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# Editorial: Food, media and the environment - cultures, practices, policies

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## Editorial on the Research Topic Food, media and the environment - cultures, practices, policies

Food is materially and culturally crucial to life. As an index of power, food was the basis of the earliest class systems, symbolized by labor, consumption, and religion, and organized around harvesting. As such, the social world is understood by anthropologists through diet as much as anything else; it is food that develops people and keeps them alive. In this editorial, we will describe how the three types of citizenship map onto food: the political (sovereignty); the economic (security); and the cultural (meaning). These citizenship types serve as a lens through which to examine food crises.

The first of the three types, political citizenship, gives the right to vote, to be represented in government, and to enjoy physical security. Democracy is conventionally said to arise and thrive in the interactions of governments and populations, with its model in the French and US Revolutions. The polity is bounded by countries whose inhabitants recognize one another as political citizens, and use that status to invoke the greater good. In terms of food, this can mean everything from how rights to land and its cultivation are established and regulated, to ensuring the safety of produce and urging dietary norms onto the population.

Like political citizenship, economic citizenship has been alive for a very long time, via the collection and dissemination of information about the public through the census and related statistical devices. This became an interventionist category during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century transformation of capitalism when paupers came to be marked as part of the social. Their wellbeing became a right, a problem, and a statistic, with society more than a market. That logic continues to matter: hence food stamps, for example, along with a whole variety of stimuli to the agricultural economy in many countries, most notably the notorious US Farm Bill or EU wine lake and their subsidies of corporations.

And cultural citizenship? Of course, citizenship has always been cultural. For instance, the Ottoman Empire offered rights to non-Muslims, and the first constitutional guarantees of culture appear in Switzerland in 1874. But such rights were unusual until after the Second World War. Today, cultural provisions are standard in emergent democracies' charters, blending artistry and ethnicity. Concerns with language, heritage, religion, and identity are responses to histories structured in dominance through cultural power and the postcolonial incorporation of the periphery into an international system of "free" labor. And whenever ethnographies of a people are written—or tourism guide books—they inevitably include significant sections on food customs and their wider significance.

As a consequence of corporate trade in agriculture, a new international division of food labor, and the displacement of national by global forms of regulation to facilitate business mobility, more and more countries have imported cuisine from around the globe since the late 1980's and 1990's. Food at the point of consumption is now radically disaffiliated from its conditions of production and circulation. Customers are not told of the complex economics and politics behind their purchase. Instead, they are given a spice of difference to do with the geographic origin of items on the menu, an enchanting quality to what is on offer. And while food is often produced in rural settings, it is increasingly an urban problem and pleasure—literally a moving feast, traveling great distances and accreting and attenuating power and signification, with an increasing environmental impact and media presence. The military aggression by Russia against Ukraine, a nation that is a major global agricultural producer and exporter, has made it clear to consumers around the world how food connects us.

Despite its centrality to life and its transformation through the technologies of modernity, from instantaneity to transportability, food security and sovereignty remain as distant for much of the world as ever (Wilson, 2017). Innovations once hailed as triumphs are now seen as part of an unsustainable drive to control/overcome nature and feed the wealthy (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020). Even anthropocentric interpretations agree with this account, given the disastrous impact on diet of industrialized farming and marketing, per the findings of science academies across Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe (Fears et al., 2019). We now know that food loss and waste are responsible for more greenhouse emissions than all but two countries, the US and China (United Nations Environment Programme, 2021).

As for the media, food has long been a theme and a source. For example, European advice books from the mid-1600's detailed table settings, measured distances between diners, and explained the need for a tablecloth to hide the lower body whilst eating. The earliest cookbooks date from this time, communicating the way the elite comported itself as a model for the slightly lower orders. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Mrs Beeton's thousand-page *Book of Household Management* had thoroughly textualized food custom, blending the political economy of daily life with manners and recipes. US newspapers first started publishing articles about food in the 1840's. These columns had become social-advice guides by the 1880's, with instructions on the behavioral correlatives of class mobility. Key links between food and the audiovisual media date from the telegraph and the radio providing data on commodity prices and weather and overproduction leading to mass advertising (Miller, 2007; p. 118). And what began as cooking shows in the earliest days of television, and occasional newspaper investigations of food's

insidious labor process, has burgeoned into a proliferation of screen networks, criticism, and celebrity dedicated to food (O'Connell, 2019; Chan, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic even played into this movement, causing a huge growth in the sales of culinary books (Ballard, 2021).

The trend toward this kind of media attention, however, has real costs. As Almiron devastatingly explains in this issue, the *bourgeois* media have failed abjectly in their duty to cover the environmental impact of meat-based eating, as a consequence of the anti-animal obsession that animates conventional diets. But there is hope. In their contribution to our dossier, O'Donnell et al. suggest that wasting food, a chronic issue in the Global North, can be changed, while the essay by Pabian et al. shows how a more creative and constructive media response can break the taboo that insists on meat-based nutrition. Li et al. in turn analyse the role social networks play for rice farmers in China and their use of biological pesticides.

We stand at a point in history where decisions have to be made about how much longer unsustainable forms of living can continue. The intersection of food, environments, and the media is one of the crucial points where substantial changes can and must occur. All three forms of citizenship will be engaged in this struggle. The question for the future is how this can be achieved.

## Author contributions

The first draft of this editorial piece was written by TM and refined by his fellow-editors. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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