

# Metadata Commons

## Tools for building effective food knowledge sharing small data repositories

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**Index Terms**—Component, formatting, style, styling, insert. (*key words*)

### I. INTRODUCTION: METADATA FOR CHARACTERIZING EVIDENCE FOR WHAT MAKES FOOD GOOD

The question “What makes food good?” lies at the center of contemporary agrifood activism--and also at the center of much antagonism in food politics, often a bellwether of broader sustainability knowledge politics. Intrigued by the challenge of supporting productive agonism amongst a wide range of often competing actors in the food system in the U.S. Upper Midwest (a region heavily identified with its breadbasket functions of “feeding the world”), and informed by instructional technology uses of knowledge systems for sustainability [1], we have developed a translational online catalogue of multiple food knowledges [2]. Starting with a wide range of over 100 collaborative research and documentation projects exploring community food issues, we have attempted to build orientation and translation frameworks in an online knowledge sharing platform that foregrounds users’ justifications for the utility and value of various food knowledges and modes of learning. From this start, we have extended invitations to a series of overlapping networks to support the sharing of stories in the context of food politics. The resulting FoodFieldGuides.com food-movement knowledge-sharing site provides a case study for exploring how different knowledge cultures work together, and what pedagogical and public research tools can support such collaborative learning.

Information, communication, and process tools play complementary roles in the collaborative processes involved in curating online repositories of community knowledge. The field of participatory planning of complex systems has contributed a range of tools for systemic understanding that can be combined with tools for communicative practice [2], a combination that helps scaffold an approach to the challenge of sharing food knowledge that has been built on a foundation of convention theory. Convention theory [3] has helped us negotiate practices for sharing metadata. We are eliciting and sharing

assessments of shared food knowledge that both assert the legitimacy of multiple perspectives--when people tell their own stories and make their own interpretations--and also provide supports for participants to practice negotiating different evaluative frameworks for what makes food good. Starting from an attempt to engage multiple communities in sharing the work of interpretation of a collection of food stories gathered around a 2000-person community meal, we explore some of the ways that convention theory has provided guidance for navigating epistemological boundaries and fostering a community of extended peer review.

### II. SHARING COMMUNITY FOOD MOVEMENT KNOWLEDGE ACROSS DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The Food Field Guides project explores mechanisms for encouraging users of a shared online knowledge base designed to support community organizing for transformation of food systems toward sustainability. The project attempts to share food movement knowledge across different perspectives. In our efforts to assemble and catalogue multiple kinds of food knowledge, we recognize that asserting public space for legitimizing marginalized experiences and discourses exacerbates their vulnerability to critique. Consequently, we have used Information and Communication Technology (ICT) methods that attempt to address the likelihood that the same power dynamics delegitimizing these voices in broader society will also delegitimize them in the knowledge sharing sites we develop.

In our attempt to account both for the systemic consensus of food practices as well as the many points of critique that actors level against each other and the food system [4], we’ve been inspired to approach many of the ideas set forward in Thévenot and Boltanski’s 2006 *On Justification* [3]. Unlike many sociologists and theorists of political economy who explore critique and consensus in large part by examining social practices and regimes of power organizing the food system more directly, Boltanski and Thévenot approach power relations in part via the moments in which people evaluate each others’ behaviors and claims. Specifically, they suggest that people invoke different regimes of logic (regimes de la grandeur) in different spheres of life that each demand their own types of justice. They focus on six that correspond to economic life, administrative life (governance), domestic life, transcen-

dental experience, and the general civic will. In addition to examining the general logic of these six regimes, Boltanski and Thévenot demonstrate that actors also seem to strategically deploy pieces of each in order to pursue their own interests. Hence, the process of establishing "equivalence" between events classified in normally separate spheres of life becomes a central strategy deployed by actors in debates about justice.

