

RESEÑAS/REVIEWS

Simona De Iulio and Susan Kovacs (Eds.). *Food Information, Communication and Education. Eating knowledge*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022

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The website Eat Move (*Manger Bouger*), one of the main public communication tools of the French Ministry of Health, highlights its goal on a central banner: to propose “recipes, activity ideas and tips for eating better and moving more”. Notions such as “eat well” and “eat better” are repeatedly used by public policies that promote nutritional recommendations to prevent certain diseases and health problems through individual food choices. But can “better eating” be the same for all individuals, independently of determinants like social class, level of education, cooking skills, and cultural background? Furthermore, to these recommendations have been recently added economic, environmental, and social issues. The result is a confusing melody, with a great number of notes, and that are adapted and diffused in different media by actors as diverse as non profit organisations, agribusiness companies, health professionals and regular citizens. And that, in an even more intensive rhythm since the expansion of the internet.

In this complex and unstable context, it seems fundamental to understand the proliferation of actors and discourses relating to food, and more specifically the circulation and reception of knowledge. That is precisely the objective of *Food Information, Communication and Education. Eating knowledge*. The book aims to analyse how eating knowledge is disseminated and configured over time in different Western European contexts, through the action of a number of actors and media. It also considers the ways in which such knowledge has been interpreted and appropriated by different publics. Eating knowledge is here perceived as “a communication process by which theories, norms and beliefs about food and food practices circulate in different spheres” (2022: 1). In this sense, the collective work encompasses a number of social environments and media contexts, such as medical books, school classrooms and canteens, elderly nutrition, businesses, diabetics’ patients, dietary consultations, and food advertising. It is also concerned with the ways in which communication artefacts transport, configure and transform knowledge about food.

The book is edited by the duo Susan Kovacs and Simona De Iulio, who have been developing research projects, publications, conferences and even an university diploma on the subject of food information, communication and education, alongside a pluridisciplinary team from the University of Lille and beyond. In this new project they gather 18 authors, most pursuing researches in France, in information and communication science. But since food and eating is a complex theme that could not be completely understood without a pluridisciplinary and comparative approach, different chapters include a historical perspective, there are contributions in sociology, education sciences, history, cultural anthropology, literature, and history of ideas, as well as researches based in Spain, Italy and Belgium.

The thirteen chapters are divided in two parts. The first focuses on the role of media (visual, oral, printed and electronic) in the circulation of knowledge within different social spaces, and on the actions of artefacts and humans who have taken on the role of mediators. It examines how media and mediators have tried to impose a normalized vision of food practices through the dissemination of knowledge since the seventeenth century. The second part of the book analyses the reception and the use of food knowledge by actors situated in different contexts and spheres, and how the active appropriation of knowledge by them has contributed to the creation of renewed food information and communication practices and alternative food pedagogies. As the chapters clarify, knowledge appropriation is a dynamic process in which individuals and institutions interpret and reorganize information, and may end up by reformulating and co-creating knowledge. In this sense, a number of actors has developed countermeasures to governmental, medical and corporate prescribed eating practices, such as food blogging and community culinary activism.

1. First part. Construction and circulation of “eating knowledge”: Mediators and mediations

In the first chapter, the Italian anthropologist Elisabetta Moro uses the case of olive oil in the context of the Mediterranean diet to illustrate how current dietary guidelines tend to relegate the cultural elements of food in favour of nutritional aspects. She introduces a historical perspective on practical and symbolic knowledge about olive oil since the ancient Greek civilization, illustrating how this product has been praised for its political, religious and dietary value. Nonetheless, educational models such as the “traffic light diet” present a simplified formula that encourages the public to stop consuming foods for their high calorie content. In a defence of olive oil, Moro calls attention to such models that may penalize foods with a long gastronomic and cultural tradition.

