

Book Review:

Media and Food Industries: The New Politics of Food

Phillipov, Michelle
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Paula Arcari¹
RMIT UNIVERSITY
paula.arcari [AT] rmit.edu.au



All kinds of media play an increasingly visible, and even unavoidable, role in the performance of everyday social practices, especially in westernized nations. What Michelle Phillipov highlights in this clearly structured and impeccably argued book is that media is not just a passive player in these practices. It does not simply facilitate the dissemination and exchange of information, but actively shapes associated discourses and practices. In other words, media has agency. While this in itself may not be a novel observation, Phillipov's original contribution clearly demonstrates not only how this agency is mobilized in relation to food, but also the increasing tendency for multiple discourses associated with different texts to gather and converge within certain integrative food media (e.g., "locavore literature," popular TV cooking shows, celebrity chef cookbooks, supermarket campaigns, and branded food products) and even with celebrity chefs themselves. As Phillipov illustrates, this

convergence can result in variable and largely unpredictable outcomes for the different players involved. Moreover, it has important implications for the kinds of politics that are being reflected, reinforced, and potentially materialized through these texts, a point that provides the rationale for Phillipov's exploration of the discursive and material agency of food media texts.

The foodsphere is brimming with overlapping and competing politics, and given the global impacts of food-related industries (50 percent of earth's habitable land is devoted to agriculture and only 1 percent to urban infrastructure), and the additional eighty million people that require access to food every year, understanding how media is shaping these politics is especially critical. Furthermore, in an era where food media seems to be colonizing a large proportion of digital space—textual, visual, and aural—and also creating some entirely new spaces of its own (e.g., the food selfie, and *mukbang* or broadcast eating), Phillipov's book is a timely and important reminder to be critical of the kinds of politics being framed as alternative as well as mainstream. To this end, Phillipov is concerned with showing how food media is “impacting the ways in which alternative food politics are enacted and understood.”² She emphasizes that defining “alternative” and determining what it does and does not include is not her focus, but rather how the term is understood and mobilized in related texts. She uses the following three questions to focus her investigation:

- How are the production and circulation of food media texts being shaped by the needs of media and food industries?
- What meanings and values with respect to food are being made visible as a result of media–food industry relationships?
- What are the implications—both for our food politics and our food systems—of representing food in these ways?

In two parts, Phillipov transports the reader to England, South Australia, and Tasmania using empirical analyses that draw on interviews with representatives from media, food, and tourism industries, as well as, government agencies. The first of these analyses explores celebrity branding (Chapter 4), followed by media tourism (Chapter 5), and the construction of “food from somewhere” (Chapter 6), while the second part explores supermarkets and their strategic management of “food from nowhere” through partnerships with celebrity chefs and integrated advertising (Chapter 7). First though, Part I (Chapters 2 and 3), grounds the reader in the key discourses and associated media practices that have shaped popular food politics in westernized nations.

The first of these preliminary chapters examines the popular genre of locavore literature, specifically Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, and Gary Paul Nabhan's *Coming Home to Eat*, in which food is very much empowered by being emplaced. What make these texts especially powerful, according to Phillipov, are the affective associations and appeals to pleasure that permeate the discourses of alternative food they mobilize. These texts represent a “clear manifesto for forms of pleasurable consumption that combine ethical and sustainability concerns with a nostalgia for ‘tradition’ and ‘connection’ to one's food.”³ Phillipov remarks on the conservatism and privilege that

support these authors' celebration of (depoliticized) individual choice as the gateway to their alternative lifestyles and "better" foods. Noting that their texts reflect "white, patriarchal forms of community and social organization,"⁴ she highlights insensitivities within the narratives of both Pollan and Naghan and the traditional, binary gender politics that Kingsolver explicitly supports. Overall, Phillipov perceives these locavore texts not as manifestos for food system change, but rather manifestos of food system change.⁵

