

# *Digital food culture, power and everyday life*

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# Digital food culture, power and everyday life

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## Abstract

Food and digital culture are mutually implicated in contemporary processes of knowledge production and power contestation around the world. Our introduction and the papers in this special issue of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* seek to draw out the distinctions, parallels and overlaps across food and the digital to offer critical insights into digital food culture's capacities, paradoxes and impacts on everyday life. We ask a series of questions fundamentally focused on issues of power that signal a critical concern for the (re)production and circulation of inequality within the food and digital nexus. For us and the authors here, Cultural Studies is particularly fertile ground from which to analyse digital food culture precisely because of the discipline's commitment to critiquing power and inequality and its subsequent capacity to illuminate everyday digital food politics and their social, cultural and ethical impacts. This article presents and highlights key questions—and introduces related concepts and theoretical debates—that drive this research agenda. In addition, we address the ways the issue's papers connect to digital food culture and power after COVID-19. We conclude with a summary of the articles in the issue and their contributions to digital food culture research and cultural studies more broadly.

## Keywords

Digital food culture, power, inequality, everyday life, COVID-19

Food is the stuff of everyday life. It is ingrained in both the literal and figurative making of the self and the cultural and social structures by which we reproduce – and challenge – norms and hierarchies (Goody, 1982, 1998; Julier, 2013; Watson and Caldwell, 2005).

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Simultaneously, digital culture is *also* a core element of everyday life, its reproduction and its resistances (McChesney, 2013; Thumim, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). This is especially true in our post-COVID world (Wheeler, 2020). Across the globe, digital technologies are helping to organise and constitute the quotidian; from work and education to relationships and identity formation. Food and the digital are deemed significant even in their absence, as seen in scholarship on hunger and the digital divide (Runge et al., 2003; Van Deursen and Van Dijck, 2014).

Food and digital culture are thus mutually implicated in the contemporary processes of – and debates around – knowledge production and power distribution through what we (e.g. Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Lupton and Feldman, 2020) and other colleagues (e.g. Lupton, 2018) call *digital food culture*.<sup>1</sup> Yet, each domain also signals distinct rules, values and aspirations. This special issue seeks to draw out these distinctions, parallels and overlaps to offer valuable and important insights into digital food culture's capacities, affordances, paradoxes and impacts on everyday life.

As a conceptual lens, digital food culture is invested in locating food's significance through its relationship with and through the digital. For instance, what ideologies infuse today's digital culinary infrastructures, and what do these interventions of making, communication and critique reveal about current visions of both 'good food' and the 'good life'? How is culinary meaning-making bound up in the political economy of today's Internet? What sociocultural, economic, political and ethical claims does digitality bring to bear on the mediated food encounter? These questions matter because they are fundamentally questions of *power*; they signal a critical concern, in both the political and conceptual senses, for the (re)production and circulation of inequality within the food/digital nexus. Cultural studies is particularly fertile ground from which to ask these questions precisely because of the discipline's commitment to critiquing power and inequality, a commitment also embedded in our digital food culture project.

Where food is sustenance in the most primal sense of the term, digital culture offers a different kind of nourishment; it provides the contemporary *infrastructure* and *grammar* through which food is increasingly communicated and fought over. Both are mundane technologies of identity making. Both have material dimensions. And both hold structural, symbolic and ideological significance. Indeed, the existential intimacy between food and digital culture cannot be overstated. Digital technologies today thoroughly impact the entirety of food's lifecycle, from production to consumption to representation and everything in between. From robots, drones and artificial intelligence (AI) tools that help farmers monitor crop conditions and livestock health (Saiz-Rubio and Rovira-Más, 2020), through vloggers and bloggers sharing recipes (Finley, 2016) and Instagram influencers documenting local restaurant scenes (Atkins, 2021), to the meteoric rise of food delivery and anti-food waste apps (Bradshaw, 2021; Sherwood, 2021), digital food culture is as diverse as it is abundant.

