

Embracing the Elephant

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THE EXPERIENCE OF THESE AUTHORS at the interface of food studies and the food industry suggests the risks of both engaging and *not* engaging in these sorts of collaborations. The risks of engaging are as clear to me viscerally, from my own experience working at the intersection of food studies and food science (a field very closely connected to the food industry), as they are in the pages of these reflections. Food studies scholars who wish to conduct scholarship at this intersection not only have to manage the pragmatic challenges of negotiating bureaucracies, “power geometries,” ethical issues, and asymmetrical expectations around timelines and “outputs” (Jackson, Introduction), but they also have to manage an equally daunting and consequential set of symbolic dangers. These have to do with “caricatured views,” “simplistic moral judgments” (Jackson, Introduction), and “tacit assumptions” (Evans) among food scholars about the food industry, those who work within it, and, by extension, those who would conduct scholarly research in close proximity to or in partnership with it. Drawing on what they have learned through their experiences, the authors provide on the one hand a set of pragmatic insights that will be useful for food studies scholars who may be called, for one reason or another, to these outer reaches of the field. On the other hand, they challenge us to make those symbolic dangers a sustained focus of our critical reflection.

The food studies researcher who engages at this intersection clearly has to overcome suspicion and misunderstandings on the part of industry collaborators, but I want to highlight the challenge issued by these authors that has to do with how we handle our own suspicion and mistrust, and whether or not we are willing to think critically about the ways in which the perceived taint of engaging with the food industry inhibits our ability to ask and answer many of the questions—about the sustainability, ethics, and future of the food system, for example—that are at the center of our field. These interactions are inevitably fraught with real ethical and pragmatic challenges that need to be carefully attended to with skill and ongoing reflection. But we should give as much

attention to our unexamined assumptions, negative biases, and foregone conclusions. As Evans argues, treating the large corporations that dominate the food system as legitimate objects of social scientific inquiry and cultural analysis, opening the space for “empirical encounters” with producers, and allowing our critical stance to open into intellectual curiosity rather than foreclose it has the potential to have an impact that is, in keeping with the outsized power of these actors within the food system, very significant.

While neoliberal pressures on academic researchers to seek funding sources and produce particular kinds of “impact” (Jackson, Introduction) are absolutely part of the picture (push factors), there may be new opportunities emerging at the food studies / food industry interface because of changes taking place within the food industry and, importantly, in its relationship with consumers (pull factors). Evans’s “empirical encounter” in the realm of food waste points to a potential shift in the dynamics of the relationship between business and civil society, while Truninger’s leads her to argue “that the greenwashing business context of the 1990s is insufficient to explain some of the corporate ethos found in twenty-first-century business operations.” Furthermore, she points out that “the growing strength of civil society pressure” is driving companies to take a new interest in “responding to external pressure to change perceived malpractice.”

Without being overly optimistic (or naïve) I think it is reasonable to suggest that new opportunities and imperatives for critical scholarship are created in this evolving scenario, which includes almost daily news stories about major producers responding to consumer pressures, and in which, feeling the heat of consumer criticism, companies are investing in trust building through various forms of “transparency,” from storytelling to supply chain accountability. Meanwhile the monolith we refer to as “the food industry” is itself evolving, as food tech startups fueled by venture capital (and driven by many of the same concerns that animate alternative food politics) “disrupt” established business practices. As the food industry doubles down to both assess its

practices and—importantly—tell its story, new opportunities may emerge for food studies scholars to make an impact, should they choose to, on an industry that is under pressure and in flux. Beyond impact in this sense, encounters with

“the other” can and should give rise to new sorts of critical, but also perhaps productively empathetic, research questions about how various sectors and pieces of the food industry work, and how they change. ☀

Industry Expert Reflections

Louise Bland

COMING FROM A RETAIL and product development background, I have found it both interesting and enlightening to read the essays. Research is paramount to successful product development, and I have been mostly fortunate to work with highly energetic academics and specialists. During past long-term strategic development projects on health and food science for Marks and Spencer in which I was directly involved, the relationships were clear, understood, and trusted, and the outcomes positive all around. Alternative and provocative thinking in innovation brought added depth and knowledge and contributed to more successful development strategies. Alongside these strategies, it has been critical to understand the mind and decisions of the customer for a successful and innovative approach to product launches. A project that worked well with social scientists was insight into consumer attitudes towards two very different diet ranges. One range focused on calorie control, whilst the other was calculated on high protein content and calories. The result was a very different and successful approach to the design and packaging of both ranges.