This chapter is followed by an extended visit with two international food celebrities—Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall—who strategically leverage many of the discourses highlighted in the previous chapter (local, traditional, ethical, and pleasurable food) by exemplifying the sort of hybrid food-media industry figures that often tread a shaky line between politics and branding (Chapter 3). Exploring the lifestyles and political discourses leveraged by each of their television offerings—Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage* series and Oliver's *The Naked Chef*, *Jamie's School Dinners*, *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, and *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*—Phillipov remarks on their quite different branding and market appeal. The author insightfully highlights how the *River Cottage* series presents the labor of food as pleasurable, leisurely, and fun, with little recognition of the everyday difficulties experienced by "ordinary" home cooks. While Oliver's programs are more democratic, Phillipov notes the contradiction between his "from scratch" approach and his branded products, as well as his perpetuation of uncritical notions of "good" and "bad" foods. Overall, Phillipov finds that both celebrities support a neoliberal logic, mobilizing political concerns around food safety, health, and ethics while creating platforms for new food industry opportunities.⁶

Within these two preliminary chapters, Phillipov is concerned with showing "how meaning and power is produced in texts,"⁷ reflecting a Foucauldian understanding of power as a dispersed and indeterminate phenomenon of social relations that is exercised through individuals rather than being located with them. Indeed, in the introduction, Phillipov is explicit about de-centering the individual in this book and shifting away from the traditional focus on choice and identity politics in academic food studies, whereby the citizen-consumer becomes "responsibilised,"⁸ in favor of an approach that acknowledges the role of broader industrial, economic, social, and political processes in shaping these choices. As such, this book would sit comfortably alongside the body of social practices scholarship which considers how meanings are socially constituted as part of a range of everyday practices, and how they, in combination with other key elements, shape both the constitution and performance of practices.^{9,10} By highlighting not just the role of the discourses and politics reflected in these texts, but that of the different media forms as a complex of practices whose industry requirements and preferences explicitly direct and configure their content, Phillipov's book underscores the extent to which meanings are not just constituted but may also be purposively managed.

In identifying power, meaning, discourse, and self-surveillance as themes that animate her empirical analyses, Phillipov also evokes Foucault's theories on power, knowledge, and governmentality (the conduct of conduct). This connection is reinforced when she draws on the notion of affective economies, which she sees as central to the "production of pleasures associated with (particular kinds of) 'good' food."¹¹ In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault outlines his "regime of power-knowledge-pleasure,"¹² which has natural affinities with the

framework Phillipov describes. This is not to say the book ought to have made anything of this connection. It is simply an observation that may draw readers interested in these themes to consider the novel way Phillipov considers them in relation to food media.

With Part II, supported by the previous two chapters' focus on mobilizations of pleasure and affect and meanings of local, natural, and traditional, Phillipov embarks on her empirical analyses, beginning with media constitutions of "food from somewhere." Over three chapters, she, respectively, explores an experiential commodity exemplified by Maggie Beer's verjuice; cult geography illustrated by the effect of Matthew Evans' TV series *Gourmet Farmer* on its Tasmanian location; and finally, the labor idyll as identified in the *River Cottage* series and reflected in popular cook books that feature farmers and food producers, focusing here on Kylie Kwong's *It Tastes Better*.

In Chapter 4, Phillipov draws on Lash and Lury's 2007 book¹³ to trace the "social life" of Maggie Beer's internationally successful verjuice—a condiment made from excess wine grapes—showing how it is imbued with, reflects, and circulates meaning. She demonstrates how the distinction between producer and product can become blurred as affective engagements with notions of "local," "traditional," and "gourmet" slide easily between product, brand, and chef, creating interdependencies and also some tensions between the artisanal and the industrial. It is these mediated connections that can have unforeseen outcomes, although in the case of Maggie Beer's verjuice, they resulted in a successful alignment with media and food industry needs and a profitable economy of affects built around an experiential commodity.

Matthew Evans' *Gourmet Farmer* has been less successful in this regard; in Chapter 5, Phillipov shows how the representational forms and requirements of different media can shape local food practices and politics in incompatible ways. Drawing on Couldry's concept of the "media pilgrimage," the author describes how through *Gourmet Farmer*, the Tasmanian town of Cygnet, where filming is based, has become a site for both the tourist and post-tourist gaze. The so-called "cult geography" generated by Evans' show has materially changed the small town as it responds to the new imaginary that leaks out from the media text into local spatial and cultural practices.¹⁴ The slippery, co-productive boundary between fantasy and reality that Phillipov describes in relation to this show and the activities it has generated is fascinating. Phillipov articulates the various, often conflicting, demands and expectations of the show's star, production team, farmers and producers, state government and tourism bodies, and local businesses that create a series of mediated connections that, compared to those associated with Maggie Beer's verjuice, can be uneasy and sometimes problematic.