Yet, theorisation of the relationship between food and digital culture has, until recently, been a relatively overlooked concern across both cultural and food studies (n.b. Leer et al., 2021; Lewis, 2020; Phillipov and Kirkwood, 2019; Rousseau, 2012a; Schneider et al., 2018). This is surprising given the long history of critical attention to food media, including ground-breaking research on the complex cultural work done by cookbooks,

culinary magazines, food television programmes, food advertising and food ‘celebrities’ (e.g. Ashley et al., 2004; Casey, 2019; Collins, 2009; De Solier, 2013; Johnston et al., 2014; Johnston and Goodman, 2015; Leer and Povlsen, 2018; Maddock and Hill, 2016; Martin, 2021; Rousseau, 2012b). While these remain vital culinary artefacts, the domestication and ubiquity of digital culture mean that food media is no longer confined to the world of print and broadcasting. This special issue therefore seeks to foreground how contemporary digitality and its specificities – from Internet-enabled smartphones to social media platforms to algorithms – map onto the current dialogue between food, knowledge and power.

This dialogue matters, as the novel interdisciplinary scholarship in this issue demonstrates. Our contributors show that food ‘going online’ introduces urgent questions about culinary meaning-making in the digital age. What, for example, does culinary expertise mean in a world of user-generated content? In what ways does the highly commercialised register of the contemporary Internet impact on culinary knowledge production? Is digital culture rewriting the narratives of authority, authenticity and accessibility by which food cultures have traditionally been analysed (e.g. Goodman et al., 2010; Johnston and Baumann, 2010; Naccarato and Lebesco, 2012)? How does platform capitalism shape and narrow our social and environmental appetites? How do digital technologies contribute to normative understandings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ food? And how do key vectors of identity, including gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality find expression in digital articulations of cooking and eating?

Through these sorts of questions, this special issue unpacks the convergences and disruptions enabled by digital food culture. But such convergences and disruptions are not purely academic. Indeed, what makes them academically interesting and important is their myriad quotidian manifestations. The Canadian filmmaker Peter Huang’s (2016) short piece *Sunday With the Girls* offers a brilliant and very funny illustration of this. In his film, three young, fashionably dressed white women are out for brunch and seated at a restaurant table. They are silent, each focused on the contents of her smartphone screen. When their food eventually arrives, they break away to announce ‘I’m so excited’ and ‘I’m starving’ but rather than tucking into their meals, the women immediately grab their phones in order to photograph their plates. In her quest for a perfect #brunch image, one woman pushes her companion out of the way with the admonishment ‘Your hat is blocking!’ Here, in addition to documenting the societal obsession with the representation of the representations of (digital) food and food ‘work’, Huang wryly captures one of the many ways that digital technologies complicate everyday culinary materiality, sociality and conviviality. Similarly, our contributors attend to the everyday register of digital food culture, unpacking the symbolic work done therein. In the process, these scholars demonstrate that food is never *just* food, and the digital is never *just* about the tech. Both are ordinary parts of the everyday that can have extraordinary consequences for how we understand ourselves, others and (food) life.

Our introduction to this set of papers continues as follows. First, we present a short discussion of the rationale for this issue. Second, we provide brief descriptions of the issue’s contributions and tie them together across related themes, approaches and analyses. Third, we address a number of critical points about digital food culture post-COVID

to further contextualise the issue's overarching focus and to, in light of the contributions of the papers, suggest ways forward for further critical research.

## Background of this themed issue

This special issue began as a 1-day workshop in July 2017, at King's College London. With support from the Department of Digital Humanities and the Centre for Digital Culture, the workshop brought together a group of scholars from across the United Kingdom to examine digital food culture as a theoretical framework and emerging field of study, and to consider the contours of cooking and eating in the context of life-with-screen (n.b. Turkle, 1995). Ultimately, the workshop sought to advance understandings of digital food culture as a mundane convergence between online tools and offline practices. Through sustained attention to what we termed 'territories of the quotidian', workshop participants analysed the relationships between food and digitality and how these contribute to ethical, political, economic and sociocultural formations of knowledge and power at the scale of the everyday.

We were also interested in the temporal dimension of digital food culture, considering for instance, the juxtaposition of digital modernity's always-on ethos and imperatives (Smithies, 2019; Wajcman, 2014) with the popularity of the Slow Food movement and food sustainability discourses (e.g. Andrews, 2008; Jarosz, 2014; Van Bommel and Spicer, 2011). For instance, how did these and related temporal oppositions contribute to the contemporary ethics of culinary consumption (c.f. Littler, 2011)? How were digital technologies of production, consumption and representation informing articulations of culinary power? Our workshop sought to theorise interactions between food studies and digital culture through attention to the online and offline terrains of practice, power and knowledge production implicated in both fields of study.

