Social media has revolutionized the world we live in today. Computers, smart phones, and the Internet have all allowed people to share information more quickly. Social media sites such as YouTube and Twitter have also allowed people to connect in new ways. Many people specifically use social media sites to discuss the production, distribution, and consumption of food. In sharing information about food on the web, consumers are helping governments and food businesses better understand what customers are looking for in food products. This dissemination or democratization in food resources on the Internet, however, has also created problems for web users as misinformation about food is widely disseminated on the Internet. Many websites, in fact, will publish any information on food products without proper background checks. This paper will analyze the benefits and costs of distributing information about food through social media.

**FOOD RESOURCES ON THE INTERNET**

With the emergence of social media sites, information about foodways and food resources has rapidly spread and expanded. Websites such as Pinterest, Yelp, Youtube, and Twitter enable users from a variety of backgrounds and locations to share recipes, evaluate restaurants, publicize cooking videos, and post messages on food. Virtually anyone with access to a computer can actively participate in the social media movement surrounding food. Consumers, for instance, can now learn about restaurant reviews from customers on websites like Yelp or Urbanspoon rather than studying restaurant reviews in newspaper articles written by critics with
professional experience and knowledge. Many consumers are also more aware of social activist
groups devoted to food causes because of their presence on the web. With more websites
providing information about restaurant reviews, food production, and food activism, I argue that
people are generally more aware of the origins of their food.

Indeed, consumers can discover a great deal of information about food by using the Internet. A
c consumer can find the amount of calories in one’s food on the Internet, and whether or not the
ingredients in a particular food product are organic. The Internet also informs consumers on the
production of certain food products, and whether or not these products involved animal cruelty
or environmentally-harmful practices. Due to the growth of information about food on the web,
consumers can more easily learn about the makers and processes of the foods they eat.
Consumers can furthermore use social media to voice concerns about issues related to food and
organize efforts with other like-minded consumers to produce change in the world of food. The
growth of social media sites has thus made it easier for consumers to learn and discuss how food
is produced, prepared, distributed, and consumed.

**Social Media and Social Activism: Jamie Oliver and Pink Slime**

Social media has played a particularly critical role in increasing consumer involvement in the
realm of food. This is visible in the work of Jamie Oliver, a famous British chef and food
personality. In early April of 2011, Jamie Oliver’s television show *Food Revolution* aired an
episode on the topic of a popular meat product known casually as “pink slime.” In this episode,
Oliver described “pink slime” as a substance composed of the worst cuts of meat and treated
with ammonia to kill bacteria (Oliver). Using his television show and celebrity on the Food Network, Oliver quickly disseminated information about “pink slime” to the public. Oliver’s message was also spread by consumers on Twitter, YouTube, and other social media sites that too protested “pink slime.” After Oliver’s episode, the term “pink slime” was even a trending topic on Twitter, complete with its own hashtag, #PinkSlime. Although the original episode featuring Oliver’s discussion of “pink slime” was no longer available on his own website, clips of it were easily visible on YouTube and other sites that concerned members of the public uploaded to the Internet. Food activists on the web essentially kept the anti-“pink slime” movement trendy and relevant long after Jamie Oliver’s episode aired in April.

On December 5, 2012, more than a year after Oliver’s Food Revolution episode appeared on television, a Twitter account called FACTS (a popular and anonymous account that posts miscellaneous facts about a range of topics) tweeted “McDonald's hamburgers contain only 15% real beef while the other 85% is meat filler & pink slime cleansed with ammonia which causes cancer.” This tweet was re-tweeted 540 times the next day and continued to spread across social media sites (Facts). Such tweets continued to fuel the “anti-pink slime” movement that inspired public outrage. As a result of the public’s reaction to “pink slime,” schools, fast-food restaurants, and grocery stores around the country discontinued stocking the product, forcing the company which makes “pink slime,” Beef Products Inc., to shut down a few of its factories (Reilly). This example reveals how consumers using social media wield a tremendous amount of influence in spreading information about food.
PETA AND THE POWER OF YOUTUBE

