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# Editorial: Food systems communication amid compounding crises: Power, resistance, and change

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## Editorial on the Research Topic

Food systems communication amid compounding crises: Power, resistance, and change

## Introduction

The crises of climate change, labor inequalities, pandemic outbreaks, food insecurity, loss of species, and the erosion of sustainable food systems are accelerating. Together, they compound and are constituted through the hegemonic control of neoliberalism over the everyday organizing of global political economies, nation states, communities, and life forms (Parr, 2014). These crises are deeply intertwined with the politics of land, labor, life, and resources under the ambits of colonial-capitalist extraction and exist in continuity with the violence unleashed by the colonial projects. In other words, the crises we are experiencing in our contemporary contexts are extensions of longstanding transformations to global food regimes connected to these projects (Dutta, 2004, 2012; Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011; Elers and Dutta, 2019). Interrogating such crises requires expanding what constitutes an environmental concern and challenging disciplinary norms that shape how we come to understand communication, food, and the environment.

A growing body of scholarship is emphasizing communicative relationships among food systems, power, and organizing (see for example Dougherty, 2011; Frye and Bruner, 2012; Williams-Forson and Counihan, 2013; Knezevic et al., 2014; Broad, 2016; Hunt, 2016; de Souza, 2019; Dutta and Thaker, 2019; Carter and Alexander, 2020; Cruz and Sodeke, 2020; Ivancic, 2020; Singer et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2021; LeGreco and Douglas, 2021; Zoller et al., 2022 among many others). This Research Topic invited contributions that expand and deepen examinations of food systems with attention to historical and contemporary food system

struggles, injustices, and undercurrents revealed within them. Articles showcased in this Research Topic foreground these dynamics, focusing on communication's relationship to food organizing and labor, framing and storytelling in food policy and media, as well as racialized and speciesist discourses during global health crises. Analyses highlight relations among human and non-human networks, and how to cultivate symbolic and material registers for the (re)organization of more just food systems at various scales.

We came together as an editorial collective to merge our shared interest in cultivating more just food systems through environmental communication, health communication, and related interdisciplinary fields. Our mutual interests are threaded together by a desire to turn to the praxis of organizing food systems that resist the ongoing onslaughts of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism, and the capacities of communities to constitute more interdependent, equitable, and ecologically just relations. We share a commitment to scholar-activism that reflects non-extractive relationships as well as praxis-oriented theory-building. We also hold that communication plays a central role in the organization of the capitalist food system and struggles within and against it. To expand on the shared perspective that guides this Research Topic, we first explicate food systems communication research, then describe the political imperative of this work through the lens of crisis as communicative struggle, and conclude by reviewing the twelve contributions from scholars and collectives who contributed to this collection.

## Food systems communication

Food systems communication invites scholars to engage in transdisciplinary thinking while emphasizing the communicative constitution of food systems and their politics. Elsewhere, two of us have defined *food systems communication* as a “framework that centralizes the pragmatic and constitutive role communication plays in arranging, negotiating, and challenging meaning-making related to food systems, including their relations, processes, and outcomes” (Gordon and Hunt, 2022, p. 115). We argue that land, labor, policy, and property are critical nodes at which intersectional communicative struggles over power take place. The food systems agenda for environmental communication aligns nicely with the ethical and political stakes of the culture-centered approach to intersectional health justice (Dutta et al., 2013) which is also demonstrated in this collection. Food systems communication research is expressly political, deriving its roots from environmental justice activism and scholarly interventions within environmental communication (Bullard, 2000; Pezzullo, 2001; Pezzullo and Sandler, 2007) and longstanding research on agrifood systems and movements (McMichael, 2009; Holt-Giménez, 2011; Alkon and Guthman, 2017).

Food systems transect human and natural systems, interweaving our environments, social structures, and lived conditions, in fundamentally uneven ways. The communicative constitution of food systems also transcends multiple scalar and temporal registers. What appears to be contemporary consolidations of power or specific localized struggles for food justice or food sovereignty are inextricably connected to much longer and enduring colonial, capitalist, and racial structures and organizing (Williams and Holt-Giménez, 2017; Miheusuh and Hoover, 2019; Garth and Reese, 2020). Mapping these relations of power, while attending to the more particular contours of food communication, builds a discursive repertoire that can be used to understand and intervene in unjust food systems.

