

Editorial:

**Food Matters and Materialities
from/at the Intersection of Culture and Communication**

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Since philosophers and anthropologists first started to pay closer attention to food as an object of study (Barthes, 1961; Douglas, 1972; Lévi-Strauss, 1964, 1966), many researchers have become interested in the social and cultural dimensions of food and eating, a line of inquiry also adopted by communication studies scholars. Food is an object and subject we increasingly communicate about. It is hence not surprising that many use communication studies' tools and conceptual frameworks (e.g., rhetoric, discourse analysis, analysis of representations, semiology, etc.) to question food's importance, place, and roles in our lives, cultures and societies, and to look at how we communicate about it (Cramer et al., 2011; Elliott, 2016; Frye & Bruner, 2014).

Food is also ever increasingly present in a range of media content and pop culture artefacts (Contois & Kish, 2022; Goodman et al., 2017; Lebesco & Naccarato, 2017; Lupton & Feldman, 2020), which has led scholars to question how its increasing mediatization may change how we approach it, communicate with/about it, and how its place and role beyond the mediatic arena is affected by these technological developments (Schneider et al., 2017; Lupton & Feldman, 2020; Contois & Kish, 2022; Guthman & Butler, 2023; Durocher, 2019; Dürrschmidt & Kautt, 2019). More recently, such inquiries include questioning the ever growing presence and use of data in our food systems and practices (Bronson, 2022; Duncan et al., 2022; Rotz et al., 2019).

But food is not only something we talk about – it is also something through which communication occurs. As Cramer & al. (2011) put it, communication can be defined as “[...] 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” (Cramer et al., 2011, p. x).

Many scholars in communication studies and related disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, have studied the significations and symbolisms associated with and embedded in food. Some, for instance, pay closer attention to foods' cultural symbolisms (many influenced by early works in semiology; Barthes, 1961), and question how significations are attributed to and created through foods, making food a means of communication in and of itself. As Cramer et al. (2011) note, “[...] 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” (Cramer et al., 2011, p. xvii).

Many of these researchers, influenced by early works in anthropology (Levi-Strauss, Douglas), have approached food as an object imbued with meanings that are culturally produced and mediated, and as such, intricately woven into the multiple relationships that constitute our lives, cultures and societies. This contributes to making food a powerful medium through which identities can be created, shared and expressed (see for instance; Bourdieu, 2013; Brulotte et al., 2016; Counihan et al., 2019; Counihan et al., 2013; Garth, 2013; Williams-Forson, 2007; Williams-Forson, 2022). Other scholars, many influenced by the Foucauldian approaches to the creation of the self and identities, have also questioned how food takes part in the creation of subjectivities (Coveney, 2000; Leung & Caldwell, 2020; Lupton, 1996; Mol, 2008; Probyn, 2000) – another way of examining how communication occurs by and through food and food practices.

In recent decades, thanks to the influence of constructivist, feminist, race, decolonial and postcolonial scholars among others, a great number of researchers adopted a critical perspective in the analysis of food and its manyfold cultural functions and dimensions, so as to reveal underlying ideologies and culturally produced power dynamics (Cairns & Johnston, 2015; Chao, 2021; Counihan et al., 2019; Counihan et al., 2013; Heldke, 2016; Inness, 2001; Slocum, 2007; Williams-Forson, 2022).

What this bulk of research reveals is that food is literally at the center of our lives, not only in terms of our experience of it and of the (food) cultures we are part of, but also in terms of its key roles in the development of economic, political, and environmental (infra)structures, systems and technologies (Alkon et al., 2020; Bronson, 2022; Chao, 2022; Duncan et al., 2022; Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart, 2022; McKittrick, 2013; Mintz, 1985). Food and food systems are political, cultural, economic, social, and environmental, and as such, need to be questioned and addressed with and from a variety of perspectives and fields of research, including social, cultural, and communication studies.