PETA is another activist group that uses social media to mobilize food activists. PETA, which stands for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, created a YouTube account on February 7, 2008, and it has been active ever since. PETA also has its own YouTube channel with 44,768 subscribers and videos that have attracted more than 25 million views. PETA uses this channel to post videos that inform viewers about animal cruelty as well as the unethical practices exercised by certain food distributors and companies. For example, one video with narration by celebrity activist Emily Deschanel discusses the effects of consuming dairy products, and encourages viewers to replace the dairy in their diets with vegan foods that are free from abuses to cows on dairy farms (Emily Deschanel). This same video also addressed the alleged adverse health effects of dairy products, including the increased risk of Type 1 diabetes and ovarian, breast, or prostate cancer. Such YouTube videos have been useful for PETA because YouTube’s regulations regarding inappropriate video content are more liberal than regulations of other websites and television shows. PETA consequently can upload videos to YouTube that would otherwise be banned by more mainstream media outlets. For instance, many videos that show graphic content of animal cruelty would normally be deemed unsuitable for television viewers, but a concerned activist would have no trouble finding the videos on PETA’s YouTube site. PETA’s YouTube videos, for this reason, have promoted their cause in a way that no other medium could accomplish. PETA activists, therefore, have successfully used social media campaigns to publicize their cause, protest animal cruelty, and encourage viewers to make healthy and ethical changes to their diets.
Food truck activists in Chicago have also used social media to create social change in the arena of food. This is evident upon analyzing the recent history of the Illinois Food Truck Association. Based in Chicago, the Illinois Food Truck Association created a Facebook page on July 8, 2012, where it actively posted articles about the ongoing battle against food truck regulations in Chicago. The Illinois Food Truck Association currently protests a new set of rules stating that food trucks cannot operate within 200 feet of a restaurant, which makes it nearly impossible for these businesses to operate in most areas within Chicago (Linnekin). The Food Truck Association’s Facebook page offered information on what citizens can do to help (Illinois Food Truck Association). The Association also posted videos on YouTube to protest the unjust truck regulations in Chicago. The Institute for Justice, a libertarian public interest law firm, joined the Chicago food truck cause and made their own video that chronicled the plight of the Chicago food truck battles. This video appeared on YouTube, the Food Truck Association Facebook page, and the website for the Institute of Justice. This video ultimately encouraged citizens to take action and convince the city’s government to deregulate laws for food truck owners so that they could conduct business more easily in Chicago and operate in better locations within the city. The video received over 100,000 views in less than three weeks (Game of Thrones). It is clear that Facebook and YouTube were invaluable tools for the Institute for Justice and the Illinois Food Truck Association, helping them promote their cause quickly and effectively to a large audience.
The “Nutrition Nannies,” a food activist group spearheaded by Congressmen Steve King (R-Iowa) and Tim Huelskamp (R-Kansas), also benefited greatly from the use of social media. These congressmen started Nutrition Nannies in September 2012 in response to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010—an Act first penned by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and championed by Michelle Obama, the figurehead of the Let’s Move campaign which combats childhood obesity. As part of the Act and the USDA’s mission to encourage healthy habits among children, the USDA capped the number of calories in school lunches, reduced the portion sizes of school lunches, and removed “junk food” such as candy bars from schools (Ritz). Despite the good intentions of the USDA, their new proposed food regulations were met with harsh criticisms. Students and parents complained that school meals were now unsubstantial and did not contain enough calories to keep students satisfied and energetic throughout long school days filled with many extracurricular activities.

One of the USDA’s harshest critics was the “Nutrition Nannies,” who joined Facebook on September 14, 2012 to express discontent with the USDA regulations (Nutrition Nannies). In addition to discussing the failings of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, this website also encouraged other Facebook members in opposition to the Act to upload photos, post links, and submit comments on the website that were relevant to the cause. Consequently, one can find photographs on the Nutrition Nannies’ Facebook page of the unsubstantial lunches served to students in schools across the country. Visitors to the page can also click on links to petitions and articles protesting these regulations. One of the Nutrition Nannies’ Facebook posts directed
viewers to a YouTube video called “We Are Hungry,” a parody music video created by students in a Kansas school that showed starving students fighting over food and falling asleep during class as a result of the USDA’s new lunch regulations (We Are Hungry, YouTube.com). The video was widely viewed, receiving over a million hits in less than three months. The spoof also appeared on cable news networks including MSNBC and FOXNEWS, as well as Comedy Central’s The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, which sided with the plight of hungry students (Archive.Org). Only a week after the video was uploaded to YouTube, the “We Are Hungry” spoof appeared on mainstream news stations as well. It is evident that without social media, this creative video on food regulations would not have spread so quickly.