Interventions into the food system take many forms, reflecting and constituting varied relationships between power and resistance. The original food systems communication agenda we put forward in *Environmental Communication* described how orientations to food systems change—for example, food system reform, food justice, and food sovereignty—offer *communicative* accounts of how power is interwoven within the food system (Gordon and Hunt, 2019). Building on food movement research and activism, we argued that each helps name a wider constellation of discourses (albeit not mutually exclusive) shaping how food movements approach socioecological systems change.

*Food reform*, for example, emphasizes improving food system processes, practices, and/or outcomes to bring them more in line with principles of food security, equitable access, and sustainable production. Food reform communication engages the discursive mechanisms that organize and (re)constitute food policy, agrifood production and distribution, as well as the advocacy tactics stakeholders use to affect change. *Food justice* stresses an intersectional approach to understanding how uneven benefits and harms are reproduced within the food system. Food justice communication discursively maps how food system inequities are interwoven with other systemic injustices, from labor regimes and uneven development to racism, classism, ableism, patriarchy, speciesism, and more. Food justice communication is polyvocal and may reflect different political commitments, epistemologies, and experiences.

*Food sovereignty* addresses how colonialism and capitalism not only reproduce the uneven distribution of benefits and harms but have undermined communities' ability to define their own relationship to food and ecological systems. Food sovereignty communication utilizes discourses of autonomy, control, and self-determination, sometimes deemphasizing a rights-based approach dependent on state recognition. Indigenous struggles for food sovereignty are intertwined with struggles for land sovereignty and communicative sovereignty, noting the interpenetrating relationship between land and food (Dutta and Thaker, 2019; Elers and Dutta,

2019). Culture-centered community-led interventions co-create communicative infrastructures for voice at the global margins. These infrastructures create the basis for de-centering and resisting the techno-capitalist rationalities of food systems immersed in whiteness (Dutta and Thaker, 2019; Mika et al., 2022). Contributions in this Research Topic traverse these orientations and include new discursive articulations that can be explored.

## Crisis as communicative struggle

In taking up the concept of crisis, we center on how power and resistance shape food systems through communicative struggles over meanings, values, and epistemologies, and thus spatial and material control. For example, as a form of communicative inversion (Dutta, 2012), global food crises act as ruptures that can tighten increased technocratic control over the food system, rooted in the whiteness of the Global North while co-opting the languages of community, participation, and decolonization emergent from the Global South. Such practices form the basis of the ongoing colonization of food systems. In this backdrop, the process of cultural centering turns to the rationalities of resistance to the forces of colonialism and capitalism that offer anchors for transforming food systems by turning toward the already existing logics of organizing food that have long been held by local and Indigenous communities across the Global South (see Dutta and Thaker, 2019).

Communicative struggles also contribute to the ongoing dispossession of labor, land, and knowledges. The capitalist system is built on this fundamental element of land alienation, the enslavement of colonized peoples, exploitation of racialized labor, and extraction and appropriation of resources. These processes of extraction and exploitation reworked the relationships of communities with ecosystems and sources of food, disrupting community-led culture-centered practices of growing and sharing food. Moreover, the colonial process introduced taxation on colonized communities, imposed cash-based agriculture that threatened the food growing practices of local communities, and consolidated the power of food distribution into the colonial structure. The racist ideology shaping colonial food distribution shaped the production of hunger, including the production of genocides such as the great Bengal famine (Mukerjee, 2014). The neoliberal attack on food systems is an accelerated extension of this capitalist project, embodying its whiteness, and targeting unequally the land, labor, and food generating capacities of communities in the Global South. It produces raced, gendered, colonial crises of food shortage and perpetuates the imposition of technocratic solutions to food systems that push forth the capitalist agendas of profiteering (Falnikar and Dutta, 2021).