For us, this is a practical problem especially exemplified in its embedded tagging system, FoodWords, which was developed out of engagement with community justifications for *what makes food good*. We cannot make large claims based on our work so far that any consensus about or translational work regarding the question "What makes food good?" emerging here provides evidence for or will lead to a cultural change, or even a real change in the way individual users act in their daily life. Instead, our project steps back from the precipice of discursive action and reports on our asking our users to share and explicate what and how they know. Our purpose is understanding ICT tools can better support exploratory rapprochement between food movement positions that appear irreconcilable.

### Working together without unifying consensus

If people are attempting to work together (or in alliances), we need to be able to address the challenge of disparate understandings of what's happening and what should happen in ways that don't require a unified perspective. Recognizing that there are many different ways to value what's good about food, our project has been structured around a series of challenges facing food movement organizing, challenges that have become salient to our processes of trying to support knowledge exchange around food, in order to support people working to address problems together, even when they disagree or value different things. As an extension beyond the North American "alternative food movement," with its operational premise that oppositional "alternative" values may be widely shared outside a mainstream "conventional" food production system, scholarship and activism more broadly aligned with the more diverse platforms of "food justice" and "food sovereignty" seek to avoid subsuming situated food knowledges into a single oppositional framework. Instead, its advocates have called for the institutionalization of accountability for -- and responsiveness to -- what Chantal Mouffe calls an *agonistic pluralism* of critical perspectives [5][6]. Following Slocum and Cadieux's call for an approach to food justice that borrows from feminist, antiracist, and anti-colonial epistemologies [7][8], our work considers how food justice practitioners might possibly intervene in progressive food policies and programs without universalizing consensus about the desirability of outcomes at all social levels. We thereby posit one possible framework for sustaining productive dissonance within a social movement that too often fetishizes the harmonic "community" or "local" food system.

In doing so, we recognize that many excellent community-based research projects have helped to reveal the dominance of white middle class imaginaries manifested in the alternative food movement [9]. Our specific interests rest with the question of what happens to community knowledge after it arrives at the

public university, or at any institution conventionally empowered with the ability to legitimate expertise. Crucially, we note that legitimacy in academic circles is awarded most readily on the basis of publication in journals that, in turn, place public knowledge behind an access paywall. Particularly in food studies, we also note that knowledge legitimated within one discipline or department does not necessarily become salient throughout the whole of the university. Instead, we observe that much of food studies - like much of food activism - remains siloed within disciplinary circles, even despite the wave of interest in contemporary food politics that has swollen in recent years.

In response, we propose a formal process designed to embolden community food knowledges in a manner that improves their **discoverability**, **legibility**, and **legitimacy** within and beyond the epistemological networks in which they normally circulate.

#### A. Discoverability of Food Knowledges

We've been experimenting with ways to negotiate between different understandings in ways that can help people navigate each others' food knowledge. We find convention theory a useful tool for this, because it helps us think about how to approach existing conventions for naming, valuing, and acting on parts of food systems, and then to name these conventions in ways that are recognizable to people -- and, further, to support the development of practices that reach between existing conventions and negotiate working models of talking about food work that are mutually comprehensible across differences.

Inspired by the work of Thévenot and Boltanski [3], we view food justice as more than a matter of critical social science, insofar as critical enterprises often adopt projects inspired by political economy in order to identify sources of power and exploitation. Instead, we envision a *sociology (or broader social science) of criticism* that helps actors to identify existing conventions for naming, valuing, and acting on parts of food systems. Further, in the Food Field Guides project we have created one experimental structure designed to improve university capacity for preserving and curating polyphonic critical perspectives. Our work attends to the challenges of discoverability, legibility, and legitimacy each in turn through a digital publishing platform operating in conjunction with community based research projects, libraries, and public groups not directly affiliated with our own local public university, the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

Thinking particularly about the dual problems of paywall access and disciplinary regimes of knowledge production, the Food Field Guides project seeks to expand upon conventional storage and retrieval practices that help to determine where knowledge travels at the university and amongst the public. For its part, the university library employs a sophisticated metadata scheme designed to guide user paths of inquiry through a standard set of search terms: these include familiar criteria such as author, title, publication, copyright date, and subject in addition to an unrestricted "tag" vocabulary aggregated through user contributions. Ultimately, however, we observe that the

trajectory of artifacts in the library system remain anchored by the authority of institutional conventions and consensus, thereby limiting the visibility of critical perspectives.

