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# Social Activism with Extra Sauce: How Food Communication Increases Political Awareness in Social Media

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Social Activism with Extra Sauce:  
How Food Communication Increases Political Awareness in Social Media

Amy DeMello

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**Abstract**

This project explores the combination of social media and food communication and challenges the prevailing belief that food on social media is trivial, frivolous, and unmeaning. This paper will explain why social media, as well as food communication, are both influential and powerful tools for activism. To prove this, I analyze Twitter posts through Storify. Ultimately, I draw conclusions about the influence of food in activism on social media. The lack of and restrictions on data available are discussed as examples of how valuable and crucial this information is, ultimately displaying that social media is not as democratic as currently perceived.

## Introduction

The evolution of online communication through social media has grown exponentially so that the earliest online networks have become extinct less than two decades later. The rapid growth has caused many to analyze the purpose and effectiveness of this form of connecting people. As Clay Shirky wrote in his book, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organization*, social media is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century's form of communication. Millions of online users are given the ability to connect online, regardless of geography, and share ideas. Shirky predicts that activism can, and will, occur on a non-physical platform. Malcolm Gladwell, on the other hand, disagrees, stating that online relationships are "loose ties" that are incapable of causing change. As Shirky's ideas were proven right by the violence in Egypt, Civil War in Syria, and Occupy Wall Street movement, even Gladwell might have difficulty denying that social media has become an integral part of American culture.

The rise of social media needs to be examined alongside the already existing interest in all things gastronomic. Food culture exploded online, from dining-focused platforms, to health scares trending on mainstream platforms. This occurs because food has always been integrated into media, from books to magazines, then television, and now social media. Throughout this time period, food has been more than just nourishment. From the American Revolution, until modern times, food has been used to spark political activism. As more than just nourishment, the American culture holds food to a high regard because it embodies ethnic diversity and the longing for a higher social class, two different yet pertinent values held highly by this country.

After examining how frequently food appears in the history of activism, analysis was conducted of food's presence online. The number of posts discussing everything from a new restaurant to food-borne illness outbreaks must represent a unique bond between food and online buzz. With all of the historical integrations of food and activism from the past, a relationship between the two must occur today with the newest form of media, social media.

To confirm this hypothesis, a series of cases were set up to compare a food issue with a non-food related issue from the same year of identical topics in terms of social buzz. The results were astounding, as a food-related topic always trumped the non-food topic in terms of quantity and quality of online buzz.

## **Chapter One: Social Media, Defined**

In 2008, the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* published its first article, an introductory piece that established a definition of a social network site with, at the time, a brief history. The need for such publications had become apparent as scholars started to note the “affordances and reach” of the newest form of communication.

According to danah boyd and Nicole Ellison, the authors, social networks are “web-based services that allow individuals” to perform three different actions. First, users must have the ability to create a “public or semi-public” profile on the particular site. Secondly, social networks share a list of other profiles that the user has connected to. And lastly, users should be able to navigate through their connections, as well as the connections of others, on the social networking site (boyd, et. al).

The term social media can be utilized almost interchangeably with social networks; however, there are a few subtle distinctions that are essential to recognize. Social media refers directly to the media content that is portrayed online. Therefore, social media can be a video, podcast, picture, or blog. This media is then uploaded to a social network, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr (Burke). The two co-exist symbiotically; social networks flourish when users are sharing social media content, and social media content is shared online through a social network. An authority in social content online, SocialMediaExaminer.com, considers sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest “whole package platforms” because they encompass a social network “engagement” and social media “tools.” Youtube is a prime example of a social media site because it hosts user-generated video. LinkedIn is a social network because job seekers can connect with human resources managers or headhunters (Burke).

In 1997, the first social networking website was conceived. Sixdegrees.com allowed users to create a profile and “add” their acquaintances, which led to a change in 1998, when users were allowed to view their friend’s connections. The site attracted millions but was unable to sustain itself as a business. In 2000, Sixdegrees.com closed, and was quickly forgotten, replaced with instant messaging services like AIM and ICQ. Around the world, web developers created sites like Cyworld in Korea and LunarStorm in Sweden. LunarStorm, emerged as a prominent social platform for 2000, by highlighting a guestbook, friend list, and diary pages.

In 2001, San Francisco’s Ryze.com looked to help job seekers establish professional connections. A year later, the same developers launched Friendster to build upon Ryze’s personal, rather than professional, connections and compete with profitable

Match.com, an online dating website. Friendster focused on connecting users with mutual connections, an advancement of social networking at the time. However, playful “Fakesters” or forged profiles of celebrities and fictional characters upset the company, which deleted as many of them as possible. Users felt that the company did not have their best interests in mind, causing them to also delete their account. Friendsters migrated to other sites. In 2003, Clay Shirky, New York University Professor, coined the term “YASNS,” or “Yet Another Social Networking Service” as sites like AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet and MiGente began to target niche audiences. In 2004, MySpace gained momentum, offering teenagers customizable profiles, ranked friend lists, and the ability to link to famous artists. MySpace remained under the radar, as the majority of media outlets failed to notice the site’s enormous web traffic. News Corporation purchased the site in 2005 for \$580 million.

In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook, an initially Harvard University-only social network. In previous years, other social networks had been launched to targeted audiences with hopes of expansion. Soon, Facebook expanded into an exclusive college-student-only network, requiring a “.edu” email. By 2005, Facebook administration permitted high school students, then the public to join (boyd, et. al). Today, American Facebook consumers spend collectively 114 billion minutes on the social networking site (Adler).

Microblog Twitter emerged a year later in 2006. Users have the ability to publicly or privately “tweet at” another user, or make a comment about their own day in a post limited to 140 characters. In 2007, Chris Messina, a web designer, created the “hashtag,” a pound symbol that indicates a group or label for a tweet. Though he says Twitter



originally rejected the idea, it eventually spread and became commonplace in a few years. Also invented that year was the “Retweet” function, an action that enables users to send a tweet from another user to the followers of their profile (Luckerson).

Every day, the average American spends about 37 minutes on his or her social media networks (Adler). Needless to say, social media is an integral part of the American 21<sup>st</sup> century lifestyle. The question as to why this time consumption and culture change occurs will unlock how social media can be used for something greater than entertainment. In a survey, 63% of people say they use social media to “share interesting things”, and 43% say to “share important things” (Nanji). These 43% are utilizing technology to let their online connections know about something that matters to them. Whether “interesting” or “important,” the content is engaging nonetheless; otherwise the astronomical number of minutes spent per year on Facebook would not exist.