The interplays of power and control embedded in the colonial-capitalist structures that threaten the sustenance of food

systems across the globe point to the urgency of embodied academic labor. The extractive ideology of the colonial project has shaped knowledge as an abstract generation of theory, removed from the everyday lived struggles of communities at the global margins. In the context of food systems, the expert-driven organizing of food systems to uphold these structures is often removed from the everyday contexts of generating, preparing, and relating to food and ecological systems. The underlying ideology of whiteness, framing the values of white culture as universal, sees knowledge as generated in spaces that are placed at a distance from the labor of growing food, the practices of sharing and eating food, and the land that sustains food. This is coupled with the global rise of authoritarian techniques of technocratic management that silence voices at the margins as repressive policies are imposed. For those at the margins, narratives of hunger and food insecurity are erased, stigmatized, gaslighted, and disciplined (Tan et al., 2017).

Therefore, it is not enough to conceptualize these exploitative and extractive food system relations in abstraction, as the labor of generating theory. The very labor of generating theory ought to be placed within the context of struggles to respond to crisis and repair. The embodied work of communicative struggle involves the building of voice infrastructures at the margins that resist and dismantle the oppressive practices of hegemonic state-market-civil society organizing (Dutta et al., 2019). Scholarship on food systems is strengthened by thinking that traverses academic silos and engages in knowledge sharing from/with food movement activism (Gordon and Hunt, 2019). As a part of this project, we invited consideration about practices of solidarity, ways of forging ethical and reflexive partnerships, and the co-constitutive translation of food movement theory and praxis. We turn to these contributions next.

## Article review

Articles in this Research Topic bring together a diverse array of perspectives on communication's relationship to food organizing and labor, framing and storytelling in food policy and media, as well as racialized and speciesist discourses during global health crises. To encourage cross-pollination, contributors could submit their work to *Frontiers in Science and Environmental Communication*, *Frontiers in Health Communication*, or *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*. Contributors also chose to submit a wide array of article types including original research articles, perspective papers, review articles, hypothesis papers, and community case studies, the latter especially emphasizing collaborative scholar-activist communication. What follows is a brief review of contributions contained within.

The immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly exposed longstanding and uneven vulnerabilities within the

capitalist food system, forcing disproportionately impacted communities and advocacy networks to mobilize in response. In “*Mobilizing networks and relationships through Indigenous food sovereignty: The Indigenous Food Circle’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Northwestern Ontario*,” [Levkoe et al.](#) share how the Indigenous Food Circle (IFC), an Indigenous-led and Indigenous-serving informal network, provided direct support to address Indigenous food insecurity, compounded by both the pandemic and the endurance of settler colonialism. Authors describe how amid infrastructural failures in Thunder Bay, Ontario to provide emergency food support, IFC expanded direct relationships, food storage, and financial support, especially to impacted remote First Nations communities. Importantly, they illustrate how addressing food insecurity should not be decoupled from a broader transformation away from the capitalist food system and requires deep relationship-building in support of self-determination.

Additional contributors highlight how retooling communication infrastructures and collaborative partnerships can help address food injustice across immediate, uncertain, and prolonged crises. In “*We still have to eat: Communication infrastructure and local food organizing as public health responses to COVID-19 in Greensboro, North Carolina*,” [LeGreco et al.](#) highlight three examples of community-based responses to organizing and reorganizing communication infrastructures during the early months of the pandemic. Drawing on the authors’ experience organizing for local food and food justice in the Greensboro, North Carolina region since 2009, they describe how the pandemic tested the communication infrastructure they had been building. Reorganizing communication infrastructures of listening and disseminating information allowed local food networks to creatively secure school meals, document emergency food resources, and refigure a community market to respond to impacted community needs.

Further, in “*Pivoting in the time of COVID-19: An in-depth case study at the nexus of food insecurity, resilience, system re-organizing, and caring for the community*,” [Fox and Frye](#) describe how a Northwest Arkansas partnership among a museum, a food bank, and over 30 additional organizations adapted to provide basic needs, food, internet, housing, and arts relief to foster social belonging for isolated communities. They illustrate how the partnership was organized to intentionally circumvent the organization-client relationship so prominent in paternalistic anti-hunger infrastructures. Instead, embracing learning, early and ongoing outreach, as well as transparent and consistent communication, allowed the partnership to incorporate food justice principles into their organizing.