To illustrate, we invite the reader to imagine one specific library artifact. Take, for example, a book: Julian Agyeman and Alison Hope Alkon's germinal collection *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* [9]. Published in 2011, Agyeman and Alkon's work represents the one of the first and most well-known efforts to bridge critical race and gender concepts with the study of alternative food systems, and it is one of the texts most frequently cited by scholars working to develop a food justice literature. Yet, its trajectory remains limited within a relatively small subset of knowledge regimes at the university and beyond.

We imagine several reasons why this might be so. One is the problem of spatial storage: like most large university libraries, the Minnesota library system actually consists of a network of several separate buildings, each containing texts divided by college, discipline, and subject. For an interdisciplinary item like *Cultivating Food Justice*, curation in one building may signify its value within an epistemological regime tied to disciplinary conventions. In fact, at the University of Minnesota library, *Cultivating Food Justice* is stored alongside texts in the Food, Agricultural and Natural Resources Sciences library, some five miles from those materials deemed conventionally valuable to social science department. We suggest that the spatial placement of *Cultivating Food Justice* contributes to its salience within the field of "food studies," but also erodes its visibility in the disciplines of sociology and geography.

Of course, digital library catalogues have made possible the listing of materials within an unlimited set of intersecting subject categories. *Cultivating Food Justice*, for its part, appears in the following subject paths:

- Food consumption -- United States
- Minorities -- Nutrition -- United States
- Poor -- Nutrition -- United States
- African American -- Nutrition
- Discrimination -- United States
- Social justice -- United States

In addition to this list, users may also suggest unrestricted "tags" signifying the item's value within any number of contexts. These user-submitted tags are aggregated and displayed in a list ordered by vote. To date, *Cultivating Food Justice* has been tagged just once each for:

- Food Justice (1)
- Geography (1)
- Agri-food studies (1)
- Sociology (1)

While we applaud these efforts to democratize the process of evaluating knowledge across conventional boundaries, we note that the current system anonymizes the metadata contributions of library users while providing scant opportunity for individuals to contest the summary logic of an aggregate

crowd. In short, we know nothing about the standpoints from which metadata contributors view the item in question. Following Boltanski and Thévenot, we consider the process of "qualifying subjects" to be an integral part of evaluation and critique: without accountability, we find it impossible to determine what perspectives are represented or marginalized in discourses of value.

Fortunately, faculty and students at the university engage almost constantly in the process of justifying provocative combinations of texts for the purpose of answering specific research questions. Embedded in countless syllabi, graduate student reading lists, and seminar blog posts are justifications of exactly this type. In its simplest form, then, we describe the Field Guides to Food project as an effort to capture this meta-content and store it in disaggregated form at the university library. There, we link curatorial choices to individual profiles in order to permit users to understand for whom and in what contexts a particular artifact appears valuable. We envision a framework in which these profiles are linked to blogs or other knowledge sharing sites maintained by faculty, staff, students, and other public collaborators, who map the relationship of texts to specific projects--and this basic framework describes the aspiration of our broader project, as well, connecting the justifications for their creation and use to various knowledge artifact that we have gleaned from existing archives.