As time elapses, social networks exponentially increase this engagement. From simple online communication, the use for these platforms began to unfold into a compelling and powerful mechanism for change. As social media content is spread throughout various social networks, activism seeks a new home online. As a free and accessible portal, social networking sites unite activists despite geographic barriers. On Twitter, powerful discussions occur every day, as users discuss a variety of issues, usually marked with a hashtag to label their ideas. Twitter’s layout organizes tweets chronologically by content, allowing anyone on the internet to see not only what is being discussed, but also the opinions users hold about the “trending topic.” The format is extremely comprehensive in a mobile platform, which allows users to be timely with posts, not even requiring a smart phone or internet access. In addition, a common

perception that “everyone is on Twitter” holds true as the President of the United States, CEOs, rock bands, athletes, and iconic cartoons utilize Twitter. The consistent format seems somewhat democratic; everyone has the same format and number of characters to compose a tweet. These characteristics enable Twitter analysis to produce powerful conclusions about social media activism.

## **Chapter Two: Social Media Activism**

Many scholars have studied the promise of social networking’s contribution to activism. The social media realm challenged some concepts of traditional media, which has led to discussions about its effectiveness to empower and unite groups of people. Criticism and praise has surrounded the debate, leaving some scholars to endorse social media, and others to disparage the empty hype surrounding internet connections.

Clay Shirky and Malcolm Gladwell have studied the promise of social networking’s involvement with activism. Shirky, an adjunct professor at New York University, has been delivering the message about the ability of social media to organize and unify users. In a TED Talk entitled “How Social Media Can Make History,” he expresses the previous problem of communication. Before, communication occurred in two ways, by “creating conversation” or “creating groups.” There was no possible way to engage a group into an intimate conversation. (“Clay Shirky: How Social Media Can Make History”).

In 2009, Shirky published a book entitled *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. He begins by telling the story of a Wall Street executive who left her cell phone in the backseat of a New York City taxi. After dialing

her own phone, she realized [the](#) teenager from Queens had stolen it, and irately refused to give it back. With the help of early social networks, the stolen phone is traced to the teenager's home. Only a few New Yorkers participated, all strangers from various parts of the city, but they united, compiling knowledge to locate the thief. Shirky closes the story by asking, "what happens next?" (Shirky) With the ease of collecting and organizing a group online, networks allow millions to collaborate and share ideas and information. Shirky challenges the reader to consider the other uses for the medium. If all this collaboration happened when the internet was in [the infant stage](#), when millions of active users join and connect, the potential is unimaginable. Powered by millions, instant discussion from users on other ends of the world can spark a revolution in communication.

In 2010, Gladwell published an essay in *The New Yorker* [critiquing](#) Shirky's views. Gladwell cites the 1960's sit-ins in North Carolina to demonstrate the strength cultivated through an organization of a handful of citizens who refused to sit in the "Negro section" of a local restaurant. From these few individuals to a few hundred "sitting-in" restaurants across the region, the South felt the impact of civil disobedience, held together by the power of human contact. Gladwell states that this kind of change is created from "strong ties." On the other hand, "loose ties" are what he calls networks, especially in online forums. Networks of people do not have physical contact, and are united on an intangible space. For example, Twitter followers and Facebook acquaintances are the "greatest sources of new ideas and information," according to sociologist Mark Granovetter. The internet allows collaboration with these "loose connections." Yet, change cannot be implemented through this medium; only the

“personal connections” can make a difference, according to Gladwell. In the 1960’s sit-ins, for example, all participants stood by each other, embracing fear and pride, all at once, in the camaraderie of each other’s company. In the 1970’s Italian Red Brigades, nearly all members of the organization had at least one friend connected in the group prior to joining. The aspect of physically seeing and emotionally knowing these connections is essential to revolution, Gladwell claims (Gladwell).

While media analysts may have sided with Gladwell’s viewpoint during the several months after the publication of his piece, Shirky’s theory societal change developing over social media was soon illustrated in multiple situations around the world.

Several examples from within the past several years have proven that social media is changing the way the general public thinks about organizing online for change. In wartime situations, social media activism occurs quite frequently; calamity truly empowers activists to speak up and out about the cause at hand. One of the first major examples of social media cultivating social activism online was the Egyptian uprising of 2011. The collection of activists online showcased the ability of civilians to unite against government forces. Activists posted comments on the Egyptian Armed Forces Facebook page one Saturday night, drawing activists everywhere to express their anti-military views in an astounding number of comments. The activists then moved to bashing the ministry’s Facebook page. Commenting abilities were taken away by the Armed Forces shortly after, so the social activists switched over to Twitter, uniting their tweets with a “hashtag.” Gladwell claims that this [type](#) of communications allows users to “hide” behind their screens, yet, the uprising led to over 10,000 captives facing trial. An Egyptian video blogger, Salma el Daly, stated, “Twitter and Facebook are the ways we

keep the momentum going... we campaign there.” In a country that is not as developed as other parts of the world, it is remarkable that Egypt has been able to rally and unite activists through social media (Aitamuro). Social media is democratic; the ease of tweeting reinforces this aspect. As more of the world is covered in basic technology, users will be even more connected. The Egyptian revolt indicates raw potential.

Another recent war also made strong use of social media. An ABC News article discusses how the Syrian Civil War is different than any war in history. Nearly two-and-a-half years later, information reported about the war has been covered significantly by social media, as those in Syria upload content for the entire world to view. Journalists did not need to travel to the warzone to broadcast a story. Viewers watched the war online, which somewhat eliminated the need for journalism in a sense (Karam). The Syrian war signifies the heavy integration of social media into journalism. This evolving model emerges as a challenge to consumers who must determine the validity of the news they consume. The easy access to media in this instance presents a risk that mimics propaganda. Biased news can, therefore, reemerge as a journalistic issue. While viewers in other parts of the world previously turned to traditional media for news, an alternative source represents the power of social media.

Even large-scale non-military social movements have benefited from social media. On American soil, the Occupy Wall Street Movement of 2011 claimed to be organized online. The series of events drew hundreds to protest in the streets of New York City, which inspired citizens to replicate the fight in from all fifty states in dozens of cities across the nation. Occupy’s few months reached more than 170,000 people to visit the more than 400 different Facebook Occupy Wall Street pages. According to a

sociology study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “while the focus [was] mobilizing individuals offline, online activities greatly facilitated these efforts.” UNC located Facebook statuses from Occupy’s origins and discovered they have collected greater than 390,000 “likes.” The one-millionth post or comment relating to the movement occurred on October 7<sup>th</sup>, about three weeks after the initial event occurred (Caren). Occupy’s toughest critics tore the movement apart, claiming participants accomplished nothing with their nationwide rally. However, Occupy can be credited for sponsoring a lively debate. Social media was the only quick and easy method of communication to gather a large number of people into one common cause. Proven by the high online traffic, social media evidently played a factor in pushing the Occupy idea forward.