Cultural studies scholars for instance have investigated food and the power relationships that inform its place within the fabric of our lives and societies (Cramer et al., 2011, citing Williams, 1981) using food objects and systems as a means to question power relationships taking form by and through food matters, meanings, and affects (Abbots & Lavis, 2016; Chatterjee & Subramaniam, 2021; Probyn, 2016; Sheller, 2016; Slocum, 2007, 2013; Williams-Forson, 2022). In other words, these scholars use food as many different sites of inquiry to question systems and structures of power, ideologies, entanglements, and affects.

These scholars’ work has led to questioning how cultures inform the development of particular, socio-culturally grounded food practices, (infra)structures and systems, which in turn also inform food matters/materialities and how they will be approached or worked with. We pursue this line of reflection with this special issue, which comes out of the [*Food Matters and Materialities: Critical Understandings of Food Cultures*](#) Conference that we, the guest editors of this special issue, co-organized and hosted online in September 2021. The Conference aimed to explore the material ways in which food and culture intersect. While much of the previous food research in the field of communication studies has focused on questioning the symbolism of food practices and rituals, the development of cultural identities via the production and sharing of meaning associated with foods and food practices, or the communicative character of food matters

or food related practices, we oriented the Conference theme so that it would focus on how food matters/materialities are produced in and contribute to a given socio-cultural context, and how they are intertwined with and contribute to reinforcing broader power relationships and inequalities. We selected some of the papers presented at the conference that enrich the scope of scholarship in communication studies interested in food and food practices. Before introducing the papers, we provide a bit of the theoretical and conceptual framework that informed the development of the Conference theme, to better situate the papers within this context.

Call to seriously consider matters/materialities

The Conference theme revolved around “matters and materialities” and their links to food cultures. The notion of food matters refers to the actual composition of food (e.g., nutrients, textures, flavors, etc.), while the concept of food materialities emerges out of recent fields of research interested in matters themselves such as the new materialisms (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Coole & Frost, 2010) who approach matters as constantly in the process of becoming, transforming. Materialities is a term used to describe these dynamic processes, turning away from a framing of matters as inert, passive. The concept hence invites us to consider the (power) relationships involved in shaping the material conditions of food and eating.

We approached food matters (and what they are/what they become/how they affect or have effects) as intimately linked to culture, making it more than relevant to adopt a cultural and communication studies perspectives to question the processes involved. Here, culture needs to be understood following the foundational works of Williams (1981) and Hall (1980) in cultural studies (see also more recent works of Carey, 2009; Grossberg, 1997, 2012) who question cultures through exploring the heterogeneity of knowledge, discourses, practices, infrastructures, institutions, etc. that structure our lives and societies. Culture needs not to be understood solely in terms of popular culture or in terms of cultural practices or artefacts, but also as the production of knowledge (lay or scientific), and the development of policies and institutions, technologies, etc.

As cultural studies scholars taught us, cultures are always permeated by power relationships that are enacted or manifested via the creation of discourses and practices constitutive of these very cultures and as such, materialize in a wide array of practices, policies, programs, popular culture phenomena, media content, to name a few examples. Likewise, food cultures can be approached as developed and enacted through a web of social and cultural relationships that produce food-related practices (such as food production and harvesting, circulation, preparation, control, and consumption, as well as communication and mediatization), hence contributing to the emergence of contingent food matters/materialities.

Contemporary food cultures are permeated by socio-culturally produced power relationships that inform how we approach food, produce it, consume it, waste it, etc. They hence frame what an issue is and how it should be addressed. For us, food matters also represent a play on words as in food matters/issues to reflect our intent to discuss food related issues, the role and place of food matters/materialities in relation to these issues, and the role food cultures play in their emergence. This theme came to us as current food cultures are marked by worries about food production and consumption, climate change and environmental degradation, and human health (Belasco, 2006; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; IPES-Food, 2016; Knezevic et al., 2017, Koç, Winson, & Sumner, 2017). These issues, and the solutions proposed to address them, are both a part and a result of the knowledge and power relationships that dominate current food cultures. Researchers coming from

various fields of research such as critical geography and political economy, critical dietetics and environmental science, climate change and sustainability (e.g., Guthman and Butler, 2023; Brady & Gingras, 2019; Alaimo, 2012) are among those who criticize how food-, health-, and environment-related issues are thought of as being “fixed” by positivist sciences such as dietetics, health and medical sciences, biology/biochemistry or technological engineering.