This critical theorisation and interdisciplinarity informs this special issue as well. Across eight articles and one book review, our contributors evaluate the culinary-cultural formations that populate some of today's most popular digital communication devices and social media platforms, and through this, locate digital food culture's ideologies, exclusions and hierarchies. Some of these are sexist, racist and classist in tenor. Some speak to the neoliberalisation of health and wellness. And others concern the potential and limits of digital food activism. Taken together, these interventions speak volumes about the material and symbolic work done by digital food culture and the *power-full* stakes implicit in that work.

## Digital food culture after COVID-19

Our workshop and this resulting issue were conceived in a pre-COVID world. Since then, the COVID-19 crisis has reshaped – and continues to reshape – everyday life across the planet. For some, government mandated lockdowns have meant that work, leisure and everything in-between became home-based. In places like the United Kingdom, where life before COVID was already marked by pervasive Internet connectivity, heavy social media usage and smartphone ubiquity (Feldman, 2021; Ofcom, 2020), the pandemic intensified people's pre-existing intimacy with digital culture. Existence, for

many, became more screen-based than ever before (Jones, 2020; Koeze and Popper, 2020). In the process, COVID-19 affected many things about how people cook, eat and engage with food more broadly. But these changes have not affected everyone in the same way. Indeed, COVID has laid bare, and in some cases, exacerbated, existing inequalities around food's and digital food culture's accessibility, sociality and economics. We wish to consider these realignments here, as they amplify many of the arguments developed throughout this Special Issue. In addition, this enables us to identify areas of concern for future digital food culture scholarship in a post-COVID world.

One of the key changes we observe post-COVID concerns shifts in culinary sociality. The virus has changed how and where cooking, eating and hospitality are done. For some, this has meant acute food poverty and increased dependence on food banks and other parts of the anti-hunger emergency infrastructure. For others, COVID meant shuttered restaurants and a generally depleted hospitality sector in which the notion of 'sharing a meal' had to adapt to newly housebound, socially-distanced confines. Without the possibility of offline co-presence, the dinner party has gone virtual and people are turning to digital platforms – particularly video conferencing apps – to eat together. Of course, eating on-screen is not without precedent. Yeran Kim (2018) and Hanwool Choe (2019), for example, write about *mukbang* in South Korea: social media-based eating videos linked to culinary excess, entrepreneurship, and online performativity. But eating online during COVID gestures to the mundane, private and intimate socialities of the quotidian. People are sharing meals with their friends and families over platforms like Zoom, Houseparty, Skype and FaceTime not for a public audience (contra *mukbang*), but as a means of achieving socio-culinary conviviality at a distance. Here, the digital functions as a connective apparatus to the ordinary, offering a space of togetherness for one of life's simplest pleasures, a leisurely meal with others.

With restaurants closed, COVID has also affected the terrain of culinary knowledge production and exchange. It has reconfigured how and where we learn about food. In the 'before times', dining out was a leisure activity that often served a pedagogical function; it introduced people to new ingredients, flavour combinations and cooking techniques. During COVID, much of that pedagogical work shifted to digital food media such as online recipe databases, cooking blogs and YouTube and Instagram instructional videos. To be clear, these digital resources and practices existed before COVID, but they have become more hegemonic and mainstream in the pandemic's wake. This calls for renewed attention not only to the content of those digital resources but also to the digitised 'who' of their production (c.f. Goodman and Jaworska, 2020). Who are the people (or institutions) making these resources, and under what conditions does that work take place? With COVID's restrictions on restaurant access, many of us were cooking more and sharing evidence of our culinary creations online. Social media feeds were full of sourdough starters and banana bread (Baines, 2020; Gammon, 2020) in the early days of the pandemic. Crucially, however, not everyone was able to indulge in these performances of traditional domesticity. Research, therefore, needs to consider *who has access, time and the resources* to create this content and consume and utilise these aspects of digital food culture in an unequal world.