Improving the transparency of systems that store and curate knowledge is an important first step in improving the university's capacity for critical perspectives. A structural improvement such as the Food Field Guides empowers library users to see that the endorsement of knowledge by a *part* of the university does not necessarily imply its endorsement by the university in *whole*. Instead, it transforms the university into a site of contested knowledge capable of accommodating multiple and sometimes contradictory regimes of justification. Further, while we cannot bring whole texts like *Cultivating Food Justice* out from behind publisher paywalls, we do propose that the introduction of blogging platforms may help introduce users to its central concepts and perceived relationships with other content--and parallel projects like [Critical Commons](#) provide methods for making fair use claims on specific content for which analysis or explication of use has been provided. In this way, we understand the qualifications of individual curators and their justifications for sharing learning materials as crucial parts of improving the discoverability of artifacts across conventional disciplinary contexts and other silos separating knowledge domains.

### *B. Legibility of Food Knowledges*

The Food Field Guide project using the Scalar platform, a modular model for sharing media-rich knowledge -- really, a metadatabase, which we have used to attempt to make community-university collaborative knowledge about food and feeding more discoverable, and also more legible. Starting with an extensive intervention in the way public intellectuals talk about *feeding* (shifting from industry-derived justifications for productivism to more critical frameworks for exploring how people ARE feeding each other), a reading and research collaborative at the University of Minnesota and several nearby edu-

cational institutions surveyed agrifood projects that had involved both community and university researchers, and focused on knowledge likely to have ended up in binders shelved in not-publicly-accessible offices, defunct websites, or confusing databases with obscure constrained search vocabularies. Addressing these discoverability challenges involved making different food knowledge legible beyond mere location: we also needed to figure out what kind of metadata, explanations, and justifications would be recognizable both to those who had contributed knowledge and those who would be looking for it.

Our project started with a series of projects that had been sponsored by university entities with significant investment in and identity-claims associated with public engagement:

- the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA, which sponsored 35 semester-long, community-driven local food projects over the five years during which this project was developed);
- the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS, an interdisciplinary center that hosted a symposium and faculty seminar in 2011-2012 on the topic of how we talk about “feeding the world,” and which had also archived over 50 agrifood talks, and through a collaboration with the television show *The Bat of Minerva*, over 50 additional long-form interviews, many with academics who had given the IAS talks, and additional interviews with community members, including two series specifically about agrifood systems—in the heart of the SW Minnesota cornbelt and in Austria);
- Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives and the Regional Partnerships for Sustainable Rural Development (two additional research and action entities that support considerable numbers of community-university agrifood projects); and
- the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA, a collaboration between the University and several locally headquartered agrifood entities, including the Land Stewardship Project, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, and the Minnesota Food Association), which, among other projects, holds a defunct website that exhaustively catalogued urban agriculture resources and actors in 2010.

In our project, which has been structured around recurring consultation with different knowledge communities who have contributed to and might wish to access all of the above knowledge resources, we recognize “legibility” as relating not only to clarity and discoverability, but also to translation and preservation of knowledges. Central questions related to legibility include:

- How might our project help the university to curate food knowledge without appropriating / changing it in some way?
- How does our project support Mouffian agonism rather than dialogic consensus?

By formally separating knowledge artifacts from work performed ON those artifacts (i.e. distinguishing data from metadata), we’re working to promote CURATION rather than

more hostile forms of criticism that seek to prove actors right or wrong (precisely because they fail to recognize multiple “regimes of justification”). Some of the features that appear to support this praxis supporting legibility include:

- Helping to keep contributions recognizable to their contributors, and to make it possible to track the work that’s done on knowledge artifacts (i.e. through intentional and well described versioning of documents -- while also avoiding being overwhelming in the process detail). This helps authors recognize different voices and also acknowledges and provokes tools to address the common violences and conversions that are done to shared knowledge in knowledge shaping domains.
- And addressing attention to questions of adequacy and fidelity: in order to help knowledge users see the context in which people have developed their perspectives, and to elicit enough explicit justification for the sharing of knowledge across different perspectives so that people can make more intentional decisions about how much context is adequate to reproduce the ideas they’re sharing with fidelity commensurate to their intentions.

