#10

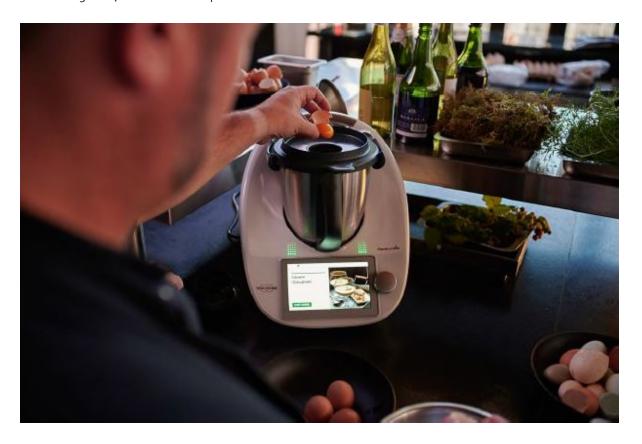# Digital eating: #FoodTech and the changing values of eating

Author
Tanja Schneider
University of St Gallen, Switzerland

www.oxfordobesity.org

About two years ago I was invited to dinner at a private home, where for the first time I encountered a Thermomix in action. Designed by Vorwerk, Thermomix is a kitchen appliance that, according to the manufacturer's website, "combines functions of more than twelve food appliances in one device and can weigh, mix, chop, mill, knead, blend, steam, cook, beat, precisely heat, stir and emulsify". In plain words, it is a device that prepares food, a full dinner even, if desired. On that occasion, I observed how this digital device was used to assist with preparing risotto, and to some extent I participated in feeding ingredients into the machine as requested on its digital display. While the device did the work of weighing, stirring, and cooking (with the help of us humans pouring in ingredients, taking them out again and then re-entering them on occasion) the proud owners informed me that the risotto made by the Thermomix tastes as good as, if not better, than home-made (that is, human-made) risotto, a difference I was curious to test. Admittedly, the risotto tasted good, but didn't one's judgement depend on one's own cooking skills, or what one compared the device's risotto to?

Some months later I organised an academic workshop on 'Remaking Families: Technologies, media and consumption', at the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland. The workshop addressed topics such as imagined families in food technology advertising, 'good mothering' as a prescription for obesity prevention in reality television, and how digital technologies (de)stabilise contemporary meanings of food and family. Researchers from a broad range of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, marketing, gender studies, organisation studies and philosophy attended, presented and discussed their and others' on-going research projects. After a day packed with great presentations, we went to dinner at a local restaurant. No Thermomix was used by the restaurant's chef for any of the prepared dishes, but for a group of about six of us the conversation turned to the qualities of domestic cooking with a Thermomix (with two proud owners of the device seated at the table). In the critical reflection spirit of the workshop, those of us who did not use Thermomix problematised the users' ravishing praise. Weren't they just reiterating the marketing spiel of the company?! Their answer was a resounding no. They suggested we would

have to test the device ourselves to see how good its performance was and the ease it brought to home cooking. The non-users weren't convinced by this answer. Wasn't this another form of marketing? It was as if our two Thermomix-using colleagues were repeating a marketing mantra: 'Test the device and if you are not happy, we will return your money'.

Fast forward a year, to Passau, Germany, a university town 200 km east of Munich, where I encountered a local food-focused magazine, 'Pasta! Passauer Stadtmagazin für Genusskultur', in the B&B where I stayed. The December issue was titled 'Merry Mix-Mas: Christmas with the Thermomix' (my translation). Surprised that a whole magazine issue was dedicated to this device, I devoured its pages and learned how the Thermomix is sold, the kinds of dishes one can prepare (including beer) and that the Thermomix provokes 'mixed feelings' (see pages 18ff).[i] The statement 'mixed feelings' in the Pasta! magazine aptly summarises the observations and discussions described in the introductory paragraphs of this opinion paper. When encountering the device or discussions and reportage about it, it became apparent that cooking with the Thermomix stimulated strong feelings – feelings of curiosity, hesitation and critique, but also conviction, perceived freedom and enjoyment.

One possible answer to these mixed feelings is the response that Thermomix users at the post-workshop conversation provided when stating that everyone had to see and test for themselves and thus to convince oneself of the benefits of using the device in one's kitchen on a regular basis. Beyond use or non-use, however, the uptake of digital kitchen appliances such as the Thermomix provokes new questions for anyone interested in considering the social and cultural implications of cooking with the device. In particular, social scientists and others studying food and its socio-cultural meanings and roles in digital times are likely to ask: Who cooks? What is cooking? Who is knowledgeable about ingredients, recipes and cooking processes? Who or what has the capacity to act at what point in the food preparation process?