The second chapter, written by the specialist in French literature and history of ideas Justine Le Floc’h, focuses on books of the medical genre “health regimens”, printed in seventeenth-century France to promote dietetic knowledge and good health practices among a wide-ranging audience (practitioners, apothecaries, non-professional readers, etc.). In a moment when the domain of disease preven-

tion was still emerging, authors aimed to promote the legitimacy of physicians as the only professionals qualified to produce reliable knowledge about food choices. Through a discourse analysis approach, *Le Floc'h* examines the conception of dietetics promoted by authors, the image that they gave of themselves as experts, and the communication strategies employed to make the reading experience engaging and accessible.

The third chapter, by historian Didier Nourrisson, investigates a pedagogical tool introduced in French schools in the mid-twentieth century: educational filmstrips. As a complement to traditional methods, they allowed teachers to personalize their explanatory discourse while projecting successive images in various formats. Nourrisson shows how the vision of different disciplines such as civic education (table manners) and home economics was significantly modified by this medium. Furthermore, the corpus analysed aims to moralize pupils, by teaching them how to eat and drink with good manners, and offers food industries and private companies the possibility to influence pupils in their food choices.

Chapter four, by sociologist Laura Guérin, examines the scientific construction of undernutrition amongst the elderly as a public problem in France. Based on a study of eating and dietary practices in care homes for older people, and on medical literature from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, Guérin analyses how the definitions of the dietary needs of older people, along with the health policies supporting these definitions, have changed over the years. She observes a progressive medicalization of diets and dietary guidelines, as well as an increasing importance given to undernutrition after the 1940s.

In chapter five, communication scholars Thomas Heller and Élodie Sevin explore the concern for workers' well-being and "productivity" in corporate world. If new professions (nutritionist, taste educator, etc.), new philosophies of food and diet behaviours have emerged in the context of late capitalism, historic research shows that questions about food at the workplace have been a major economic and political consideration since the second half of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, the authors point out the similarities and distinctions between the issues and types of knowledge in both periods, highlighting the importance of a historical analysis to the understanding of contemporary practices.

In the last chapter of the first part, the specialist in strategic and digital communication François Allard-Huver also uses a historical and communicational perspective, but in this case to examine the dissemination of knowledge during food-related scandals that took place in the European Union. He explores four aspects of these phenomena: the info-documentary dimension of knowledge, the contribution to the creation of a specific discourse in the public sphere, the emergence of new mediators, and the extent to which these events have transformed the way food exists as a commodity. According to Allard-Huver, although traditional food information mediators try to control narratives, citizens seem to turn to other actors who manage to exploit the potential of digital media and new modes of publicization, leading a reconfiguration of food knowledge.

2. Second part. Uses and appropriations of “eating knowledge” in everyday practices

Sociologist Vincent Schlegel initiates the second part of the book with his work on the evolutions of prescriptions for diabetes mellitus, of medical practices and of patients' involvement in their own care in twentieth-century France. Based on an historic overview, on an ethnographic study of “therapeutic patient education” programmes and on interviews, he reveals how dietary restrictions imposed by medical staff gave place to self restraint through patient training. Although patients are offered knowledge, know-how and life skills, there are relevant class-based discrepancies in the reception of nutritional recommendations: working-class patients must make supplementary efforts to comply with prescriptions, which reduces the capacity of such programs to promote change.

Chapter eight, written by information-communication science scholar Viviane Clavier, explores the process of food knowledge mediation through the work of dietitians. Based on an online survey, the research reveals wide disparities in information-seeking among professionals, namely in terms of frequency and types of sources favoured. Although dietitians' knowledge has become highly specialized, their expertise is often called into question, and they end up being considered more as information mediators than as nutrition consultants. In this context, Clavier observes that to a great number of professionals it is necessary to propose personalized care and adapted advices, focusing on how and when to convey information, instead of adopting a top-down prescriptive model.

In the following chapter, sociologist Virginie Córdoba-Wolff analyses the information practices of people who do not eat gluten for health reasons, based in interviews, participant observations, a quantitative survey, and the analysis of blogs and websites. Córdoba-Wolff shows that information practices are multiple and complementary, and include practical and theoretical knowledge. Furthermore, with the ascension of the Internet, search patterns have become more selective according to individual skills necessary to understand information, and to access to sources and to the internet.