**Pink Slime Revisited**

While social media and the Internet are powerful resources that consumer activists have used to inspire social change, it has also in some cases endangered consumers’ rights and hampered the public’s education about food. One of the biggest dangers posed by the Internet is the publishing of misinformation on the web. The dissemination of misinformation has caused panic and anxiety for a number of consumers and businesses, as in the case of the “pink slime” incident. “Pink slime,” as has been discussed, was featured on Jamie Oliver’s show as a dangerous meat product. Oliver specifically described pink slime as an unsavory product doused in ammonia and water. In reality, “pink slime” is merely sprayed with a light mist of an ammonia and water mixture that the USDA has deemed entirely safe. Beef Products Inc., the producer of “pink slime,” thus declared that their product was misrepresented by Oliver and social media sites. In
a press conference on March 26, 2012, the company asserted that the media displayed “a gross misrepresentation of its product and process” (Avila).

In defense of its product, Beef Products Inc. uploaded a video to YouTube a few weeks prior to the press conference on March 8, 2012 showing verbal testimonies from food safety specialists at reputable establishments that countered claims declaring that “pink slime” was unsafe for consumption (Beef Products Inc.). Although the video uploaded by Beef Products Inc. presented more trustworthy and honest information about pink slime than Oliver’s show, the company’s video received only 15,000 views in the duration of several months. As a result, the spreading of misinformation about “pink slime” on the Internet played a vital role in killing the “pink slime” business. Web users too played a role in injuring the so-called pink slime business because they did little research to verify the real facts on how this product is made. Users of the web oftentimes interpret erroneous information on the Internet as valid without understanding how such information can be manipulated, exaggerated, or completely fabricated.

**GREENPEACE AND ACCOUNTABILITY ON THE INTERNET**

Greenpeace’s recent campaign against the candy company, Nestle, is another good example of how the Internet and social media can damage food companies and businesses. Greenpeace launched a campaign against Nestle, more specifically the Kit Kat bar, because the organization believed that the palm oil used in the production of this candy bar was acquired from suppliers indulging in practices that were harmful to rainforests and orangutans in parts of Indonesia. As part of this campaign, Greenpeace uploaded satirical videos against the Kit Kat bar that
immediately spread across social media sites, gaining enough momentum that Nestle surrendered to Greenpeace’s demands. One of the videos uploaded in March 2010 depicted an office employee “taking a break” with a Kit Kat bar that formed the bleeding fingers of an orangutan. The end of the clip showed views of rainforest devastation and the phrase “Give the orangutan a break” (Greenpeace-Kit Kat).

In the end, Nestle complied with Greenpeace’s requests, yet Greenpeace continued to ask followers to boycott the brand. The actions of Greenpeace were further problematic in that they used questionable statistics when campaigning against Nestle and their palm oil suppliers. For example, Greenpeace claimed that Indonesia had the fastest growing rate of deforestation of any well-forested country, while the UN Food and Agriculture Organization revealed that Indonesia had greatly reduced their deforestation rates and was no longer the leading country in deforestation (Caught Red-Handed). This is one of several statistics and claims that Greenpeace either fabricated or exaggerated. Greenpeace, in this way, used social media in an irresponsible manner. Although the end result was positive in that Nestle’s Kit Kat bar is now produced with more environmentally-friendly practices, Greenpeace mislead their followers during and after the Nestle campaign. Not only should companies and organizations be held accountable for publishing inaccurate information on the Internet, consumers should take more responsibility in certifying that the information posted on the Internet is in fact correct. It is clear that with these new forums for communication, major issues surrounding accountability and reliability emerge.
CONCLUSION

Social media in recent years has thus become an important vehicle for consumer activism. The ability to post information on the Internet allows people to share ideas, create organized communities, and mobilize consumers to produce change. The ease with which people can navigate social media has also encouraged more people to become consumer activists. Social media, as a result, is a powerful tool that has empowered consumers and improved businesses. The freedoms and autonomies that Internet users enjoy with social media, however, can also create panic and spread misinformation. Hopefully, in the future, consumers will be more discriminatory about what they read online and social media campaigners will be more accountable for what they produce online.
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