Peter Jackson suggests that future requirements for both academics and business should be mutual understanding, time management, a common language, trust, and unbiased funding. For a successful collaboration, such requirements would appear a most positive route.

The traditional methods of gaining insight through customer card data, discussed by David Evans, or short-term market research whether qualitative or quantitative is rather reactive, operational, and often another “me too.” Most retailers are searching for unique and new ideas. Engaging with social science academics encourages new knowledge and thinking. If true trust is developed in the relationship, the

benefits to all parties are positive and importantly noncompetitive. The access to the internal industry information required by academics and the new knowledge required by the food industry are trading tools to ensure that both parties benefit. Remaining relevant through accessing information and knowledge must also be factored into equal collaboration.

Based on my experience, knowledge or information external to the food company is often the more trusted. The benefit of independent judgment and academic insight is of considerable value and heavily weighted in decision making. Independence, integrity, and impartiality are strong levers for a business to trust in a collaborative approach, especially if confidential information is to be shared. From a commercial perspective, it is a powerful business approach.

The essay by Monica Truninger reflects very honestly the stakeholders and their mindset. Having an open mind—at a time when both parties may be feeling vulnerable due to unfamiliar ways of thinking—is a powerful approach to innovation. Trust and timing become the outstanding and important factors for success.

Projects that give the business credentials and pioneering recognition would appear from Food Stories, curated by Polly Russell, a positive approach. Food businesses are inevitably focused on the future but understanding and documenting their histories can contribute to articulating and reflecting on company values and culture. Additionally, developing a respectful relationship with an internal stakeholder who has organizational knowledge allows for greater access to company information. A mutual acknowledgement of differing remits and priorities as well as timings will facilitate positive interaction between academics and industry. ☀

The Knowledge Economy in Corporate Engagement

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THERE IS, UNDENIABLY, A pressing set of expectations from universities, academic funding bodies, and the corporate sector for researchers to “really understand” their research subjects and to then translate that understanding into the language of the multiple agendas set by the various parties invested in their research. Researchers in the social sciences and humanities are all too familiar with the manifold expectations of “quality” and the idea that research should have *impact* and be *useful*. As Marilyn Strathern (2006: 191) notes, researchers are quite adept at balancing the various, at times contrasting, commitments between “knowing through investigation (research) and the condition of asking what is to be done with that knowledge (management),” as “each gestures to a particular kind of work.” These conditions become built into ruling paradigms for certain kinds of activities that are expected of the researcher and their research.

In the contributions above, we see the ways in which knowledge management in food research involves being attentive to the disjunction between intellectual and corporate agendas for the production and application of knowledge. The papers here demonstrate the ways in which each researcher has oscillated between these objectives as they have been granted access to the very active underbellies of large corporations in the food industry. What each author has demonstrated is that the management of knowledge creation involves various strategic, intellectual, ethical, and practical interventions on behalf of the researcher throughout the life of a research project. The viability of research with large corporations is demonstrated and asserted here as each author makes explicit their own negotiations between the intellectual and the commercial applicability of their research.

In this knowledge economy, researchers are also very much managers of the production of knowledge (Strathern 2006) as they split their attention between different demands. At the same time, we see new kinds of expertise being required. On the one hand, the researcher systematically collects the most relevant data from a multiplicity of sources and effectively translates their knowledge into useful information.

On the other hand, we have corporate managers, selection committees of academic funding bodies, and impact case study criteria systematically selecting from that information the most useful, most relevant, most expert aspects of the knowledge we produce, and conversely determining what is less relevant and useful. It is at this moment when we feel the power geometry that determines our fate as relevant, funded, impactful researchers. And it is here where I would like to pick up on the question set out in Peter Jackson’s introduction to this volume where he asks, can researchers enter the field on more equal terms [with their commercial partners]? This really is the million-dollar question, as it speaks to the thorny methodological, ethical, and political issues that each paper has raised in this collection. How do we apprehend and influence the power geometry of corporate and academic interests?