In all of the previously examined texts, Phillipov recognizes a common reluctance to depict "the realities of professional foodwork" in favor of "labor idylls," in which alternative forms of food production are presented as pleasurable and desirable.¹⁵ In Chapter 6, Phillipov foregrounds this exclusion of reality, observing how an adherence to the labor idyll restricts consumers' understanding of the origins of their food, thereby limiting "what a mediated food politics can 'do' to shape both the knowledges and concrete practices associated with modern food systems."¹⁶ Focusing on Kylie Kwong's cookbook *It Tastes Better*, which features farmers and producers with whom Kwong has close business relations, Phillipov shows how the challenges and hardships of professional food production are made more visible than in

Fearnley-Whittingstall's *River Cottage* series and Matthew Evans' *Gourmet Farmer*. However, drawing on Hardt and Negri's theories of immaterial and affective labor, the author demonstrates how these still sanitized representations are located squarely within a discourse of passionate work that romanticizes the realities of foodwork as labors of love and passion.

With Part III, Phillipov turns to the purposive reconstitution of food from nowhere, a response reflective of the highly successful affective commodification of food from somewhere. Over two chapters, the author explores supermarket efforts to co-opt the narrative around local, natural, traditional, and artisanal food, by leveraging the potential of mediated connections with celebrity chefs (Chapter 7) and popular TV cooking programs (Chapter 8) to do most of the heavy lifting. Phillipov emphasizes that despite the disconnection inherent to their business model, supermarkets continue to be where most people shop. The sorts of media texts discussed in previous chapters, and their politics, appeal primarily to a middle-class audience with "both the economic and cultural capital to choose to shop at farmers' markets or gourmet food stores, and to see ethical food choices as part of the construction of 'good' citizenship and sustainable consumption practices."¹⁷ Nevertheless, these texts exert pressure on more everyday practices, and focus consumer attention on the supermarkets that materially support these practices.

In Chapter 7, Phillipov provides a comprehensive summation of two recent events that directed much critical attention at Coles and Woolworths, Australia's two leading supermarkets. The first event relates to allegations of supplier bullying, including anti-competitive and duopolistic practices, to which both Coles and Woolworths were subjected between the mid-2000s and 2014. The second event, popularly dubbed the "milk wars," came about in 2011 when the two supermarkets reduced the price of milk below cost at the expense of dairy farmers. The convergence of various media texts as these two events unfolded, together with other events like Australia Day, makes for fascinating reading and perfectly illustrates the capacity of these texts to alter, divert, or amplify the popular discourse, and also their ability to adhere to their subjects, in this case the supermarkets. As part of these supermarkets' subsequent strategic efforts at rebranding, both entered into partnerships with celebrity chefs—Curtis Stone for Coles and Jamie Oliver for Woolworths. Phillipov argues that through these chefs and the media texts they themselves embody, both supermarkets are attempting to inject a sense of close connection between their consumers and producers (suppliers), thereby mirroring the farmers' markets and gourmet practices of the alternative food scene. Phillipov's analysis examines both examples of celebrity partnership in detail, revealing why Coles' relationship with Stone amounted to a public relations coup, in contrast to Woolworths' public relations failure with Oliver.

In Chapter 9, Phillipov examines the (slightly) less overt efforts undertaken by supermarkets to manage their public image in the face of criticism, and construct the right brand identity in line with alternative food discourses and practices. This is achieved through what is known as "integrated advertising," which describes "the integration of advertising material with other media and communications content."¹⁸ Popular prime time food cooking shows like *Masterchef* are the key platform for integrated food advertising. Phillipov discusses this global phenomenon, which began in Australia, along with another Australian show, *My Kitchen Rules* (MKR), now franchised internationally, and the Australian version of Canadian show *Recipe to Riches*.

In some very illuminating accounts, the author shows how mediated these shows really are, down to the wardrobes of both the contestants and any farmers that appear on the shows who, she notes, are primarily male and “symbolize the rugged, salt-of-the-earth masculinity of farm life central to Australian myths of nation.”¹⁹ However, Phillipov’s main focus is the different food media/industry relationships each of these shows model and how they resulted in very different outcomes for the supermarkets and their brand image. In both cases, but in different ways, the supermarkets are striving to attach themselves to a range of “somewheres” and undermine the prevalent facelessness of the corporation.