While Clay Shirky’s theory of strong social activism online may have seemed lofty in 2009, he forecasted much of how current groups collectivize. In a *Mashable* article from 2010, Sarah Kessler discusses the weak and powerful aspects of online petitions like Change.org. While the value of rallying signatures in person is nothing like the an electronic petition, the outlet allows users to expedite the process at a speed impossible of paper petitions. Change.org has allowed millions of users to learn about issues they may not be aware of, or find an already active petition that they were hoping to launch. Ben Rattaray, the founder of Change.org, states that petitions on the site change a law or practice at least one a week, a substantial number considering most of the activists have never or will never meet. Kessler argues “more loose ties leads to more activists,” citing that something as simple as liking a page creates a “ladder of engagement.” While not every “like” or “favorite” generates something noteworthy, it

will create involvement for a few. For example, Craig Kielburger was 12 years old when he read an article about child labor. Years later, he founded Free the Children, to help advocate against such practices, which has about 3,500 active members today. The low-involvement of reading a newspaper article generated a cause much larger than ever imagined. These loose ties and low-involvement acts can evolve into monumental change (Kessler).

The accessibility of social media defines the digital age. According to Mediacom, an online marketing agency, social media has created “the rise of the empowered consumer” (“Rise of the Empowered Consumer”). A Harvard Business Review Study survey suggests that at least 79% of the businesses questioned are or are planning to use social media. Currently, 58% already use the medium. Approximately 50% say that social media allows them to have more awareness, and a stronger online presence (“Social Media: What Most Companies Don’t Know”). Marketing standpoint aside, the crucial factor is that people are online, and discussion topics discussed on this medium express what matters to them. With such potential to be heard by anyone across the globe, users post and tweet what they hold in high regard. All of this data is stored, and can be used to develop into remarkable conclusions about what matters to society today. Shirky was correct when he said, “Our social tools are not an improvement to modern society, they are a challenge to it.” Social media has forever changed how the world communicates.

## Chapter Three: Food Communication, Media and Activism

### *Food in Social Media*

Integrating social media and food communications has been a “trending topic” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The two have been paired together from Twitter’s invention. “Tweeting about breakfast” was a phrase used to critique Twitter’s supposed incapability to produce meaningful, engaging content, as critics believed a successful social media platform should. The origin of that statement comes from Noah Glass, the forgotten Twitter founder, who tweeted about breakfast days after the site launched (Piepenbrig). That tweet established the relationship between food and Twitter. A Flowtown study found 25% of people photograph their food daily, especially for a photoblog or food diary. Since 2000, fifteen noteworthy social media sites were created to accommodate the users’ demand to share information about food online. Thirteen of those are food specific. Social media elevated the food communication realm, as a user’s followers and friends can now witness a meal in real-time (“Dine & Dish”).

Food posts online can easily be viewed as a frivolity, as posts of “last night’s dinner” or “#foodporn” have taken over social media because of food’s popularity. On the surface, these posts about food seem somewhat vacuous, as a picture of a delicious lunch or styled cookbook photo can be perceived as a mindless and futile post. Yet, according to Melissa Salazar, “cell phone manufactures, internet website creators, and social media software designers were probably not thinking about food research when they created their products” (Salazar). Food ideas online are indicative of this era, despite the underestimated previous impact.



The ease of posting pictures on Facebook, Twitter, and later Instagram is eye-catching. As of December 2013, the hashtag “foodporn” generated eighteen million results, and a month later, there were over twenty million posts on Instagram. Jessica Teich writes, “A steadily growing foodie culture, paired with perpetual access to social media, has given new life to amateur food photography.” The rise of food photography evidently led to a study concluding that people are less happy with their meals after seeing that of another. This fact alone concludes the impact social media can have on a user. From the other side of a screen, Brigham Young University Professor Ran Elder says a consumer is “likely to not enjoy [food] as much as I would have, had I not looked at images.” He goes on to conclude, “showing [...] food is showing a little bit of [...] personality” (Teich). The visual representation of food is expressive and emotional, despite the software, algorithms and complex data files that make up social media.

While the decreased enjoyment of meals from Instagram’s influence negatively affects the user, there are positive ways for food to be expressed on this medium. According to Alison Caldwell, between 2008 and 2009, New York City’s food truck culture was reformed into more than simple vehicles peddling food. The new trend of serving food in this format bespeaks “business plan and graphic designers along with hip vendors, chic food, and savvy technology.” The technological aspect is attributed to the common use of Twitter’s micro blogging capabilities for internet marketing. The “characteristics of internet communication, shared by tweeters, bloggers [are] more subjective, honest, and credible”. In the brief word allotment, food trucks convey “sincere enthusiasm in real time,” or it appears that way through the Tweeting medium. Thomas DeGeest, owner of New York City favorite Wafels & Dinges Truck, says that his

company adopted Twitter because it was an easy method of communicating their location to customers. However, he has realized that through Twitter he can “shape a brand and communicate a spirit,” noting this realization as a “very emotional experience” (Caldwell).

### *Food and Media in History*

Food has long been seen as “mere sustenance.” Plato once remarked, “Now the first and greatest of necessities is food, which is the condition of life and existence.” (Greene et al). In Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat’s *History of Food*, she notes that since the beginning of the Tertiary period, a “tree-like dwelling” realized a “chain of sensations: the stimulus of hunger, the excitement of gathering food, the satisfaction of appetite.” As time elapsed, newly evolved *Homo sapiens* scatter across the globe. Civilization organizes, creating the idea, amongst others, of “cookery: the intentional preparation of foods” (Toussaint-Samat). This eating for more than a biological purpose immediately becomes an initial factor in the concept of culture. The phrase “tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” is apparent, from the “lotus-eaters in the tale of Odysseys,” to the Imperial roasted ducks of the Han Dynasty (Oxford) (Chinese Imperial Cuisines). The human has historically strived to make food taste good. As far back as 12,000 years ago, humans periled swarming bees for sweet honey. The sweet syrup indicated much more than taste, as Zeus was fed honey as a child, indicating that food can be a status symbol (Toussaint-Samat). At all points of history, humanity has made great advancements in cooking for the pleasure that food seeks, rather than the biological need. The earliest hunters and gatherers collected aromatics for flavoring, and as time

advanced hunting became a way of life. The idea of “cookery” continues to develop, defining cultures along the way.