These researchers have brought forward the importance of reflecting on what is given the status of a “problem” in the first place, and what types of solutions are proposed in response to these problems. In other words, how something is framed affects the way we view it. For example, environmental crises sometimes reduced to a matter of individual consumption choices (meat free diet; locavorism; household food waste management) can dismiss broader, more systemic and structural problems characteristic of our contemporary neoliberalist, capitalist, globalized food systems contributing to climate change, loss of biodiversity, etc., and skip over the cultural, economic, and environmental factors that shape diet and food practices.

Another concern abundantly discussed when it comes to food is fatness. Fatness is currently framed as a “problem”, a “crisis” (the “obesity crisis”), for which “solutions” come from a biomedical or a nutritionist perspective focused on individual behavior. Researchers in critical dietetics and fat/obesity studies have highlighted how the links between obesity and disease remain murky (Brady et al., 2019; Campos et al., 2006; Gard & Wright, 2005; Guthman, 2011; Rich et al., 2011; Strings, 2019) and how the medicalization of the fat body has led to the failure to acknowledge the exclusion and discrimination processes that emerge from its problematization. These researchers have also highlighted how the stigmatization of fatness contributes to overlooking the systemic, structural inequalities that affect individual and community health, and which can be manifested through the shape of one’s body or the state of one’s health, independent of body size or individual will or control.

Linked to these fears of fatness, many concerns are expressed surrounding access to “healthy foods”. Discussing the solutions to/causes of the “obesity crisis” in terms of “food access” avoid addressing the real causes of lack of access (i.e., lack of income) or more broadly, health inequalities (Dennis & Robin, 2020; Hatch, 2016; Martin & Amos, 2017; Power, Belyea, & Collins, 2019; Shannon, 2013; Tarasuk et al., 2010; Settee, 2020; Yates-Doerr, 2020). It is also made more complex when we realize that the types of food at the center of these discussions often entail limited conceptions of “healthy” food, based on Western approaches to food, health, and diet (Dennis & Robin, 2020; Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013; Martin & Amos, 2017; Overend, 2020; P. Williams-Forsen, 2019).

The limited knowledge that is granted legitimacy when it comes to defining “healthy” also ignores that what is considered “healthy” changes over time, along with the emergence of new scientific knowledge, but also as a result of various factors (cultural, environmental, political and economic) that contribute to what gets framed as a priority. For example, Canada’s official food guide has evolved over the decades to reflect the changing dominant understandings of nutrition (Mosby, 2012; Overend, 2020); inclusion of dairy and meat alternatives, and recognition of culturally-specific diets are only found in the most recent editions of the guide.

In the context of the *Food Matters and Materialities* Conference, as well as in this special issue, we took seriously the call from Alaimo et Hekman (2008), and other new feminist materialist researchers, who invite scholars to consider seriously ‘matters’ so to engage with problem-framing and solution-creation in a context characterized by multiple crises. In line with works in critical

food studies that demonstrate how power relations take form in food cultures and create unfair and unequal relationships to and through food (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013a; Koç et al., 2017; Shugart, 2017a; Slocum & Saldanha, 2016), Conference participants examined how power relations materialize in particular food matters/materialities, and in (re)producing consequential and unequal power dynamics between and across bodies, food systems, environments, and human and non-human health. To that end we invited contributors to adopt a “critical perspective”, which means that the papers featured in this special issue work at revealing the power dynamics at play (such as racism, gender discrimination, anthropocentrism, and socio-economic inequities) in any given food culture, and how they are reflected in, take form through, inform ways of relating to food matters/materialities.