Of course, not all of us cooked more during COVID, as evidenced by the tremendous growth in takeaway sales and food delivery apps. Huge customer uptake has driven



record revenues for delivery platforms like Just Eat, Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Grubhub, Postmates, Seamless and Caviar (Durbin, 2021; Sumagaysay, 2020), and this surge in the platform economy draws attention to some of digital food culture's further pernicious inequalities. These inequalities affect restaurants, delivery drivers and tech developers as much as they do the consumers of food and its digital culture. In particular, restaurant owners lament the enormous fees levied by delivery platforms. Deliveroo, for example, charges upwards of 35 percent per order (Shead, 2020). Despite the high cost, restaurateurs also acknowledge that they cannot afford to *not* be on these platforms, given the lack of dine-in revenue and the platforms' stranglehold on the takeaway market (Ovide, 2020). For eating establishments, this signals the double bind of digital participation under COVID.

This double bind also affects the people collecting and delivering our food. While COVID decimated much of the service sector, it opened up many new delivery jobs (Clark, 2020). But as research on gig work and the sharing economy has long shown, these are not 'good' jobs (Huws et al., 2017; Schor et al., 2020). Workers in this space are considered self-employed, meaning they lack access to paid holiday and sick leave, pension schemes, set working hours and other protections afforded to employees. Gig work also pays poorly. Since 2016, Deliveroo drivers in the United Kingdom have complained that their wages often fall below the national minimum wage (Farrell and Osborne, 2016; Hayns, 2016) and in April 2021, hundreds of its drivers went on strike in protest (Cant, 2020; Rawlinson, 2021). And in the context of a global pandemic, we must remember that these couriers are putting their lives at risk with every drop-off. For all the utopian visions of pizza delivery by drone (Metz, 2021), the reality is far less glamorous for those currently putting in the hard graft of food transport. These are physically demanding jobs often taken in desperation or as a last resort (Huws and Joyce, 2016) – particularly in the current moment of economic crisis. Likewise, these jobs are often done by immigrant and non-white workers (Schor et al., 2020). This should prompt us to reflect seriously on the cost of ordering dinner through our smartphones.

One heartening development on this front is Deliveroo's recent, disastrous initial public offering (Steppek, 2021). Its stock market failure represents a powerful repudiation of the platform's business model. In the runup to the IPO, several institutional investors announced that they would not back the company precisely because of its poor labour practices (Topham, 2021). However, not everyone is losing out in the platform surge surrounding contemporary digital food culture. Indeed, COVID has ushered in the rise of many new digital intermediaries that connect eaters with restaurants. In the United Kingdom, eCommerce platforms like Supper, Slerp, Dishpatch, Big Night, RestoKit and Restaurant Box have been especially popular with high-end restaurants. The volume and vitality of these new platforms suggest a certain stratification within digital food culture, likely amplified by the pronounced gap between COVID's haves and have nots. Not everyone can afford a takeaway. Fewer still can afford one from a Michelin-starred restaurant that delivers to your doorstep.

As the pandemic ravaged the hospitality sector and its supply chains, farmers, growers, food wholesalers and others who had previously sold only to restaurants needed to adapt quickly. Many did so by leveraging digital technologies to shift to direct retail sales. For example, the high-end greengrocer Natoora launched a smartphone purchasing app within



days of the United Kingdom's first lockdown. Meanwhile, amateur cooks and unemployed chefs turned to social media – particularly Instagram and Facebook – to promote and sell home-cooked meals. Some also joined nascent digital networks like HomeCooks, a volunteer-run eCommerce project that invites '[l]ocal chefs (to) make food in their homes and sell it to their local community' (HomeCooks, n.d.). Big corporate players also jumped on the direct-to-consumer bandwagon, with airlines marketing in-flight meals to grounded customers: 'In Hong Kong, Cathay Pacific is selling meals to airport staff, while Indonesia's national airline Garuda is offering its food as takeaway dinners on a tray' (Ratcliffe, 2020). Singapore Airlines (2021) launched a home delivery service, 'which comes with the exquisite tableware and luxurious amenities available exclusively on board our flights'. And for those who miss eating in a first-class cabin, Japan's All Nippon Airways offers customers the chance to do so abroad a grounded aircraft (Gorman, 2020).

