Transformations in the Perspective of Individual Learning and Communication

PhD 01a: Communication

From the Niche Cuisine to the Mainstream Kitchen?
A Communication Perspective on Drivers and Barriers in Popularizing Local Alternative Food Systems (Working Title)

Rationale

The work in this perspective focuses on the question of what communicative practices emerge from and around local alternative food systems and how communicative framings of sustainable food practices and different media channels and instruments are used in order to popularize local alternative food systems. It is informed by a socio-spatial and media ecology approach that explores social groups' interaction with food consumption infrastructures as well as their media exposure and usage on a defined local scale. The research interest is to understand how innovative food practices in local alternative food systems are addressed and framed in which communication settings, what effects arise from these figurations (e.g. with regard to social inclusion/exclusion), and how these insights can be used to inform more effective communication strategies supporting processes of transforming food systems and practices towards more sustainable ones.

Background / State of Research

Systems of food provision and patterns of food consumption are considered as a crucial issue for both regional and global sustainable development (Seyfang 2006; Bekin & Seyfang 2007). Consequently, progression towards regional food markets has moved into the focus of several scholarly and policy circles, see for example transition management (Loorbach 2010), urban living labs (Voytenko et al. 2010), and real-world laboratory research (De Flander et al. 2014) in sustainability science. Despite recent advancements and growing interest in this field, there is need for more research in particular with respect to generating context-specific knowledge of "regional needs and conditions" (Kneafsey 2010: 187), the transformation (Hinrichs 2014) and up-scaling (Mount 2012) of local and regional food systems. Communication plays a critical role in this. It refers to processes in which people share their representations of the social and natural world, which makes communication a social process in which common orientations are interchanged (Fischer et al. 2015). In recent years, scholars and policy-makers have paid increasing attention to the potential of communication to not only more effectively 'transmit' information or persuade people, but also as a focal lens and venue to explore how social practices are contested, negotiated and (re-)framed between different actors and social groups. Despite these recent advancements, there is still an immature understanding of how communication can be effectively utilized to enhance the mainstreaming of more sustainable consumption practices, in particular with regard to the transformation of food systems.

Approach and Research Design

This perspective uses a multi-step research approach. In a first step, a typology of social innovation practices is developed that systematizes variations of alternative local food systems (e.g. foodsharing, community supported agriculture, wasteless packaging stores, seasonal diets and cuisine) according to different aspects, e.g. innovation type (from incremental to radical), social groups involved, inclusion/exclusion criteria, media channels and communication formats/instruments employed or narratives and discursive figures used. This desk research further entails a systematic review of the literature on the

effectiveness and effects of different formats, instruments and messages as well as framings of alternative local food systems and variants in the academic literature in communication science. In a second step, cases of organized alternative local food practices (as variants of food systems) will be selected on a theoretical basis to be studied in a comparative exploratory case study. The focus here is on the dynamic interplay of how the in-group communicates to the public (inside-out) and how out-group communication infers with the narratives of self and the institutionalization and consolidation of practices (outside-in). Of particular interest here is to understand how the usage of different media channels and communication approaches bring about inclusive and exclusive tendencies (e.g. with regard to different social groups, milieus or lifestyle segments) that promote or hinder the broader implementation and dissemination of local alternative food systems and practices. Thirdly, and finally, an intervention study is piloted to explore how communication strategies can be (re-)designed to overcome barriers and shortcomings of and to enhance the transformative potential of local alternative food systems through effective communication measures.

Expected Results

The focus on communication conveyed in this work complements the perspective on individual and social learning. The synthesis process will explore the interconnectedness of learning in socio-ecological systems and provide new insights on the interdependencies of individual learning, social interaction and communicative contexts. Furthermore, the findings on communicative framings of alternative local food systems, their emergence and possible intervention points resulting from this perspective provide valuable reference points for other perspectives (e.g. transdisciplinarity, politics) on sustainability transformations in the field of food and nutrition.

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