Today, the concept of “food communications” is slowly gaining acknowledgement by scholars, and can be recognized as a genre of literature. Food communication, in the sense of this study, defines any communication - print, film, television, or online - that pertains to food.

Returning to the beginning of the American Revolution, food communications can be traced through the advancement of communication itself. Printer-pressed cooking formulas are the first evidence of food communications in America. Recipes and serving suggestions had been recorded and passed around as manuals for years before, but in 1742, Eliza Smith’s cookbook, *The Compleat Housewife; or, Accomplish’d Gentlewoman’s Companion*, became the first cookbook in America. Her book was later published in Boston, New York and Philadelphia, along with other British recipe publications. No cookbooks had been written to American tastes at this point yet, and would not until 1796. Twenty years after the American Revolution, Amelia Simmons published the descriptively titled *American Cookery; or, The Art of Dressing Viands, Fish, Poultry, and Vegetables, and the Best Modes of Making Pastes, Puffs, Pies, Tarts, Puddings, Custards, and Preserves, and All Kinds of Cakes, from the Imperial Plumb to Plain Cake, Adapted to this Country, and All Grades of Life*. While scholars argue that most of Simmons’ work is an adaptation of Susannah Carter’s *The Frugal Housewife; or Complete Woman Cook*, *American Cookery* documents the earliest recorded recipes for Indian slapjacks, and hoecake or johnnycake. Also included are recipes for corn, a plant

indigenous to America, as well as the suggestion that cranberry sauce accompany turkey, two more native food items (Oxford).

Transitioning to the advancement of pictures and text, the now defunct *Gourmet Magazine* was the first American magazine publication of its kind. Earle R. MacAusland began the food magazine sector at the start of World War II. *Gourmet* generated more than recipes; it also published notable essays, such as David Foster Wallace's work against "boiling lobsters to death." *Gourmet's* near seventy years of publication paved the way for hundreds of other food-inspired magazines (Oxford).

With the invention of the television came cooking shows, vital to looking at the way America communicated about food in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. While many attribute the first televised cooking show to Julia Child, there had been about twenty years of produced television before her "The French Chef" program. James Beard's show "I Love Food" aired in 1946, followed shortly after by 1947's "Kelvinator Kitchen," sponsored by Kelvinator Appliances. "Kelvinator Kitchen" is "emblematic" of the 1940's and 50's era of cooking. In 1993, the Providence Journal debuted The Television Food Network, the first cable network to focus solely on food. Shows like "Food News and Views" and "How to Boil Water", hosted by Emeril Lagasse stand out as popular programs that embody the dynamic change of communicating about food in America's culture (Collins).

### *Food and Activism in History*

American history has long been intertwined with food activism, utilizing a few communications methods mentioned previously. In the years since America's existence,

food has played a pivotal role in political and societal change. The American Revolution began in 1765, when Americans refused British parliamentary taxes. Until this point, the colonists consumed tea daily, influenced by the British culture. Colonists planned the Boston Tea Party of 1773, which turned the corner towards coffee consumption. It became a “patriotic duty to switch to coffee.” John Adams wrote to his wife “I must be weaned, and the sooner the better.” Furthermore, the War of 1812 solidified coffee as America’s drink, as the access to tea was temporarily cut off. During the Civil War, Union troops were allotted an annual thirty-six pounds of green coffee beans, which soldiers roasted over campfires. John Billings, a Massachusetts artillery man, recalled, “It was coffee at meals, between meals... and men going on guard or coming off guard drank it at all hours of the night.” (Oxford). Coffee’s symbolism still exists today. Approximately 83% of American adults consume the hot beverage, which generates thirty billion dollars in the United States alone (Passikoff).

The Quakers may have been less demonstrative but held beliefs that were just as strong and used food to communicate their point. Quakers and Abolitionists alike formed a quiet movement to refuse slave-made sugar and urged the British to do the same. In the late 1700’s, Baptist printer William Fox and his business partner Martha Gurney distributed a pamphlet. Together, the piece was copied 130,000 times with twenty-six editions, then another 120,000 editions in a later printing, surpassing Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* as the most printed pamphlet of that century. Fox theorized if every family used five fewer pounds of sugar a week, one slave could be saved a year (Holcomb). While the Emancipation Proclamation later set American slave labor free, the boycott itself displayed another example of citizens uniting through food, which led to the

increase in consumption of maple syrup, a token product of the Northeast (“History of Maple”). The peaceful, quiet protests of the Quakers contrasts with the uproar and calamity of the Boston Tea Party. These two instances, one aggressive, and the other more passive in nature, indicate that activism can come to fruition regardless of the approach.

From the rioting Boston Tea Party to the peaceful sugar protests of the 1800’s, the 20<sup>th</sup> century also had its share of food activism. In 1905, Upton Sinclair’s book, *The Jungle*, discussed the potential ailments of socialism in society, but its descriptions of Chicago’s meat factories were horrifying to the majority of its half million readers. The filthy conditions, spoiled meat, and tales of ravenous human devouring rats, placed Americans on high alert. *Doubleday*, a publishing company out of New York, received Sinclair’s story and urged President Theodore Roosevelt to investigate the hazardous conditions. Critics claimed Sinclair’s accusations to be false, to which he retaliated, “I have not invented the smallest detail.” Readers and smaller news firms demanded the truth, reaching out to media like Doubleday to attempt to uncover the truth. However, any undercover operations were quickly revealed, allowing ample time for factory owners to clean before any conclusions could be drawn. Finally in 1906, after heavy demand for the truth, a report published in *The New York Times* confirmed Sinclair’s accusations. That year, the Roosevelt Administration passed the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906 (Finger Kantor). The use of media vehicles in this case focuses on the empowered consumer, allowing their voices to reach the President, later fabricating into a major policy change. Depictions of food issues can be communicated to the public through a number of forms, from this use of media, to the artwork of The Great Depression.

The Great Depression began in 1929, and poverty immediately engulfed the lives of Americans. An influx of citizens required aid to feed their families. Some of the most poignant pictures from the Great Depression depict Americans waiting in line for bread outside of stores. An especially disquieting image captures hundreds, potentially thousands, waiting for rations in Times Square, New York City. A statue series of five men waiting in line for bread, entitled “Bread Line,” created by George Segal, is displayed at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC (“Hooverville Photos”). These images and artwork depict a trying time in American history, but infused by the utter hardship that cursed the nation. While Americans were able to persevere during one of the most trying times in the country’s history, the images of hunger are especially sorrowful.