But some of the biggest direct-to-consumer innovations have come from restaurants themselves, particularly in the form of the restaurant meal kit. From artisanal pizza shops to Michelin-starred gastronomic temples, many (higher end) restaurants have adapted to closed dining rooms by partnering with the new eCommerce platforms mentioned above to '[deliver] restaurant-made, pre-prepared food in a box for reheating, finishing and eating at home' (Low, 2020). These kits consist of carefully packaged, pre-cut, and often pre-cooked ingredients that arrive with detailed instructions on how to put these things together. Despite the fact that many of these kits require you to do some of the cooking yourself, some cost hundreds of pounds.

Pandemic-era digital food culture, however, is not only the domain of elites. The stunning (re)emergence of mutual aid groups and initiatives – now organised through websites and other online sharing tools – provides an inspiring, if concerning, counterpoint. Around the world, these digitally mediated networks bring food and care to our communities' most vulnerable, through community kitchens, food delivery services for the housebound and other projects that use digital solutions to combat food insecurity (Sanderson Bellamy et al., 2021). And in polities that lack social safety nets or continue to remove them (e.g. the United Kingdom), online networks and crowdfunding sites offer vital infrastructures and life-lines of support (Richardson, 2020) to some of the most structurally marginalised and/or historically ignored. These are powerful examples of technology-for-good, wherein the web's communicative and organising capacities are directed towards helping those in need, when local, regional and national State actors fail – even under conditions of unprecedented emergency – to provide for their residents. Herein lies the danger of the success of these voluntary, charity-led and digitally mediated food security initiatives: their ability to keep the vulnerable from going hungry or dying during the pandemic lockdowns and restrictions might signal to governments that these initiatives are sufficient, and thus provide further rationale for more and deeper cuts to social services and support for our communities' most vulnerable groups and individuals.

The diversity of post-COVID culinary developments, that we have explored here, points to the unevenness of digital food culture's current and potential future impacts. The gains and losses within digital food culture are not distributed equally, and the online and offline expressions of these inequalities requires our continuing critical attention. Understanding the continued and future power asymmetries and shifting cultural politics

within and across digital food culture is crucial to understanding the emerging food/digital nexus, which is at the core of the papers in this Special Issue.

## **The issue's contributions in brief**

We start the issue with Ben Little and Alison Winch's (this issue) critical analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's 'year of travel', which saw him use Facebook and Instagram to document his grand(standing) trip across all 50 US states. Focusing on his political campaign-like 'informal' and everyday encounters with 'normal' Americans – mediated through shared, home-cooked meals – the article explores how Zuckerberg's visits integrate staged authenticity, diversity and hospitality to set up a kind of masculine leadership that is both anti-Trumpian and anti-Tech Bro. Zuckerberg and – by design – his Facebook and Instagram empire have been on a political and politicised charm offensive through digitally mediated food encounters. As Little and Winch argue,

The Year of Travel exploits this to promote Zuckerberg's presidential brand; that is harnessing the tropes of a typical Democrat who is open to liberalism and diversity – at least in the optics. The sharing of food – in person but then later as pictures on the platform – reveals Zuckerberg and Facebook as being both invited guest and hospitable host.

Digital food culture is harnessed here to do a kind of everyday 'diversity work' (Ahmed, 2017) that not only deflects from the ethno-white-nationalism, misogyny and election-rigging that circulates on Facebook's platforms, but works to problematically cement the power of tech billionaires and the racialised, gendered and classed neoliberal capitalist hegemony at the centre of our everyday social and material relationships.

The next two articles also consider capitalist interpolation, but with attention to two 'glow'-related digital 'wellness entrepreneurs': Gwyneth Paltrow and her lifestyle platform Goop, and Ella Mills and her multi-platform, multi-million pound food brand Deliciously Ella. In her critique of Goop, Bridget Conor (this issue) proposes the lens of 'cosmic wellness' – what she refers to as 'a broad constellation of materials, foods, imagery and discourse which speak primarily to, and are sold to white, "well-thy" women' – to analyse a digital food culture that frames and supplies a seemingly essential response to damaging and 'fiercely neoliberal modes of working and living'. At the same time, Goop can be seen as a contradictory form of narcissistic self-absorption that may be downright unhealthy and dangerous to women's bodies. Combining the theoretical tools of digital food studies, spirituality research, post-feminism and critical whiteness studies in her critique of Goop Glow's Instagram content, Conor argues that 'cosmic wellness . . . powerfully illuminates the contemporary and sometimes contradictory connections between women, wellness and whiteness' in its 'neoliberal affects of optimism and energy' designed to 'repair' bodies and psyches damaged by the excesses of a harried post-industrial capitalism.