This special issue

For this issue, we selected a handful of articles that bear relevance to communication studies scholars who are interested in food matters/materialities and their links with food cultures. We include three distinctly different but theoretically related papers that use different tools and analytical strategies and methods but share a common interest in relationships through/with food matters. These papers are complemented by five book reviews.

David Szanto & Simon Laroche consider performance art centered on food and eating. In reflecting on a feeding robot installation that they developed and exhibited in several settings, they bring together observations around food anxieties, human and non-human agency, and the acts of feeding and nurturing. They demonstrate how food and art can work together to reveal new insights about subjectivities and intersubjectivities at the intersection of food and technology.

Maya Hey's essay turns our attention to living more-than-human actors, and proposes that human-microbes' relationships can be viewed as a communication model and through the lens of communication theory. Hey demonstrates that the interactions between food, fermentation, and microbiota offer insightful theoretical propositions, despite our inability to ‘communicate’ with microbes in the human sense of the word. The piece is timely considering the growing human interest in micro-organisms, and concerns around the relationships humans have with more-than-human actors.

Geetha Sukumaran turns our attention to literature. She mobilizes a feminist approach to analyze texts written by women combatants in Sri Lanka's long civil war. Sukumaran offers generous descriptions of excerpts from the texts as she teases out how food matters are featured in and intertwined with memory, identity and gendered performance in war context.

Together, these articles shed light on the matters and materialities of food in different contexts and cultures, but all consider how food practices can both reproduce and resist power relations. They represent a snippet of the emerging body of work at the forefront food and communication studies. They encourage food scholars to think about the communicative dimensions of food, and remind communication scholars that food can be both a participant in and an object of communication practices. By looking at technology, interspecies relations, and literature, the contributors to this special issue discuss, implicitly or explicitly, the intersections between food matters and food cultures and, while still emphasizing that food works symbolically, they remind us that this symbolism is still rooted in materiality.

The rest of the issue includes reviews of books that will be of interest to scholars whose work is at the intersections of food and communication studies. Anson Hunt reviewed *The Immaculate Conception of Data* by Kelly Bronson (2022, Queens University Press). Jennifer Marshman offers the review of the book *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human Becomings in West Papua* by Sophie Chao (2022, Duke University Press). Jennifer Whitaker delivers a review of the edited collection *Food Instagram: Identity, Influence, and Negotiation*, by Emily J. H. Contois and Zenia Kish (2022, University of Illinois Press). Chengjiao Zhang reviewed *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia* by Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell (2020, University of Hawaii Press). Finally, *Intimate Eating* by Anita Mannur (2022, Duke University Press) was reviewed by Eileen Naazie. Like the three original articles featured in this special issue, these reviews are a cross-section of the expanding literature that considers communication, culture, and food as inextricable and revealing of larger social structures and dynamics.

Interested readers are also encouraged to visit the conference website, at: <https://carleton.ca/foodmatters/>, for the complete conference program with full abstracts, a conference “bookshelf”, and an engaging collection of outreach materials developed by students under Myriam Durocher’s mentorship.

A cognate special issue that features works from other conference participants is also being published in a separate journal, *Food, Culture & Society*, along with an interview with Conference keynotes, Emily Yates-Doerr and Hi’ilei Hobart available via the [Nutrire Colab podcast](#)

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Acknowledgements

The conference from which the papers in this issue originated was generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Additional support was provided by Carleton University, Faculty of Public Affairs, School of Journalism and Communication, and the Carleton University Food and Media Hub.

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Citing this Editorial:

Knezevic, Irena & Durocher, Myriam. (2023). Food Matters and Materialities from/at the Intersection of Culture and Communication. *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*, 15 (1), 1-11.