Whereas some might fear 'machines' will take over our food knowledge and cooking skills and others look forward to gaining new freedoms while the 'machine' cooks, I speculate that we, that is, humans and machines, will continue cooking together or co-cooking as we have done for quite some time. Humans have been using a range of mechanical and electrical equipment and machines to prepare food for decades. What is interesting to observe and explain, however, is what changes with each subsequent 'new materiality of cooking' and what digital transformation of cooking and eating entails. So, what does this form of cooking tell us about changing values of food and eating?

With the Thermomix it is still the cook (is this still the correct term to use? Or do we have to talk about the user, the owner, the assistant?) who decides what will be cooked. However, the information on how a certain dish can be cooked is provided by the device or the recipes that come with it. The cook can alter or add ingredients to some extent, but there is a limit to alteration and the use of one's 'own' recipes. And as sociologist Monica Truninger has argued in her study of the kitchen appliance and its appropriation into households in Portugal, "the meal may perhaps be better analysed as the outcome of an orchestration of several practices in everyday life. In this vein, technologies may either help or disrupt such orchestration, depending on how they are incorporated into everyday life and appropriated by its users." (Truninger, 2016: 103).

The Thermomix is but one digital food technology that has been entering households (for quite some time by now). New foodtech technologies are becoming increasingly available, promising to make food shopping, cooking and eating easier, healthier, transparent, more sustainable, or faster (Schneider, 2018; Schneider et al., 2018). Examples include, but are not limited to, three-dimensional (3D) food printers that print, cook, and serve foods; the development of blockchain technology to trace food provenance; and the emergence of mobile apps that track

users' food consumption or caloric intake. Tech-focused food start-ups aiming to innovate "all the way from farm-to-fork", raised $16.9 billion in 2018 (AgFunder, 2019).

This development requires the reflexive and critical attention of social scientists, with the aim of understanding how digitalisation affects food, eating and eaters. Studying practices of 'digital eating' (e.g., Schneider and Eli, 2018) that is, food and eating practices enabled and maintained through mobile, sensor-based and digital technologies, anthropologist Karin Eli and I plan to shed light on how the emerging digital food economy becomes embodied in consumers' everyday lived experiences. As illustrated by my account of cooking and eating with the Thermomix and its owners at the start of this opinion piece, the digitalisation of food and eating begs the question: how does this development transform people's interactions with and about food and with others? And what new practices and values does it propel? As Ruth Schwartz Cohen (1983) and other historians and sociologists of domestic technology have illustrated vividly in their research, novel technologies "[r]ather than speeding up existing activities, often as not […] change the very nature and meaning of tasks and introduce novel practices." (see also Shove, 2003; Wajcman, 2015: 122)

Bibliography

AgFunder. 2019. AfFunder AgriFoodTech Investing Report 2018. San Francisco: AgFunder. Available: https://agfunder.com/research/agrifood-tech-investing-report-2018/.

Cowan, Ruth Schwartz (1983) *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave.* New York: Basic Books.

Schneider, Tanja (2018) Promising sustainable foods: Entrepreneurial visions of sustainable food futures. *In:* Phillipov, M and Kirkwood, K (eds) *Alternative Food Politics: From the Margins to the Mainstream.* London: Routledge, p.75-94.

Schneider, Tanja and Eli, Karin 2018. Digital eating: exploring the contours of platformed food. *Bi-Annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Science and Technology (EASST): MEETINGS - MAKING SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY TOGETHER.* University of Lancaster, United Kingdom.

Schneider, Tanja, Eli, Karin, Dolan, Catherine and Ulijaszek, Stanley (2018) Introduction: Digital food activism - Food transparency one byte/bite at a time? *In:* Schneider, T, Eli, K, Dolan, C and Ulijaszek, S (eds) *Digital Food Activism.* London: Routledge, p.1-24.

Shove, Elizabeth (2003) *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: the Social Organization of Normality.* Oxford: Berg.

Truninger, Monica (2016) Appropriating Bimby on the Internet: perspectives on technology-mediated meals by a virtual brand community. *In:* Cappellini, B, Marshall, D and Parsons, E (eds) *The Practices of the Meal: Food, families and the market place.* London: Routledge, p.92-106.

Wajcman, Judy (2015) *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism.* Chicago/London: Chicago University Press.

---

[i] Interestingly, in the following issue, the magazine's editors published a statement that they hadn't received any funding from the device's producer (p. 5). Apparently, many readers had wondered and expressed concern about that.