Journal of Rural Studies 45 (2016) 1–14

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

Virtual reconnection: The online spaces of alternative food networks in England

Elizabeth Bos [a, *], Luke Owen [b]

[a] Centre for Business in Society, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB, United Kingdom
[b] Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 August 2015
Received in revised form
16 February 2016
Accepted 28 February 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Alternative food networks
Virtual reconnection
Online space
Social media
Civic food networks

ABSTRACT

Spaces of 'alternative' food production and consumption have been the subject of considerable interest within agri-food research and policy-making circles in recent decades. Examples of these Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) include Farmers' Markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes and farm shops, where food products are embedded with social and spatial information that serves to differentiate them from conventional agri-food systems. These shorter, more transparent, localised supply chains that characterise AFNs are underpinned by the notion of reconnection – a fundamental set of biological, social and moral processes that enable agri-food stakeholders to participate in ethically minded, transparent systems, where they are better connected to one another and to the markets and environments in which they are immersed. Drawing on a range of eight AFN case studies in England and using a multi-method approach, we explore the notion of reconnection within online space to show how social relations have changed, and are changing as a result of online activity. In examining the websites and social media platforms of AFNs and primary data collected from the creators and users of these spaces, we uncover the notion of 'virtual reconnection'. We found the embodied, socio-material reconnection processes that occur *in-place* also occur online. However, by extending AFN spaces, virtual reconnection cannot fully replicate the same embodied and tactile experiences associated with the material spaces of AFNs. As such, online spaces in the context of AFNs provide a useful additional realm for reconnection, but need to be understood as supplementary rather than as a substitution for socio-material reconnections. Future research should consider the moral dimensions of reconnection and the capacity that online spaces have for enhancing the inclusivity of Civic Food Networks (CFNs), and their transformative role in contributing to more sustainable behaviours.

1. Introduction

Interest in the spaces of 'alternative' food production and consumption within agri-food research and policy-making circles has increased in recent decades, this is "in part a consequence of consumer reactions to a range of environmental, ethical, and health concerns which are associated with 'conventional' food supply systems that have become increasingly industrialised and global in reach" (Ilbery and Maye, 2005: 823). Indeed, the horsemeat scandal[1] was a recent high profile incident that raised concerns with the state of food systems, heightening public and political anxiety about the transparency and authenticity of elongated, conventional food supply systems that exist across Europe and beyond. Along with undermining consumer confidence in the familiar products that populate supermarket shelves, such incidents highlight how complex systems of food provisioning serve to distance and disconnect consumers from the people and places involved in contemporary food production (Kneafsey et al., 2008). As a result there has been an interest in alternative modes of food provision, which aim to 'reconnect' consumers, producers and food (Renting et al., 2003; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Sage, 2003).

Drawing on the concept of reconnection, we explore the role of online space in relation to the biological, social, and moral dimensions of reconnection (Dowler et al., 2010; Kneafsey et al., 2008). Studies connecting agri-food spaces and networks to online spaces are becoming more necessary as the mediums used to

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: e.bos@coventry.ac.uk (E. Bos), Luke.Owen@coventry.ac.uk (L. Owen).

[1] Horse meat was found in a number of beef products, sold in UK supermarkets in 2013, which raised concern over food safety and transparency of the food chain.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.02.016

access the Internet have developed significantly over the past 20 years with technological advancements enabling a 24/7 connected culture. Online and social media account for a large proportion of contemporary Internet-based activity and play an important role in organisational image construction, and in the relationships and experiences of individuals. Such a rapid change has seen over 70% of online adults access social networking sites in 2014, and Facebook listed as the fifth single most popular online activity in 2013 amongst UK adults (Ofcom, 2015; ONS, 2014). Furthermore, nearly half of UK businesses made use of social media in 2012, with the main reasons being to develop business image, market products and to obtain or respond to customer opinions (ONS, 2012).

To understand the impact and implications of technological advancements in the context of agri-food research, 'reconnection' – an underpinning concept to Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), must be at the heart of this endeavour. As such, we aim to explore the ways processes of reconnection are mediated and manifest in a virtual capacity, and to consider how this is related to material connections. To do this we conducted a mixed method, empirically rich study incorporating eight AFN case studies and 21 online spaces, reflecting the range and complexity of new metamedia.[2] Key findings are presented in five main sections incorporating: AFNs' use of online and social media (including how customers and members use it), biological, social, and moral connections, and the importance of place and context. Drawing on the nuances of how different AFNs use online space, the paper concludes by introducing the concept of 'virtual reconnection' which should not be regarded as a substitution for the socio-material reconnections that arise *in place*. Finally, future research questions are proposed which include an exploration into online and offline interactions and relationships, the transformative potential and moral aspects of virtual reconnection.

