the dialogic nature of social media (Rousseau, 2012b). Similarly, Barnes (2014 in press) illustrates how consumers 'talk back' to celebrity chefs through social media and demonstrates how this production of collaborative knowledge both upholds and contests chefs' authority. Social media provides a space, then, for the construction and communication of counter-discourses although, as Rousseau cautions, it can only 'contribute a precipitating agency to the already fraught arena of discourses around what is 'good' and 'proper' when it comes to how and what to eat' (in press).

It is this notion of social media as precipitating agency that informs our account of how competitive eaters dialogically mobilise Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to construct and express their eating practices in their own terms. We further draw on scholarship that shows how 'subcultural communities of practice' (Ritzer et al., 2012: 394) reflexively use social media as a tool to construct a digital identity (cf. Woermann, 2012), and look to extend this by exploring how this process of self-reflection occurs in dialogue with, and in contestation to, mass media representations. We thus present competitive eaters as prosumers of food knowledges and social media as a political instrument that is deployed to 'talk back' to critics through the construction of counter-food identities.

Methodological approach

Recent ethnographies (Boellstorff, 2008; Miller, 2013) and broader discussions of digital anthropology (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Horst and Miller, 2012) have established the Internet as an object of critical enquiry and a location – or fieldsite – of study. In the networked world of amateur competitive eating, social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook emerge as the key sites in which this self-defined 'community of practice' are located. We consequently treat social media spaces as both field-site and research object. Due, in part, to mass media caricatures of competitive eating we adopted a qualitative approach that would be less obscured by preconceptions and pay heed to the perspectives and voices of competitive eaters. In keeping with this methodology we initially formed a basic but loose research direction with the understanding that it would act as a springboard for any unforeseen outcomes or alternative directions. In other words, our participants would lead the research, and we would be guided by their responses, life stories, experiences, and comments. Our study thus grew organically and holistically and was shaped by the lived experiences of our participants.

We identified potential participants through online competitive eating sources, and sent invitations to participate in research

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