

The politics of good food : why food engineers and citizen-consumers are talking at cross-purposes

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Valorisation addendum

Relevance

In this dissertation, I have presented an analysis of current public discussions on food technology and innovation in the Netherlands, as well as a number of recommendations to technology developers, citizen-consumers and dialogue facilitators for how to improve the quality of such discussions. The general thrust of my argument is that better discussions are those in which people are more responsive to concerns generally regarded as ‘soft’; which, in turn, may help the (re-)building of trust between those who make our food, and those who eat it. A deeper understanding and recognition of whatever citizen-consumers hold dear is a vital step towards the ideal of responsible innovation, and consequently, the development of better food production, food processing and food products. As long as this understanding is lacking, technology actors and societal actors will be talking at cross-purposes.

My recommendations do not present a recipe for public trust. The importance of trust emerges where absolute certainties are missing. Relations of trust cannot be enforced but need to grow; and one can only cultivate a seedbed from which the growth of trust is at least not impossible. Nor do my recommendations offer a recipe for better food products. It takes a food engineer to know what creative and innovative possibilities are given within the limits of food technology. At least I have suggested why and how food engineers need to explore these possibilities, and what direction this exploration may take: towards the more ‘experiential’ aspects of food (i.e. generally regarded as soft) – those aspects that seem immeasurable, private and causally unrelated to technologies as such; and for which food engineers may not consider themselves responsible at face value.

Stakeholders

My research results are of interest, therefore, first and foremost, to

technology (en)actors in the field of food innovation – and, given the kind of ‘soft’ concerns I have identified – those who are specifically involved with food *processing*. Although I have addressed food engineers in particular, my analysis should be instructive for many more actors in academic and industrial fields of food technology who are faced with public distrust; and from my critical analysis of the instrumentalist conception of technology it should become clear that responsibilities for ‘soft’ impacts may reach beyond the distinction between technology ‘as such’ vs. its application. Attention for ‘soft’ concerns, in other words, should not be left to marketing departments alone.

But if the quality of public dialogue is at stake, the imperative of responsiveness cannot apply to only one side of the table. I have presented several recommendations to societal actors who (try to) raise concerns that are generally regarded as soft. These include a broad variety of citizen-consumers who actively (and sometimes frequently) express their concerns on discussion forums, online and offline, some in the role of food professional, some speaking on behalf of NGO’s, some as concerned parents, and some simply as sceptical consumers. Their interest is to be heard and adequately responded to. The key message for them is two-fold. If they have specifically ethical, cultural or aesthetic concerns, they better not conceal it; and they should articulate the ways in which their concerns are entangled with ‘harder’ food issues already recognized as legitimate by those they seek to address. Especially those who aspire to have a structural and substantial influence on the public food innovation agenda – the Slow Food movement, for example – thus need to master both techno-scientific *and* ethical-esthetical repertoires. My analysis and recommendations show why and how to connect both.

A third group to whom my findings are of interest consists of those who are interested in facilitating public deliberation and dialogues on the innovation of food (and) technology, and bring the aforementioned stakeholder groups together (e.g. consultancy firms, communication advisors, governmental policy analysts, technology assessors and ‘science cafe’ organizers). The dialogue setting as well as the techno-ethical scenario design (criteria) suggested in this dissertation should provide them with guidance, if and when they have the ambition to set

up a dialogue (series) that is more responsive than is currently the case with public discussions on food technology.

A fourth group, whom I did not explicitly address in my dissertation but to whom my analysis may well be instructive, are those who report public controversies and potential issues in food innovation and technology. Those include journalists and reporters on science, technology or food-related issues, and policy advisors who seek to draw a representative image of current positions, views and concerns in any of those fields. If they are interested in making a fair representation of current issues in food and technology, my dissertation urges them to take 'soft concerns' into serious consideration. Serious consideration here means to take them seriously on their own terms rather than instantly framing them as mere expressions of fear and romanticism.

Activities

I have shared the results of my research – and more importantly, the perspective I have developed in achieving those results – with some of these people in several ways.

I have participated in *De Nationale DenkTank*, a Dutch Think Tank of young academics. We conducted a field analysis of the sustainability of the food supply chain in The Netherlands, and presented our recommendations to key stakeholders – such as CBL (Dutch food retailers' trade organization) and FNLI (Federation of Dutch food industries). In the working group Consumers we have promoted the importance of food culture for developing a more sustainable food supply chain (Nationale DenkTank 2012).

In order to share our main findings and provoke further discussion, I have organized a stakeholder conference together with the research project team I am part of, and in collaboration with Schuttelaar & Partners consultancy. We asked leading experts in the philosophy and sociology of food to moderate several discussion sessions, each addressing specific 'soft' concerns. The conference was attended by a number of food engineers, policy advisors, communication professionals and marketers. In preparation of this conference, we

have launched a project website (Fasos-research 2013) and set up an open LinkedIn discussion group. Also, we published a YouTube animation video, produced by Daan Dirk de Jonge and Didier Jansen, in which our main findings are explained in lay terms (De Jonge 2013).

Furthermore, I appeared in a science radio show, in an episode dedicated to gluttony and food studies (Hoezo Radio 2013) and posted an article on Foodlog, a news blog on virtually all aspects of food production and consumption (Haen 2013). I have presented key findings of my analysis of the food additives controversy in Voeding Nu, a magazine for professionals in the food sector (Haen 2014), and at VMT Food Event 2014, an annual conference for food professionals, the theme of which was food trust.

Contribution

Over the past five years, the issue of trust has become a growing priority on public as well as institutional food (technology) agendas in the Netherlands – although one could reasonably argue that food trust has been an issue of all times. In the public sphere, but also in the food sector in particular, this issue has given rise to an often-heard call for more transparency about food products, their origins, how they are processed and what health and safety warrants are in place. My main contribution to the discussion of food trust is distinctive in the sense that I challenge this call: more transparency will not do. In order to (re-)establish a mutual relation of trust with consumer-citizens, food innovators and other technology (en)actors in the food supply chain will have to engage in public dialogue and respond to substantial consumer concerns about good food – even if they do not consider themselves primarily responsible for those concerns. If they don't, they may miss out on early warning signals and creative business opportunities. The persistent controversy of E-numbers suggests that public trust in technologically produced and processed food is too fragile to leave it up to information campaigns and the mechanism of the free market.

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