### C. Legitimacy of Food Knowledges

In the space of the Food Field Guides project, we attempt to make it clear that:

- Different perspectives are welcome, and that they will be expected to provide explanations of how their analyses are supported and why they are legitimately warranted.
- Authorial voices may be polyvocal, and authority can come from different kinds of argument-making.
- Translation between perspectives is valuable, but is not reserved as a role for the intellectual authority of designated interlocutors.
- Compromise should not be synonymous with hegemony.

We operationalize these through a series of values statements with accompanying evaluative questions:

1. All people should have the chance to explore, shape, and tell their own food stories.

Are we engaging an adequate range of perspectives and types of knowledge?

Are we being adequately inclusive at all stages in our process, with opportunities for all participants to define problems and solutions -- as well as the system in question, including communication and process tools to be used?

2. People should be able to learn from each other, and negotiate and tell stories in relationship, in order to figure out how to modify and support stories and actions that improve our conditions.

How are we learning from each other? (What is surprising us about what we’re learning?)

How adequately are we generating useful information for and from all participants?

How are we able to put what we're learning into action as we go along?

3. Our explanations should relate our experiences to our social and environmental relationships, recognizing that different relationships will shape different environments and perspectives, and that part of the work of our stories is translating between these.

Are we considering the contexts of the systems in question and their relationships across scale?

Are we addressing conflicts among perspectives?

Following from the three principles above, the process of developing investigations of \*how people feed each other\* should address:

A. The need to reorient the question of “how do we feed the world” to “how are people feeding each other?,” with attention to what that reorientation makes possible and what is different between those investigations. This reorientation helps to integrate the natural and technical science approaches to feeding with popular approaches as well as approaches from the social science and humanities, and to address dissonances in different understandings of the challenges of food security.

The focus here is on what works to enable people to feed each other—as well as on providing people with ways to explore how orthodox explanations of food security work have come to be dominant. (A subsidiary focus is on collecting various ways that people set about exploring feeding on their own terms as a sort of collective exploratory curriculum, recognizing that assertions to deconstruct status quo explanations are unlikely to be as effective as more participatory investigation-based inquiry.)

B. The challenges of upscaling and downscaling knowledge practices as appropriate—challenges that are particularly salient in the context of understanding the Midwest in global context. Understanding the global flows that have shaped specific dynamics (the shape of the current food system in the midwest)—and the corollary ways that specific local events, relationships, and efforts have had global effects (the role of the midwest in the roll out of various green revolution technologies and relationships) is crucial for facilitating dialogue between people who focus on different scales of food activity. This dialogue across different scales is, in turn, crucial for building shared understandings of how we have come to the social arrangements in which we find ourselves and how we can improve these to address the challenges that face us.

Something that could really benefit from this practice of understanding the implications of moving across scale would be the development of usable public models of who has power over what value(s) in the food system, under what conditions. To use an interdisciplinary data-analysis technique as an example, different parts of the food system could be assigned different audio pitches for how much power over them is shared by the public, and that could be both very interesting to explore together and rewarding to enter information into, and to parse analytically, even for people who do not usually identify with such practices.

C. The centrality of people acting in relationship and in place. Exploring popular understandings of food involves re-centering the importance of popular knowledge, action, and

relationships that may be useful in building the mutual legitimacy of different domains of food knowledge production. In turn, this public emphasis involves a participatory, transformative, and performative scholarship that recognizes the process of exploratory learning in relationship as central to the purpose of research and teaching. Rigorous collective public development and analysis of knowledge involves a co-education process committed to communicative participation, accountability, transparency, solidarity, and equity.

Practical case studies seem crucial to this approach, as a domain for learning in relationship while doing—rather than trying to reconstruct learning processes only out of questioning past processes, etc.