The multifarious interests in a research project in which the researcher is engaged with commercial partners, a funding body, and an academic institution pull at the strings of the researcher’s bow to make very different kinds of music. When working with a corporate partner, the hoary question of how to identify the limits of one’s research in the corporate sector and who it is, exactly, establishing those limits suggests that identifying the power geometry between researcher and corporate partner is crucial. As we see in each of the contributions, this is not simply a question of avoiding “selling out” to our commercial partners; nor is it just a question of asserting how valuable our research data and knowledge production is as food researchers. It is about how to manage one’s research project, while moving between alternating positions of authority when engaging with our commercial partners. I would like to see this point taken further in discussion and debate. Perhaps we can do this by first thinking through what it is exactly that we are looking for when we call for equality in our engagements with the corporate sector. Equality of what? This question may well lead to discussions of ownership, authority, and expertise, and open up what we mean exactly when we speak

of the “integrity” of our research. Secondly, if equality in corporate research engagements were to be achieved in a given collaboration, what would it look like, what form would that equality take and could that form be used for further competition or influence? In other words, depending on the immediate objective in the research process, achieving equality may not necessarily be the problem; rather, I would suggest that in order to get to a sense of a fair, level playing field, what must be established and agreed upon in the first instance is that there will necessarily be an alternating authority (cf. Gregory 2014) between researcher and commercial partner.

The researcher is and always has been a manager of the knowledge they produce and well versed in alternating positions in the field. What we can see in the contributions above is just how flexible, adaptable, and impactful the food researchers here can be when working with/in large corporations in the food industry. ☀

REFERENCES

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Food Corporations and Collaborative Research

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THE PAPERS IN THIS collection represent an important challenge, and a departure from routine, for academic researchers who work on food. Anthropologists, in particular, are at a turning point: Do we continue our comfortable routine of analyzing *consumption* at the end of the food chain, or do we face the realities of global capitalism and examine the corporate enterprises that make that chain possible? Speaking as someone who has toiled in the fields of consumption for many decades, I believe it is time to pay close attention to the recent work of the geographers, sociologists, and historian-archivists who are trying new approaches to an old problem: How does one do corporate ethnography?

A revolution in anthropological methodology and focus is long overdue. By the 1990s and early 2000s, many of the leading journals of anthropology had become almost unreadable (and, frankly, repetitious) in their preoccupation with postmodern theory, literary technique, and disdain for empirical/quantitative research. Our undergraduate audiences suffered few delusions regarding the relevance of late twentieth-century anthropology; they voted with their feet

and found other pursuits that reflected their real-world interests.

The authors of these essays do not pretend that collaborative research is the only way to study food industries and industrial farming. If anything, they are cautious with their advice and open about the pitfalls of their own methodologies. Evans claims that collaboration can be “intellectually and morally rewarding,” but he rejects paid consultancies as a mode of research. Funding for his research, and other studies in this collection, derived from third-party institutions, such as the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (similar to, but not exactly paralleling, the Social Science Research Council and sections of the National Science Foundation in the United States). Readers can judge for themselves whether or not third-party funding absolves the authors from a “Faustian” engagement with corporations (Evans) or a “pact with the Devil” (Truninger). All research requires money and for academics it is, at bottom, their salaries as teachers that foot most of the bills—a reality that is often forgotten in the perennial pursuit of “outside” funds (which,

of course, are “inside” capitalism—no matter how much one sweetens the pill).

Jackson and Evans note that one of the main attractions of collaboration with corporate institutions is the prospect of gaining access to large-scale data sets. Evans’s work with Tesco (one of Britain’s leading grocery-store chains) is a case in point: the company collects data on the purchase practices of 17 million customers who use Tesco loyalty cards. A “Shopper Thoughts Panel” also gathers information on topics such as food waste and attitudes toward leftovers. As Evans notes, there is a long history of research on these issues: the environmental impact of food waste is a hot button that promises to become even more important in the near future (try a Google search of “food waste”; hundreds of articles will turn up).

Russell (a curator/archivist at the British Library) and Jackson (a geographer) were both involved in a large-scale study of poultry production and marketing by Marks and Spencer, a cornerstone of British consumer culture and an important innovator of ready-to-eat foods. Their interactions with M&S executives were often delicate and difficult, but this kind of research could never have been done from the-outside-looking-in, a characteristic of most sociological and anthropological studies of food corporations.

Jackson concludes his essay with the following challenge: “The question for food researchers . . . is not *whether* to engage with these commercial interests but *how* to engage with them on terms of relative equality.” His experience of working with various food companies should be required reading for all students contemplating a career in food studies. 