Contributors in this Research Topic also emphasize how communication constitutes historical and ongoing racialized labor regimes across sectors. In “*Racialized and gendered constructions of the ‘ideal server’: Contesting historical occupational discourses of restaurant service*,” [Dempsey](#) traces transformations in the communicative constitution of servitude

across time and space. With particular attention to raced and gendered discourses, [Dempsey](#) draws connections between the contemporary devaluation of restaurant labor and longer histories of servitude, including plantation labor, dining car and domestic service, the establishment of tipping, and feminization of service in relation to other forms of culinary work. In doing so, [Dempsey](#) identifies the potential for solidarity among wage workers and the constant risks of eroding coalition-building.

The communicative constitution of vulnerability and disposability takes place across food system labor regimes traversing national borders. In “*Bodies and documents: The material impact of collaborative information-sharing within the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program*,” [Clause](#) describes the fraught practices of information-sharing across Canada’s SAWP program, which enrolls and manages agricultural workers from Mexico and eleven Caribbean countries to labor on Canadian farms. Using critical discourse analysis to study official documents that circulate among workers and program stakeholders, [Clause](#) argues that most documents employ discourses of economization and omit information about social, health, and non-work-related topics that are critical to migrants’ wellbeing. Official discourse thus constructs the disposability of SAWP workers, affecting the lives of those working in the agricultural sector, their families and communities, as well as the viability of the program.

Resistance to the corporate food system and inequitable labor conditions can take many forms, including union cooperatives and grassroots organizing. In “*Re-imagining localism and food justice: Co-op Cincy and the union cooperative movement*,” [Zoller](#) illustrates how unionized cooperatives incorporate social justice in their organizing principles to address working conditions, food access, localization, environmental sustainability, and increased consciousness-raising among minoritized communities. This case study brings us to food organizing by Our Harvest and Apple Street Market in Cincinnati, Ohio. Both organizations are a part of Co-op Cincy, a cooperative network that was a founding member of the 1worker1vote ecosystem. Drawing on document analysis as well as knowledge derived from interviews and the author’s board membership with Apple Street Market, [Zoller](#) describes how union cooperatives navigate, resist, and reimagine capitalism by emphasizing solidarity and transformative social change. This study highlights possibilities for networked and everyday organizing to advance the solidarity economy with attention to the local, place-based conditions of power, land, and labor.

Given the market-based logic that orients the capitalist food system, community-embedded food initiatives often can struggle to have stories about their importance and impact register with wider audiences. In “*Framing good food: Communicating value of community food initiatives in the midst of a food crisis*,” [Knezevic](#) illustrates how framing such initiatives through the lens of diverse economies and more-than-market contributions can help. This case study takes up Nourishing

Communities, a decade-plus Canadian-based network that has researched and supported informal food economies and movements for food sovereignty. Knezevic illustrates how communicative frames can be employed to help food activists and practitioners tell stories about more-than-economic successes. In doing so, these frames can help organizations communicate their impact to participants, funders, and policymakers for long-term sustainability and support.

Communication is also at the heart of debates over food policy and how to rhetorically advocate for environmental and justice initiatives within place-based contexts. Some locally supported policy initiatives face political and legislative roadblocks that make it difficult to mobilize against harmful impacts. In “*Making food-systems policy for local interests and common good*,” Lind and Reeves analyze common arguments by advocates on both sides of U.S. state governments’ preemption debates and how they enable or constrain their advocacy efforts. Focusing on two preemption debates in Kansas, the authors address the policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) strategies used to advance policy change. Their analysis examines the affordances and constraints of appeals to self-interest and the common good and the implications of these rhetorical choices in food system reform deliberations.

The politics of storytelling is also taken up in “*Tracing the story of food across food systems*,” where Khan addresses the use of blockchain and digital twinning technology in corporate food storytelling about food system supply chains. Khan argues that companies are increasingly drawing on these technologies to tell food stories, akin to early documentary media promises of advocating for “radical transparency” in food supply chains. These promises are often framed as telling the moral story of food systems, including transparency over its production practices, environmental impacts, and humanizing those who labor within the broader commodity chain. Khan posits that there are implications to this form of storytelling, including stories about North/South inequalities and the fantasy of absolute control over the food system, that tell us more about life within capitalism.