Via this work, our project makes performative claims about the public facingness of public institutions. For example, for University libraries and archives, it makes subaltern claims on state-centered knowledge domains. And in the community-engaged research hubs (MISA / CURA / IAS), which are still within the center, it provides impetus to build network hubs beyond the center (how to make claims on the center for support without giving up “small data” power). This has several implications for the qualification of legitimacy:

- It de-automatizes the University's stamp as legitimizer (taking away automatic imprimatur of legitimacy); using convention theory to show the heterogeneity of the university, this approach gives more access to specific modes of legitimacy justification via the foregrounding of regimes of justification,
- It provides more access to traditionally non-legitimate feeling actors to make justification claims, a particularly important characteristic of this approach in the domain of food knowledge, where everyone knows things, but many people's knowledge has been constructed as unqualified.
- And answering obvious challenges of such a complex problem, we are operationalizing the use of this platform by training students (in service learning contexts and paid internships) to act as community process supporters. These students carry out the otherwise often-overlooked tasks of adding metadata. We add this competency to basic political storytelling training (in a series of existing programs), adding critical coding skills and metadata handling as part of a platform for public food knowledge engagement.

### III. METADATA FOR FOOD POLITICS: BEYOND WHEN EXPERTS RULED FOOD (FUTURE DIRECTIONS / HYPOTHESES)

Building on the literatures of participatory planning of complex systems, community food systems, and conventions theory, we have described the development of a metadata standard for food politics that moves beyond existing categorical descriptions of food attributes to embed possibilities for action into the archiving and curated sharing of systemic food knowledge. The knowledge artifacts shared are coded with an emergent metadata structure designed collaboratively to sketch the relational social space of food system reform, and to enable communities engaged in transformational food system work to

identify models, allies, and examples relevant to their experiences and goals. Distributed knowledge tools enable communities promoting alternative, socioecological models of food provisioning to challenge the many social injustices and externalities of status quo agrifood systems. These systems retain hegemony in significant part through their monopolistic control of (perceived) expertise and of systemic information (for example, as agrifood surveillance has been significantly privatized in the era of Big Data, food safety regulations favor capital-intensive processor, and capital flights incentivize foreign direct investment models of farmland stewardship).

There are many ways to think about legitimization of different kinds of food knowledge, but given the current status of food knowledge as significantly captured by experts (especially in Minnesota, the U.S. headquarters of food commodity trading and food processing), we highlight a few related centrally to Convention Theory. We argue that our structure offers greater transparency into the qualifications of experts. Unlike aggregated metadata fields (like democratized "tags"), Scalar blogs invite the user to question what stakes a particular person might have in a topic. At the same time, our emphasis on context / regimes of justification makes it difficult for users to write-off perspectives they might disagree with (hopefully, they say "oh, this person is just operating within a different logic scheme"). Translating across different goals makes it more possible for people to talk about current conditions from different standpoints, and to figure out where their actions might correspond, where they might form alliances, offer mutual support or engage in collaborative learning.

We address the messy domain of radically open collaborative learning with normative and also gestural instructions. In building a platform to support collaboration without consensus, we work with the operational goal of understanding other peoples' understanding. This has implications for planning and policy, food procurement across a range of scales, and pedagogy of both public and scholarly learning. Communities promoting green decision making and development in the domain of sustainable agriculture and community food security face both the daunting scale of the status quo ICT infrastructure and also significant literacy building challenges. Over the past decade of community organizing, the Food Field Guides project has been designed to encourage users to equalize power over food knowledge, to vouch for each others' qualifications and credibility as curators and knowledge creators, and to foreground metadata about the utility, legitimacy, and relational accountability of shared knowledge sources.

We hope this project also helps people legitimate each others' knowledge cultures and better share intellectual authority in regard to experiential expertises. This would be in stark contrast to the existing status quo, which is characterized by expert capture of intellectual authority and frequent loss of painstakingly gained momentum toward addressable goals. Supporting platforms where people can share learning without ceding intellectual authority (e.g. to extractive research), we hope to support food movement work by translating across different goals (involving different understandings of position in relation to

food system) and making it more possible for people to talk about the forces and relations that have led to the current conditions, since these are the conditions that usually need to be engaged in order to move toward either supportive or transformational goals.

#### IV. COPYRIGHT FORMS

[to follow]

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