In chapter 10, information-communication science scholars Simona De Iulio, Laurence Depezay, and Susan Kovacs, alongside education scholars Christian Orange and Denise Orange-Ravachol, focus on the mediatization of discoveries related to vitamins in the second half of the twentieth century, through school biology textbooks and commercial advertising. The authors analyse the ways in which knowledge about vitamins is presented in accordance with school curricula, and as part of promotional discourse about food and food products for children. There are significant distinctions, but in both cases vitamins and foods that contain them are seen in a metonymic relationship: vitamins are represented as properties of such foods, mediating representations of food and eating in the social imaginary.

The last three chapters of the book focus uniquely on the school environment, whose importance in food education has been intensified by the end of the twentieth century. Chapter 11, by information-communication science scholar Marie Berthoud,

explores how knowledge related to food is constructed by French public authorities and the way information circulates and is mediated by actors in public schools. Although knowledge is institutionalized through school activities, times and places, new knowledge emerges through practices of appropriation by professionals and children. Berthoud refers therefore to “forms of knowledge”, in the plural – a mix of expert, institutional and lay concepts and precepts.

Chapter 12, by education scholars Christian Orange and Denise Orange-Ravachol, examines some of the conditions that allow approaches to food education through scientifically reasoned knowledge. Authors argue that classroom activities should surpass conventional modes of thinking, such as normative discourses, storytelling and object-based reasoning, and include functional argumentation, systemic reasoning, and discussions on the foundations of nutritional science. Furthermore, it would be fundamental for pupils to avoid basing their choices on appeals to authority: instead, they should understand recommendations and decide for themselves.

At last, sociologists Philippe Cardon and María Dolores Martín-Lagos López present an ethnographic research on parent-run school canteens in Granada, Spain. This “reform movement from below” aims to educate children on eating practices in line with dietary orthodoxy, as well as on environmental issues related to food and on citizen involvement. Such initiatives criticize not only the preeminent educational model, but the quality of the meals prepared by outsourced catering companies. An important aspect is that conformity to such nutritional and environmental model is characteristic of the upper-middle classes, to which belong most parents involved in the canteens. Nonetheless, they integrate different strata of this social group and have diverse visions of the future, which signals a potential need for more detailed studies on such political dimensions.

3. Final remarks

Susan Kovacs and Simona De Iulio have composed a flavorful book, pleasant to read, with a rich diversity of contexts, objects and approaches. It may therefore be of interest to researchers from any area who are sympathetic to human and social sciences. Chapters are complementary and help us understand how complex can be food information, communication and education practices. Through specific examples, they question the larger social and historical contexts in which food knowledge emerges, circulates, and is transformed during this process.

A relevant aspect of the project is the focus on the processes of transforming, rewriting, mediating and reusing concepts and beliefs derived from academic and lay sources. In this sense, it proposes new critical perspectives on how knowledge sources are disseminated, revived and shared; how they are used to support advice and behavioural guidelines; and how they are interpreted. According to the editors, “when media and mediators communicate theories, beliefs and experiences about food and eating, they inevitably transform them. Such processes of knowledge circulation in the field of food and eating remain largely unexplored” (2022: 5).

Finally, it is important to mention at least four points that permeate different chapters, and unveil their importance to the global theme of food information, communication and education. The first is not a surprise: the recent medicalisation of food, with a focus on nutritional terms and elements such as vitamins and calories, often accompanied by reductionist explanations. Another point is the search for information and the reception by the public: we can observe relevant class-based discrepancies, but also related to the access to technology and to the development of new skills. This highlights the importance of understanding how information is adapted and diffused to different publics, but also how they react to it. The third point is connected to this: how is knowledge transmitted? As we can read in the book, different models coexist, varying from a top-down prescription of practices, to personalized, adapted advices and training. The former is adopted by most nutritional policies that do not focus on the contextual phenomena that shape citizens' choices. This leads us to the last point, that is how some mediators' authority has been called into question and gave place to new actors, including citizens themselves, who may appropriate information and co-construct knowledge. The book offers relevant, but non-exhaustive insights on these points, stimulating thought and inciting collaborations between disciplines to investigate more appropriate ways to promote "better eating" with all and for all.