2. Contextualising alternative food geographies

The growth in AFNs during the late 1990s and early-mid 2000s is evidence of producer and consumer responses to the 'murky' and unsustainable food systems that are increasingly failing to satisfy the needs and demands of food producers and consumers alike (Sage, 2013). Examples of these AFNs include Farmers' Markets, farm shops and farm gate sales, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), box delivery schemes, producer and consumer co-operatives, and community gardening initiatives (Jarosz, 2008). These types of food provisioning systems are markedly different to conventional counterparts as they can redefine and shorten relations between producers and consumers through transparent short(er) food supply chains (from here on referred to as Short Food Chains – SFCs); these shorter chains are founded upon quality and provenance and point towards more sustainable modes of production (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Sage, 2003; Goodman, 2004; Ilbery and Maye, 2005; Morris and Kirwan, 2010).

These re-localised SFCs that characterise AFNs invite critical insight into the relationships and transactions that take place from the point of production to the point of sale as they are characterised by shorter physical distances between producer and consumer (geographical proximity) or fewer intermediaries or 'links' in the chain (social proximity) (Aubry and Kebir, 2013; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Renting et al., 2012). While geographical distance is implicit in the term 'short', a defining feature of SFCs pertains to the embeddedness of social relationships that enables value-laden information such as provenance to be communicated between actors from farm to fork (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Kirwan, 2006; Renting et al., 2003; Sage, 2003). This reduction of social and geographical proximity ultimately enables producer–consumer relationships to be 'thickened' (Whatmore et al., 2003; Eden et al., 2008), in contrast to the disembedded conventional systems that have served to disconnect rather than reconnect people to their food.

However, more recently, the AFN concept has proved problematic due to the polarised distinction from conventionalised food systems. While the term AFN offers a useful, heuristic conceptualisation (Holloway et al., 2007), a distinctive alternative-conventional divide rarely exists in practice (Ilbery and Maye, 2005). As such, AFNs are situated alongside and operate within conventional systems and market logic. Given this hybridity, AFNs have been unable to coalesce around any consistent, normative content of their own (Renting et al., 2012) and are often defined in relation to what they are not, rather than what they are (Tregear, 2011) which can instantly marginalise them and risks normalising adverse 'conventional' practices (Seyfang, 2006). Similarly, it is necessary to regard alternative stakeholders less in a fixed, dualistic sense and appreciate the different agendas, interdependencies, and synergies that are implicit throughout agri-food systems (Lamine, 2015).

Current scholarship is increasingly interested in going beyond alternative debates toward addressing matters of food system governance, community participation, social entrepreneurship and grassroots innovations (Grasseni, 2013; Kirwan et al., 2013). As such, the role of civil society and communities has become an important focus in understanding and developing transformative food systems (that have emerged since the 2008 food crisis) and are situated less in regional development and instrumentalist discourse (Hinrichs, 2000), and more in notions of justice, control and food sovereignty (Lamine et al., 2012; Renting et al., 2012; Shawki, 2012; Goodman and Sage, 2014; Sage, 2014). The Civic Food Networks (CFNs) concept has been proposed as a way to move beyond the debates associated with alternative and to bring to the fore the role that citizens play in (re)shaping and reclaiming food systems (Renting et al., 2012).

2.1. Contemporary agri-foodscapes

It has been argued that CFNs provide a complementary category to existing AFN knowledge and definitions that enable alternative food system relations and governance at the community-scale to be theorised (Renting et al., 2012). Indeed, a key attribute of CFNs is that they open up possibilities to explore progressive social change moving away from debates around alterity and producer routes to markets (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003). Furthermore, a decade-long understanding of alternatives from this prevailing neo-liberal stance has enabled larger-scale mainstream retailers to gradually capture or assimilate the ethical and aesthetic qualities of local AFNs (often under their own branding), which can threaten social projects and the transformative ambition of 'alternative' food movements (Goodman et al., 2012; Lutz and Schachinger, 2013).

Situating alternative food practices as part of a broader transition movement towards a more resilient future may provide a way to alleviate the impasses associated with the market framings of AFNs (Sage, 2014). This is because CFNs are defined by the active role citizens play in the "initiation and operation of new forms of consumer–producer relations" (Renting et al., 2012: 290). It is argued that CFNs include more participatory and collective forms of organisation (such as consumer co-ops, solidarity buying groups and collective urban gardening initiatives) viewed as community-scale approaches attempting to (re)shape, (re)claim and challenge the broader prevailing food system. This reflects the role of civil

[2] Used by Marshall McLuhan (1964) and refers to new relationships between form and content in the development of new technologies and new media.