The country continues to rally behind food. In 2003, a small restaurant in Beaufort, North Carolina, posted a sign stating, “Because of Cubbie’s support for our troops, we no longer serve French fries. We now serve freedom fries.” Also listed on the menu instead of traditional “French Dressing” was a substitute, “Liberty Dressing.” The origin of this disconnect to the French occurred after their opposition to America’s declaration of war on Iran. Soon, the call for Freedom Fries spanned across the nation and into the White House, where Congressmen were served the patriotic potatoes (Rawson). While the name change did not resonate with the majority of establishments, the effort to adjust the name of one of the nation’s most popular foods as a form of protest indicated the importance of food in American culture.

These occurrences reveal an often unnoticed conclusion. Food has served as a tool to gain attention and generate a discussion. Anytime food is brought into an issue, a

conversation combusts into something revolutionary, big or small. When the Americans called for freedom from Britain, they relied on tea to demonstrate it. The lack of food and the trauma of hunger are constantly depicted to illustrate the despair of the Great Depression. Food is universal and relatable.

There are ample explanations for why food is an integral part of society. Two particular theories include resistance to the hierarchy system and embracing culture. In LeBesco's piece on the popularity of Martha Stewart and Julia Child, she discusses how all their work from cookbooks, biographies and televised programming reflects a lavish lifestyle associated with the wealthy. Through these mediums, the consumers are given "an illusion of access that contradicts the reality of their economic and social position." The readers and viewers are "seduced less by recipes and more by the imagined status that food culture claims to confer." In this way, food acts as an escape, or "vehicles" for "an imagined class identity" (LeBesco). As the two personalities prepare French meals and throw lavish dinner parties, consumers are allowed to watch, enraptured by the lifestyle on the other side of the screen or page. In this theory, food is a gateway through which all consumers want to escape. Food communications, therefore, has grown in popularity because it reveals the overall unhappiness of the public with their respective social class status. Food's expanse into television, glossy printed books, and magazines represent such lifestyles. As time elapsed, the consumers saw increasing glimpses of the life they were not a part of, creating insecurities. Their imagination takes a conscious, yet unconscious role of placing themselves in these situations, consuming exquisite food, surrounded by friends around an eloquently decorated table. Food is a vehicle that



transports them because it is just “mere sustenance,” something familiar and necessary, but its presentation elevates them to an imaginary lifestyle.

The second theory involves the use of culture. According to Elspeth Probyn, cultural foods “hide the taste of racism,” implying that cultural foods are consumed to erase the ignorance America has created toward any minority group. She poses a question comparing what is more interesting, a white male preparing an “‘authentic’ Thai meal,” or “the alimentary racism that [...] naturally asserts what’s edible and what’s not ” (Probyn). Laura Lindenfeld’s work on critiquing food in film agrees but takes a lighter stance on the approach. Americans seek “culinary tourism” through films, and “serve as a platform for experiencing Otherness.” The 2000 film *What’s Cooking* focuses on four families of ethnic diversity all preparing meals for Thanksgiving. Lindenfeld concludes “food [is] a metaphor to bridge the four families.” Taking the film example into the larger realm of communication, food has the ability to introduce a foreigner to a new culture (Lindenfeld). While some hints of racism occur, as Probyn notes, the theory of bridging cultures through food can be seen as a positive advancement (Lindenfeld). The “mixing-pot” cliché of American culture itself denotes the use of food. This overworked phrase describes the diversity of the nation, using food as a commonality to represent the culture of America.

These lenses suggest that food’s role is significantly greater than nourishment. These examples lead to the conclusion that food is important to the American culture, as some of the most trying moments in history have food intertwined simultaneously into the event. Because food has been so crucial to American history and because it has been adapting to changes in communications, it makes sense that it would easily adapt to

social media. The medium has taken over the nation as a primary time consumer, and prominent method of communication. Since social media and food are staples in 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture, it is logical to discuss how the two are in tandem impacting society today.

Examining through a social media focus, perhaps food is not heavily discussed to escape from class perceptions or correction of cultural indifferences. Instead, the posts' intentions are to be inclusive of sharing a certain feeling of warmth and comfort. This sensation is instinctual; almost all celebrations involve food or meals. Users post the experience online to their networks, regardless if the online relationship is one of Gladwell's "strong ties" or "weak ties." Social media is about sharing, uniting, and communicating as one, which has led to its success as a tool for social media activism.

When a food related issue occurs, an overwhelming number of retweets, shares, or opinionated posts are symptomatic of a popular topic online. Headlining health concerns or innovations and horrific publicity stumbles are periodically lost in the food conversation. Food activism has become overwhelmingly popular because food communication matters to Americans. The popularity of food on social media combined with an issue with potential health risks generates dynamic content that generates more "buzz" than non-food issues of equal importance.

### **Chapter Five: Case Analysis: The Power of Food on Social Media**

To confirm my theory about how social media and food communication are connected, I examine several case studies. To demonstrate that connecting food to an issue creates buzz online, I will compare the social media impact of two issues related to

a similar topic, one food-related news story, and the other [non food-related](#). These issues are:

Heart health

Food contamination

Attitudes of same sex marriage

### *Introduction*

As established previously, food has always been a medium of activism in American History. From the use of tea for political change in Boston, to sculptures of impoverished men waiting for bread during the great depression, food ignited the conversation by leveraging its psychological pull and popularity. Using social media to show pictures or share dining activity has already been studied, as multiple scholarly works have been published about this new method of communication. Something that isn't discussed much is the other food content users talk about online. This does not include the "#foodporn" pictures of oozing cheese, or where the most buzzworthy food truck is located for the day. Americans spend more time tweeting, sharing, and posting information about the latest changes in a fast-food menu, health scares, and food industry icons than anything else online. From five years ago until now, there are examples of a food-related story receiving more air time than non-food related topics of equal or more importance on the same subject.

To confirm these theories about how social media and food communication are connected, a series of case studies were created. A headlining event dealing with food will be compared to one from the same year about a similar issue. Twitter will be the medium of choice. With the 140-character microblogging format, the entire platform's

history can be searched for a keyword or phrase. An analytic tool will calculate how many times the word or phrase was mentioned that year. The platform Storify is an online mechanism that social media consumers can utilize to gather tweets and other social media content into categorical lists. If there are few lists on a certain topic on Storify, the topic was less often discussed online for a few reasons. First, the topic was not trending, so no users compiled tweets to make a Storify about the topic, and secondly, there was not enough content to compile into a list. While the quantities of Storify are not statistically reliable due to external factors like the search engine's algorithms for displaying results, they are used here for qualitative data purposes.