Rachel O'Neill (this issue) further develops the notion of the wellness entrepreneur through her post-feminist analysis of the problematic digital food culture articulated by Deliciously Ella, as mediated through Ella Mills' project of 'health enhancement, a project to which food and nutrition are central'. O'Neill argues that '[f]or this figure and her

followers – predominantly comprising young women – health is understood not simply as freedom from disease, but a kind of preternatural exuberance and luminous vitality, often denoted through references to “glow”. Yet – much like Conor’s critique of Goop – all is not so glowing in the online aspirational world-building of Deliciously Ella; through the personal and media narratives of entrepreneurial success, ‘health is understood as a private good and personal responsibility’ that elides the ways that understanding ‘wellness in the United Kingdom must be related to the decline of welfare, as precarity threatens collective conceptions of and commitments to well-being’. In this, both Conor and O’Neill remind us that the everyday power of digital food culture is thoroughly enmeshed with the powerful inequalities of not just gender, race and class but also the fundamentally intersectional tendrils of neoliberal capitalist cultural politics and their broader economic registers.

The next article sees Fay Bound Alberti (this issue) examine the moral hysteria surrounding the digitised fetishisation of women’s bodies and appetites. She explores the normativity of ‘appropriate’ eating behaviour that emerges when patriarchal surveillance cultures intersect with the gendered policing of public food consumption. Through analysis of the Facebook page ‘Women Who Eat on Tubes’ (WWEOT), which takes illicit and morally problematic – but currently legal – photos of women in the ‘reprehensible’ act of eating in public, Bound Alberti considers the ways the male gaze central to this digital food culture leads not just to feelings of shame and embarrassment for women, but to an expansion of gendered online abuse and harassment. Focusing on questions of embodiment, emotion and affect, the article analyses the ways that WWEOT ‘highlights an ongoing and historically-situated misogynistic response to female appetite, and to the ways class, gender and ethnicity intersect with food and consumption’. As Bound Alberti concludes, the existence of WWEOT ‘shows above all else . . . the way spaces in social media can become sites for ongoing monitoring and control of female appetites and desires’ as a core aspect of the digitised ‘logic of misogyny’ that constitutes some of the darkest corners of digital food culture.

The issue’s next article shifts focus from gender to race, wherein Elaine Swan (this issue) persuasively argues that ‘the digital constructions of whiteness in relation to foodscapes’ at the scale of the everyday have been little studied. In response to this gap, Swan uses a selection of online photos of Australia’s Welcome Dinner Project (WDP) to suggest that the WDP ‘reproduces different visualisations of the everyday commensal spaces and hospitality practices which draw on racialised connotations and ideas about home as the site of civic politics making the good Australian nation’. Designed to demonstrate the possibilities of a hospitable, multi-cultural Australia, the WDP brings typically non-white, new immigrants into the homes of typically white, settled Australians to eat and share food to ‘break down barriers . . . [and] offer intimate, embodied and meaningful encounter[s] to challenge national inhospitality towards racially minoritised groups’. Through an analysis of three ‘motivated’ visualisations of food sharing dinners and their representations of everyday commensality, Swan suggests that, while working for progressive goals and forms of inclusivity, the WDP’s images also reproduce whiteness as ‘the normative mode of belonging’ (Due, 2008) whereby digitised white bodies are the ‘national-spatial managers’ regulating and tolerating racialised others as the ‘managed national object’ (Hage, 1998).

The next three articles draw our attention to the ways that platforms such as Instagram, smartphone apps and wellness blogs mediate our existing and emergent relationalities to so-called 'good food' across the digital food culture landscape. Through a unique comparison of the venerably elite, professionalised and text-based *Michelin Guide* and the expanded role Instagram has taken on in the world of contemporary food criticism, Zeena Feldman (this issue) proposes the conceptual device of the 'Instagram Gaze' in her analysis of restaurant criticism in London. For her, Instagram does something new and crucially important to how 'good food' is articulated: amateur-generated, visually focused culinary criticism provides new spaces and media through which some of the democratic and inclusive promises of digital life might be realised. Yet, this is not a clear and simple case of foodies of the world uniting to take down elitist (food) culture. As she argues – and shows in clear empirical and conceptual detail – “good food” in the Instagram age is a story of two halves: one reproduces many of the claims associated with traditional institutions of culinary authority [such as the *Michelin Guide*] while the other actively challenges certain exclusions'. For Feldman, 'the Instagram Gaze offers insight into how culinary criticism operates in this technosocial moment of smartphones, social networking and pervasive internet connectivity, and the extent to which this departs from pre-digital institutions and hierarchies of gastronomic taste making'.