Rhetorical constructions of “food” in food systems discourse focus critical attention on ideological assumptions that undergird environmental communication scholarship and praxis. In “*Carnistic colonialism: A rhetorical dissection of ‘bushmeat’ in the 2014 Ebola outbreak*,” Muller makes the case for placing critical animal studies and postcolonial critique into conversation. Assessing texts circulated in North America and Western Europe through ideological rhetorical criticism, Muller parses the colonial and speciesist logics articulated in mediated narratives surrounding the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, and the implications of these articulations for institutional responses to a public health crisis. Rhetorical analysis reveals three themes among these discourses: biosecurity, conservation, and development. Ultimately Muller argues that in such discourses “Western rhetors strategically minimize their own complicit

in the existential threat posed by zoonotic diseases” and vilify others through discourses of carnistic colonialism.

Intersections between food system communication and critical animal studies are also addressed in “*Cover stories: Concealing speciesist violence in U.S. news reporting on the COVID-19 ‘pork’ industry crisis*.” In this case, Barca takes up journalistic representations of pig farming and pork industry practices during the economic shutdown of the early pandemic period. Barca argues that framing choices legitimated animal violence, objectifying sentient beings (pigs), and constructed an image of animal production (specifically, slaughter and culling) as “humane” farming. Barca argues for a “just and non-human inclusive orientation to food systems communication,” opening space to broaden conceptions of who and what is at stake in food system discourse. The paper concludes by revisiting recommendations for how journalists can better communicate about experiences of non-human animals in reporting “rather than dismissing their moral significance through a wholly anthropocentric discourse.”

Of course, food system impacts are not outside of the everyday spaces that make it possible for us to research, learn, and teach either. In “*The neoliberalization of higher education: Paradoxing students’ basic needs at a Hispanic-Serving Institution*,” Schraedley et al. investigate proliferating experiences of basic needs insecurities in U.S. college campuses, in particular at a public institution in southern California. Focusing on the experiences of low-income, first-generation, and students of color, the authors make critical connections between neoliberalization in higher education, organizational paradox, and food, housing, and employment insecurity. Understanding the complex, overlapping, and persistent contradictions of basic needs (in)security, organized in and through neoliberal institutions like colleges and universities, invites food system communication scholars and practitioners to advocate for more comprehensive interventions instead of “patchwork solutions” that deepen inequalities.

## Conclusion

These twelve contributions highlight how embedded questions of power and resistance are to food system struggles and possibilities otherwise. They remind us that food systems research exceeds normative assumptions about “environment” too often disarticulated from the scope of human and non-human relations, as well as political, economic, and cultural infrastructures that organize and affect them. This format offers an intriguing space to curate a conversation that traverses disciplinary boundaries and links theory and praxis. Contributors took this call to heart and drew connections between past research and contemporary struggle. Many case studies provided on-the-ground reports of activist and organizing practices. We are grateful for the support of Tarla

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Of course, this collection remains incomplete. More can be done to adequately account for the overwhelming and disproportionate effect of food system inequalities globally, especially in the Global South. At the time of writing, significant global food crises have emerged and loom ahead. Processes that manifest them are intimately connected to the intensification of the capitalist food regime, climate injustice, accelerated expansion of racial capitalism in the form of land grabs, and increased consolidation of power globally. Attending to the contours of knowledge production around these issues, and the particularities of both research and voices of resistance must involve interrupting the political economy of open access publishing as well (Dutta et al., 2021). Compounding crises inevitably affect the publication economy, which we too witnessed firsthand as co-editors of this Research Topic. This was especially the case during a time when many food system scholars and activists were forced to navigate great changes in their lives and environments and engage in food system and other care work at the same time.

We mark these absences to acknowledge the range of creative, critical, and necessary work so many are doing beyond this arena and those who are routinely and systematically excluded from these conversations. Food systems communication research can continue to respond through ethical and reflexive research practices that attend to micro, meso, and macro power dynamics, advocate for the sharing of knowledge in non-extractive ways, and provide pathways for amplification that do not recreate inequalities. In doing so, the political project of food systems communication research can

better contribute to the constitution of more just food systems, relationships, and worlds.

## Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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