### *Hypothesis*

Food-related [activism](#) issues are and have been discussed online more than non-food related [activism](#), which is attributed to food's universal appeal.

### *Methodology*

The food cases were [selected by analyzing central topics that pertained to several issues from a given year](#). Then news stories or investigations from the same year with similar subject matter were paired together. Searches were implemented on Storify, a social media site where users can create lists of tweets. If a case was highly buzzed about on social media, there are Storify articles to document and save the posts. [This produced qualitative results, as Storify does not display specific numbers. In addition, content that conveyed more meaning with emotional posts and attached video links indicates a greater intensity of the topic.](#)

Cases:

### **McDonald's Double Cheeseburger vs. The American Heart Association**

The recession of 2008 forced businesses to develop innovative ideas in order to keep their customers satisfied while covering their increasing costs. McDonald's, concerned about a Dollar Menu classic, the Double Cheeseburger, attempted to decrease costs. At a dollar, the Double Cheeseburger boasted two beef patties, two slices of cheese, and the classic tomato, lettuce, and ketchup fixings. Costs of the annual 260 million pounds of cheese used per year were rising, and Vice President of Marketing Greg Watson knew something had to happen in order to cut costs. Watson and the marketing department tested a number of ideas with focus groups, and realized that people will pay more for two slices of cheese in a cheeseburger, regardless of costs. This realization led McDonalds to increase the price of their Double Cheeseburger to \$1.19, and to introduce the McDouble, a double patty burger with one cheese slice to the Dollar Menu (Burbank). While there are no official reports confirming the amount of money McDonalds saved from this strategic business strategy, some blogs state that the restaurant could have saved about \$15,000 for each restaurant, calculating to about \$278,850,000 that year ("McDonald's Double Cheeseburger and the McDouble").

This astounding fact has made its way around the social media realm, from Facebook to Twitter ("The Ultimate Facts"; Twitter Search) and is still discussed today. McDonald's move occurred during an ongoing era where health concerns are a popular topic on all fronts from political to social. The amount of money the company was able to make by keeping unhealthy food affordable was upsetting to a few. By eliminating a slice of cheese, McDonalds continued the trend of generating value out of fast-food. While

McDonald's sacrificed a slice of cheese, it sponsored the debate about the sustainable success of fast-food. On the economics blog, "Freakonomics," Stephen Dubner quotes a blog reader stating that the McDouble "at 390 calories, 23g (Half a daily serving) of protein, 7% of daily fiber, 20% of daily calcium and iron, etc. is the cheapest, most nutritious and bountiful food that has ever existed in human history" (Dubner). The argument is supported with the nutrition content facts, however, New York Post writer Kyle Smith ignited more controversy by calling it the "Greatest Food In Human History" (Smith). Inherently, this ignited a conversation that pulled on the general health of America and the difficulty of maintaining healthy food. "People who eat this sort of stuff are more likely to have heart disease, diabetes, depression, and other health problems, feel more tired and be less productive at work and visit the doctor more often," writes *Huffington Post* Chief Financial Writer Mark Gongloff (Gongloff).

Online reactions placed significant blame on McDonald's for America's obesity epidemic. As seen below, users go beyond talking about the McDouble, and incorporate the burger into the national health crisis.



**Addison Patrick**  
@A\_Patrick5 Follow

You know why obesity is a problem? It costs 1 dollar for a mcdouble at mcdonalds and 6 bucks for a salad....



**Matthew Moore**  
@Flat\_Face\_Films Follow

Hooray for obesity! RT"@McDonalds: Got a single? Get a McDouble! RT if you are all about the #DollarMenu. [VIDEO]: [mcd.to/URA2sX](http://mcd.to/URA2sX)"



**Devin**  
@devolution36 Follow

5 people a year die from sharks...500000 die from obesity... You should be more scared of a #McDouble

In that same year, while Americans were holding fast food responsible for the ongoing obesity crisis, The American Heart Association changed the guidelines of how to

perform CPR. The new guidelines excluded the mouth-to-mouth portion, in which those performing the action on a victim in cardiac arrest would administer rescue breaths. They looked to make the process easier by having doctors inform the press of “two things [...], call 911 and push hard and fast on the middle of the person’s chest” (Associated Press). While they hoped to decrease the calamity that often occurs during an incident, 70% of Americans still say they would feel “helpless” during a cardiac emergency (CPR Statistics). This change is still something that was not as widely discussed on social media, or even known to the general public, despite attempts to publicize it. While this new system is slowly becoming common knowledge in the American public, the move to make the CPR process easier failed to generate publicity about the broader cause of how to prevent these situations from happening in general.

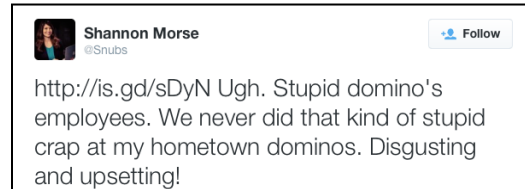
Both of these heart health issues occurred during 2008. The McDouble’s ability to remain at a low cost is still tweeted and posted about today. This situation was able to stimulate conversation more than the critical change in policy to “hands-only” CPR. Food’s involvement here created the conversation about fast food and the epidemic rise of obesity. The Search results on social media and Storify are almost non-existent for the non-food related issue of the change in CPR standards, and cannot compare to the story of the McDouble. McDonald’s was able to generate a conversation about the future of American health better than the American Heart Association. Storify tweets Similarly in another example, a fast-food company proved to be more popular than an overlooked potential health crisis.