In a paper that simultaneously categorises and analyses food-related apps in the Google Play store through the lens of feminist materialities, Deborah Lupton (this issue) deploys the concept of 'promissory narratives' in order to explore the ways that app descriptions 'reveal the complex meanings and vibrancies of food'. Offering everything from fun (through games apps), convenience (through meal delivery and planning apps) and bodily control, embodied self-awareness and well-being (through diet and nutrition apps) to creative inspiration and experimentation (through recipe apps), the article assesses the affective forces, relational connections and agential capacities food apps produce in their narratives of promise to a hungry, eating public. As Lupton argues, while the 'thing-power' of food apps tends to 'remove food from the sensualities, messiness and visceral forces that are evident in other visual digital media', their promissory descriptions and functionalities 'present the apps as solutions to or escapes from the stresses and difficulties of everyday life'. In this digital food culture, the public's everyday relationships to food, eating and bodies are – much like some of the promise enacted by Feldman's Instagram Gaze – seemingly working to distribute power in more de-centralised ways.

Kaisa Tiisanen (this issue) turns to analyse the ways that the 'ideal wellness subject' is created through Finnish women-run food blogs. In mapping the narrative techniques of change, spirituality, clarity, transformation and determination through which a wellness subjectivity is formed there, the article explores how these techniques are shaped by post-feminist, neoliberal and healthist governmentalities that resonate in and contribute to contemporary everyday digital food culture. Through analysis of three wellness blogs, Tiisanen deploys Foucault's notion of 'technologies of the self' and related theorisations on governmentality to critique the three ways that the wellness subject is constituted in relation to 'clean' eating. She shows that they must be balanced to be healthy but not 'too' healthy; they must boost the body and heal the soul; and they must be committed to the 'never-ending journey towards wholeness and wellness'. As Tiisanen suggests, 'the wellness subject persists through employing (discursive, affective and bodily) techniques

of balancing, healing and self-narrativisation in order to keep on striving towards a self that meets the requirements placed on a neoliberal individual'. She concludes that

[i]n a cultural space as highly gendered as the world of wellness food, these techniques morph with culturally feminine and postfeminist sensibilities that demand women . . . strive for a normative, palatable femininity, rigorous self-care and self-love, continuous self-labour as well as bodily perfection.

Tiusanen's analysis – like Conor's – thus highlights a potent contradiction in contemporary wellness culture: the exhausting, if not outright unhealthy material and psychologically pathological, drive to self-surveillance and control of female bodies done in the name of health and balance.

Zeena Feldman (this issue) closes the issue with a review of *Alternative Food Politics: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, edited by Michelle Phillipov and Katherine Kirkwood (2019). Through the analytical lens of food media, the collection deftly considers 'how systematic critiques of culinary production and consumption practices can (and do) converge with the individual mode of address that dominates today's consumer culture'. Offering an astute set of arguments for why food media – across but also beyond the digital – should be intensely and critically studied, the book's chapters 'observe time and time again how technologies of representation help shape popular ideas about what qualifies as "good" food and "good" food politics' as well as how these circulate in the realms of the 'alternative' and 'mainstream'. Tied directly into several of the themes circulating in this Special Issue, Feldman concludes this of the book and its chapters:

Ultimately, Phillipov and Kirkwood's book is an important, interdisciplinary contribution to the study of food, popular culture and the media. It offers cogent and urgent analysis of the platforms, claims and vicissitudes of culinary power today, and how these impact on individual and collective projects of meaning-making. In so doing, the anthology also draws attention to the moral register through which contemporary politics operates . . . That register usefully complicates the politics of any 'alternative'.

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## Note

1. Let it be said that we fully recognise that there are different, competing and diverse digital food *cultures* in the multiple. In this introduction, we use the singular for simplicity's sake but to also allow us to encapsulate the generalities that intertwine, construct and connect these multiples.

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