Reflecting on her analysis, Phillipov’s final question is whether “the intensified media focus on food [is] ultimately helping or hindering changes to discourses of food politics and to our food system as a whole?”²⁰ For all the reasons indicated in this review’s introduction, this is a critical question. In particular, a notable point in the introduction was Phillipov’s emphasis on the importance of understanding “the type of politics that media’s focus on (certain kinds of) food both enables and *constrains*”²¹ (emphasis added). The constraining, or silencing, of certain politics hinders changes to food systems as much as the enabling or active endorsement of others. More of these constrained politics could have been drawn out in each chapter.

It would have been useful, for example, to include further discussion of the labor idyll that characterizes all these texts and how it belies the hard work of food production, simultaneously negating any deeper questioning of the farming practices’ suitability, particularly those involving livestock, to increasingly fragile and denuded landscapes. Relatedly, these texts either avoid completely or narrate in very specific, carefully managed ways the realities of meat production and slaughter, which at any scale involve practices that ought to be subject to greater critique, given the increasing magnitude of their environmental impacts. Indeed, the “myth of nation” attached to farming that Phillipov acknowledges in Chapter 9 is much more significant, and extends beyond Australia. The historic roots and deeply affective associations with rural imaginaries of farmers, farming, farmland, and especially livestock, combined with similarly affective associations with notions of the natural, local, and traditional, exert a much more powerful pull within food media texts than is more generally recognized. A wider consideration of the sorts of discourses excluded by these media texts would expand Phillipov’s inquiry in ways that challenge *what* is eaten, as well as *how* it is eaten, while lessening the focus on perceived differences between mainstream and alternative, or large- and small-scale, differences that are becoming materially, and not just discursively, blurred. It is equally important to interrogate the material implications of media texts and the discourses they perpetuate for food systems, the environment, workers, and the billions of animals used each year as food, not to mention other species whose habitats are disappearing.

That said, Phillipov’s volume makes a valuable and entertaining addition to the body of academic literature exploring ethical and alternative food movements, practices, and products from a variety of perspectives, encompassing sociology, cultural studies, geography, environmental studies, sustainability, and others. While much of this literature focuses on what these developments say about consumers as political citizens and their agency in achieving long-term systemic change, this volume brings another dimension to the table, considering the

role of the media texts themselves in mobilizing these movements, practices, and products. I will now be watching, reading, and listening to such texts in a wholly new and brighter light.

-
- ¹ Dr. Paula Arcari is currently a research officer within the Centre for Urban Research at RMIT University, Melbourne. She has an interdisciplinary background, encompassing quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods, and is interested in how both societal change and stability are constituted. Her PhD research, completed in 2018, was a Foucauldian exploration of how “meat” and “food” animals are “made sense of” in everyday social practices. Continuing this theme, her current focus is understanding how to challenge habitual ways of thinking and acting about nonhuman animals using a critically posthuman approach.
- ² Michelle Phillipov, *Media and Food Industries: The New Politics of Food* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁹ Bente Halkier, *Consumption Challenged: Food in Medialised Everyday Lives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
- ¹⁰ David Evans, Andrew McMeekin, and Dale Southerton, “Sustainable Consumption, Behaviour Change Policies and Theories of Practice,” in *The Habits of Consumption*, ed. Alan Warde and Dale Southerton (Helsinki: Collegium, 2012), 164.
- ¹¹ Phillipov, *Media and Food Industries*, 13.
- ¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
- ¹³ Scott Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007).
- ¹⁴ Phillipov, *Media and Food Industries*, 113.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

Bibliography

Evans, David, Andrew McMeekin, and Dale Southerton. “Sustainable Consumption, Behaviour Change Policies and Theories of Practice.” In *The Habits of Consumption*, edited by Alan Warde and Dale Southerton, 113–29. Helsinki: Collegium, 2012.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Halkier, Bente. *Consumption Challenged: Food in Medialised Everyday Lives*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.

Lash, Scott and Celia Lury. *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2007.

Phillipov, Michelle. *Media and Food Industries: The New Politics of Food*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Roser, Max and Hannah Ritchie. "Land Cover." *Our World in Data*. 2018. <https://ourworld-indata.org/land-cover>.