### Domino's Vile Video vs. PharmaWater

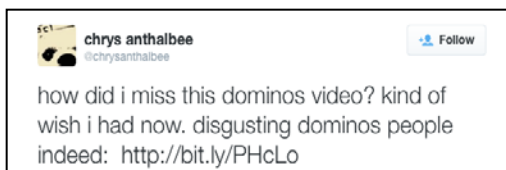
In 2009, one of the biggest names in the fast-food industry suffered brand damage by a mere two employees in Conover, North Carolina. A video of two Domino's Pizza workers was posted online featuring them preparing several sandwiches with nasal mucus and violating several other health codes. In just a few days, the video gathered two million likes, took over the Twitter world as a trending topic, and appeared as five of the twelve Google search results on the first page when "Dominos" was typed in. Domino's spokesman Tim McIntyre stated "we got blindsided by two idiots with a video camera and an awful idea. Even people who've been with us as loyal customers for 10, 15, 20 years, people are second-guessing their relationship with Domino's, and that's not fair." According to YouGov, a metric that surveys consumers about brands, Domino's ranking went from a positive to a negative (Clifford). This one act online was covered by all forms of media, and put the well-established brand at risk, just from one post on social media. Upon searching for this topic on Storify, there are multiple lists like "Dirty Domino's" and "Social Media Failure: Domino's" that showcase the video itself followed by disgusted and outraged posts. Upon a simple search of "Domino's video" on Storify, there are at least eleven results, one as recent as March 24, 2014. After the incident occurred, Domino's closed the entire facility for a thorough sanitation. Additionally, their hiring process was reevaluated at the executive level to "make sure that people like this don't make it into our stores," according to Rob Weisberg, VP of multimedia marketing at Domino's. Since then, Domino's has become largely active on social media, especially on their Twitter account that was created the day after the



incident. Domino's has since undergone a complete rebrand (Bryson York). As seen below, tweets establish the destruction of Domino's brand.



Additionally, comments were made about the overall health issues at Domino's, making some users think twice about choosing where to eat.



The infamous Domino's video was able to create a conversation about health and sanitation. The use of food, in this case an established brand, raised concerns about the cleanliness of what consumers were eating.

In that same year, while social media exploded due to vile sandwiches, the Associated Press announced its ongoing report, entitled PhamaWater, which uncovered that approximately 271 million pounds of pharmaceutical waste has been dumped into US water over the past twenty years. About 51 million Americans are exposed to this water on a regular basis, some in large areas such as Cleveland, Ohio and Dallas, Texas. Chemicals such as “antibiotics, anti-convulsants, mood stabilizers and sex hormones – have been found in American drinking water supplies.” While the EPA has taken measurements over this period of time, they do not think that drug manufacturers are the leading cause of this problem. The Associated Press believes the policies regarding measurements of water waste are on a “don't ask, don't tell” policy, stating that

consumers are the main contributors to the drug content. Some scientists estimate that the trace amounts of pharmaceutical content in drinking water will have serious implications on human health within several decades (Donn). However, upon searching for content on social media through Storify, two lists are found, leading to the conclusion that this topic had little or no content posted about it on social media.

The concern over a few Domino's employees caused brand ratings to drop for a major fast-food company, and users turned to social media to discuss their fear of food contamination. Yet, the possibility of serious implications of pharmaceutically infused water did not appear to be as popular of a topic. While these issues can be argued as appealing to the "gross factor" that stimulates chatter online about content that is found disgusting or vile, the eleven Storify articles based on Domino's represent its importance online compared to the two of the Pharmawater issue. The next example examines a non-food related topic, gay marriage, and provides an example of the discussion generated when it is related directly to food.

### **Chick-Fil-A and Barilla vs. Salvation Army**

In 2012 and 2013, there have been many controversies about negative attitudes toward same sex marriage. Every few months there appears to be a new controversy, as leaders in various parts of society discuss their personal opinions of the sensitive matter. In 2012, Chick-Fil-A CEO, Dan Cathy, spoke out against gay marriage on a radio show, stating "We're inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at him and say we know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage [...] I pray God's mercy on our generation that has such prideful, arrogant attitude that thinks we have the audacity to redefine what marriage is all about." Later, Cathy told the Baptist Press that he

is “guilty as charged” and “supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit.” In addition, on the day of the Supreme Court ruling regarding gay marriage, Cathy allegedly tweeted it was a “sad day for our nation” (Passy). All of these comments ignited a social media storm in 2012, as Storify is filled with at least twenty-eight lists documenting everything from outraged Twitter users, to social media activism of “kiss-ins,” where gay couples protested by occupying the restaurants while displaying affection (Passy).

In a similar example of a CEO causing a firestorm [due to](#) homophobic comments, Barilla CEO Guido Barilla told an Italian radio program that, “I would never make a spot with a homosexual family [...] I do not see it like they do.” This 2013 incident also sent the social media into a frenzy, from people posting pictures of Barilla pasta in their garbage can, to speaking out against the idea of a “traditional family” (Heller). Similarly to Chick-Fil-A, there is no shortage of lists on Storify showcasing the uproar over Barilla’s comment.

To compare both of these instances, focus is shifted to the Salvation Army, a not-for-profit four billion dollar company that would rank at 578 on the Fortune 1000 list. Outrage ignited when Salvation Army ceased homeless outreach programs in the San Francisco area. This reaction occurred after the city [introduced](#) requirements in 1998 that stated health benefits should be provided to same sex couples. In 2004, Salvation Army attempted to lobby for religious charitable organizations to be exempt from anti-discrimination laws (Tkaczyk). In 2012, an Australian spokesperson confirmed that “part of [their] belief system” was that gays deserved death” (“Andrew Craibe, Salvation Army Official, Implies Gays Should Be Put To Death Interview”).

Throughout 2012, a few activists turned to social media to call for a protest of Salvation Army, due to its views against gay marriage. But while a small number of blogs erupted, the response was not overwhelming. Salvation Army-related Storify posts are definitely not as abundant as those of Chick-Fil-A and Barilla, as only five emerged from the search. Ironically, some Salvation Army searches of Storify content brings up the other two food brands.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study proved my hypothesis to be true. Although some headlining stories seem to be of major importance, food-related issues garner more interest than non-food issues. In all of these cases, the reference of food easily stoked a large conversation online. The immense gap in number of Storify posts establishes that food is a tool that can trigger a conversation, while non-related issues are predominantly less popular on Twitter. Social media is easy to capture a user's attention, and allows ideas to spread with ease, faster than ever before.

As proven in several case studies, social media is unarguably a method of communication that should be taken seriously. When food is brought into the conversation, however, the number of users discussing the topic on social media exponentially increases. Food, therefore, serves as a catalyst, starting the conversation about gay rights or economic downturns because food is involved.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

All of these comparisons involve general qualitative data which indicates what issue generated the most online buzz, or lack thereof. However, nothing can compare to solid facts and numbers. There are hundreds, if not thousands of ways to analyze Twitter data. Software companies have invested time and money into software development that make qualitative and quantitative metrics that measure online conversation. A few of tools have grown a following within the last several years.

TweetDeck was invented in 2008 as a desktop application that supported multiple accounts at once. The interface displays an unlimited amount of columns, which can focus on a user's feed, a hashtag, or a list of followers. More than 3.5 million dollars have been invested in the application from outside investors. In 2011, Twitter purchased TweetDeck for forty million dollars, and altered the program slightly to rebuild the program in HTML 5, allowing the application to be used on the internet, rather than solely on a desktop application ("TweetDeck"). TweetDeck highlights several different features that have make it a solid choice for business owners, and those who work in the social media field. A constantly refreshing live feed of tweets allows a user to monitor their data instantaneously. Users can schedule posts through TweetDeck for multiple accounts. Also, words and users can be filtered out through the feeds to allow for only relevant information to be displayed ("TweetDeck About"). For example if Don McDonald tweets very frequently, but a user only wanted to see tweets about McDonald's, the food company, Don's tweets would be filtered out to report only information that the user wants to be displayed. As one of the oldest former third-party

analytics tools, millions rely on TweetDeck every day to monitor various areas of Twitter (Bilton).

Twitonomy is another tool that has generates statistics about a searched term or profile, pulling information from 9-10 days back. Twitonomy generates colorful graphs to visualize information for users. In addition to monitoring online conversation, users are able to analyze their own profiles, such as followers that are not followed back, or how tweets are spread across the platform. This platform goes more in depth than Tweetdeck as far as quantifying the data. Users can also export tweets and graphical data to such programs as Microsoft Excel. However, Twitonomy offers these features only to their “Twitonomy Premium” members, who pay a monthly price to gain access to these tools. While the cost may be insignificant to some companies, it is not a tool that many individual users will gain access to due to the financial investment involved (“Twitonomy Premium”).

Topsy was created in 2007, as a way to “measure the social web.” Topsy “can decipher how often a term is tweeted, find an influential person on a specific subject, or measure the exposure of an event or campaign” (Wakabayashi). In 2010, the start-up established a closer relationship with Twitter and began storing data from 2010, allowing for users to search for any term from that point forward. In 2013, Topsy announced in a press release that it made the entire history of Twitter available for search, from the very first Tweet by founder Jack Dorsey in 2006. While the data was available, free Topsy users could only access data from approximately 10 days back, while the paid “Topsy Pro” service was the only way to access this data. While the service does not have a set price, some sources say a ten-thousand dollar price tag should be expected. (McGuire).

On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, Apple purchased Topsy Labs, Inc. for 200 million dollars.

Apple's acquisition surprised many, and both parties were secretive regarding details of their plan. Some analysts thought Apple sought better monitoring of social media to predict which products or services would be best received. Advertisements are now run on Apple's own internet radio, "iTunes Radio," and the integration of iAds into more of their products seems like a viable answer (Wakabayashi).

Along with Topsy come other sites, including Gnit and DataSift. These two small start-ups are considered Topsy's competitors, but do not offer the same services as far as interactive and user-friendly screens. Gnit, for example, processes raw data before exporting it to another company's analytics tools. Gnit works directly with Twitter to receive raw code data before selling it to another company that analyzes it. Similar to Topsy, however, both have monthly costs that are at least a thousand dollars a month. Some accounts even amount to five to ten thousand a month for a service that includes all tools and analytics ("DataSift: Pricing").

These small data company startups have taken control of the marketplace today. Their ability to provide analytics of social media gives them power. Corporate companies paying for access. Yet, social media has been discussed as the people's tool, uniting activists for boycotts, law changes, and revolutions, connecting them together. Social media activists have done this, and more, but all without access to see the global, macro, "big picture" that is the entire realm of social media. Access is easy to gain, but only on what is being talked about at that second. Information from an hour ago, however, requires time and often times an hour of scrolling. Looking at a day before might be more challenging, and data from a week previous would need to be purchased. The power to

purchase this kind of data lies in the hands of big businesses, who know the value of user generated social media content. Meanwhile, consumers have thought that social media's grassroots intentions were empowering and "little people" focused. Initially, this might have been the case. If users are allowed to see what is being discussed, what happens then?

Social media is about the consumer, being empowered through a communications method that has been flipped upside down. Yet, as an individual consumer and college student, I cannot gain access to data in order to confirm if my theory about food activism is correct. My point about food being an integral part of our culture cannot be confirmed through the best data. The frustration of this inequity is something that, perhaps, Americans have not realized yet. Perhaps we are all too caught up in the phenomena itself, how Egyptians organized themselves to create revolts, or how Oreos started a revolution in social media marketing. Once everyone has reflected upon these awe-inspiring occurrences, social media users can see one fact clearly; the medium is not about them.

Big businesses have been controlling this data for almost ten years now. In an article by Joseph Turow, he discusses how the airline, baking, and even supermarket industries have been selecting their customers, providing great service and deals to valuable ones, and spending less of their time with the opposite (Turow). And with powerful analytical tools in their hands, large businesses can see how their customers react to a product, or what they talk about, such as the suspected case with Apple and Topsy, to better improve their businesses. Consumers don't see it, but they have been



watched all along. And social media has allowed companies to get even closer, seeing what they are talking about and what matters to them.

Anyone can call themselves a “foodie,” or say American culture has become obsessed with eating. An analytics tool is not necessary to see how our internet acquaintances love to post about food and drink. Knowing how much Americans love food, or the underlying “why food” question cannot be answered right now. Hopefully, a user somewhere will realize that all the online voices are being funneled into a vacuum of analytics tools that promote the bigger entity, not the empowered individual tweeter. At this point, a new revolution can be formed, one that will allow the spirit of social media to be used in the way it was originally intended.

Perhaps Gladwell was right when he insisted that networks for activism could never exist online. His reasoning involves the “loose-tie phenomenon,” because it is incapable of anything powerful. He is partially correct here, since his theory that social media is incapable of true change is correct. However, his reasoning on why this exists is incorrect. Social media is not capable of producing change because it is being controlled by businesses, permitting the access to the entire realm of billions of tweets and posts. Gladwell’s claim that “social media are not [...] hierarchical organization” is not true. This is a hinderance to activism on social media, as the ability to monitor, track, and view what others online discuss is crucial. That kind of knowledge has a price, unlike the seemingly accessible and user-friendly social media platforms.

The utter importance of social media cannot be denied. Yet, the difficulty accessing mediums that analyze social media data raise an issue that has yet to be addressed. While some scholars and avid social media users alike discuss the frivolity of

social media, this is not the case. Social media is highly guarded and held by big businesses, which is ultimately indicative of the importance.

Contrary to the public's belief, social media is not a democratic medium. As the popularity of social media continues to grow exponentially, more data is created. This valuable information is continually withheld, accumulating into insights that are not readily available to the public. Perhaps activism should occur more on this subject. The power of social media is slipping away right before our eyes. Unfortunately, so is that basket of garlic fries that I was not able to Instagram yet.

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