# FOOD AND SUSTAINABILITY



## COMMUNICATION, PR, AND THE CULTURE OF RESPONSIBILITY

**Editors: Martina Topić-Rutherford and Marija Geiger Zeman**

# Food and Sustainability

This new book, *Food and Sustainability: Communication, PR, and the Culture of Responsibility*, edited by Topić-Rutherford and Zeman, provides an innovative and comprehensive perspective to investigate the role of public relations and communication in shaping the culture of responsible and sustainable food consumption, an understudied area in public relations. The edition presents scholarly contributions from top scholars in the field of public relations on various topics related to sustainability and responsibility in the context of the global food system, ranging from food preparation, representation, consumption, and communication. More importantly, in an age crying out for responsible and sustainable communications and behaviours, chapters collected in this edition provide critical lenses across cultural, economic, social, and political boundaries to reflect the field's latest studies and practices in an interesting and engaging style that help scholars, educators, professionals, influencers, policy makers, students, and foodies grasp the complexities of the 'missing' culture of responsibility in food development and consumption.

—***Juan Meng*, University of Georgia, USA**

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Food and Sustainability: Communication, PR, and the Culture of Responsibility*. It's a collection of some very interesting and scientifically robust articles that offer new insights in the fields of communication, PR, and social responsibility. This edited volume is a compelling and timely contribution to the interdisciplinary study of food, sustainability, and communication. The book brings together a diverse range of academic perspectives, offering insightful analyses of food as a socio-cultural, political, and environmental issue. The articles it included delve into specific themes, such as the gendered dynamics of professional cooking, the neocolonial undertones in food television, the ethical challenges in food-related public relations campaigns, and many others. I believe that the curation of these articles is excellent. The book's biggest strength pertains to its ability to bridge theory and practice, making it relevant for both academics and practitioners. It is an excellent read and I highly recommend it for both researchers and practitioners.

—***Dr Ioannis Kostopoulos*, Liverpool John Moore University, UK**

# Food and Sustainability: Communication, PR, and the Culture of Responsibility

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# Introduction: Power of Sustainability and Promises of the Culture of Responsibility[1]

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## Abstract

The introductory chapter is organised around three basic areas: firstly, food has significant political and economic dimensions the model of integral sustainable development. Despite the global profitability of the food system, the challenges of food (in)security are important topics at the global and local levels. Secondly, we provide an overview of food and the practice of food preparation and consumption through socio-cultural lenses, with a special emphasis on the class and gender dimension, which includes feminist analyses but also analyses from the fields of men's studies and queer studies. Food is an important part of popular culture as well as different media landscapes. In addition to the social and cultural dimensions, sustainability issues, as well as food are visible in the media, but they are not sufficiently developed in the field of public relations. This edited volume contributes to knowledge from a communication and public relations perspective and tries to shed light on the important role of communication and public relations in fostering a culture of responsibility in food consumption and sustainability generally. This introduction situates the book in a wider sustainability debate, taking into consideration works produced in multiple fields, such as sociology, cultural studies, and policy changes. We see food

[1]The title is inspired by the title of Karen J. Warren's article 'The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism' (1990) (see also Geiger Zeman & Holy, 2014; Geiger Zeman & Holy, 2024).

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as communication and argue that food issues should be communicated whenever possible and that public relations has an important role in fostering a culture of responsibility at both societal and organisational levels.

*Keywords*: Food; consumption; socio-cultural perspective; media representation of food; culture of responsibility; public relations; communication; food as communication; organisational reputation; corporate social responsibility

## 1. Food as a Sustainability Matter

Issues and challenges of sustainability occupy a 'relevant place in society' warning of the dramatic consequences of destructive exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation (Neckel, 2017, p. 46). Already in the 18th century, economists and environmentalists pointed to the need to preserve natural resources, and in the 1960s, there were increasingly critical voices pointing to growing environmental problems (Topić & Lodorfos, 2021, p. 1). After the publication of the report *Our Common Future* (or *Brundtland Report*) (1987/1991), in which sustainable development was defined as development that 'seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future' (WCED, 1991, p. 40), the concept of sustainability was positioned as a global and local 'ideal for societal change' (Neckel, 2017, p. 46). However, the idea of sustainability is used in various social agendas in contradictory ways, for example in '"green economy" and "smart" growth programs' (Fücks, 2013, cited in Neckel, 2017, p. 47), the idea of sustainability stands out as 'a vital precondition for future economic growth' (Jänicke, 2012, cited in Neckel, 2017, p. 47) while in the degrowth movement or convivial economic growth is understood as 'a serious obstacle to sustainable development' (Neckel, 2017, p. 47). Despite numerous criticisms due to normativity, insufficient determination, and political instrumentalisation (Geiger Zeman & Zeman, 2010, p. 86), the idea of sustainability is ubiquitous and thematised in the academic community and beyond. In the beginning, sustainable development was mainly considered and questioned in relation to the economic domain (Kates et al., 2005). However, the '"monopoly" of economics in determining environmental issues' was abolished by the model of integral sustainability, which insists on an interactive and systematic approach that connects the social, economic, and environmental domains (Geiger Zeman & Zeman, 2010, p. 87; Maida, 2007, p. 1). Relying on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) according to *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015) as 'a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity' (p. 1), 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets were determined which are 'integrated and indivisible' and connect and balance 'the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental' (UN, 2015, p. 1; see also p. 6). Special emphasis is placed on inclusivity, empowerment, and achieving gender equality because 'the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues

to be denied its full human rights and opportunities' (UN, 2015, p. 6; see also Holy et al., 2021). Along with women's rights, the rights of all deprived, invisible, and vulnerable social groups are affirmed (UN, 2015, p. 7) – 'children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80 per cent live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants'.

Food security, nutrition, food production, and generally 'healthy and sustainable food future' (Nutrition Source, n.a.) play an important role in the context of sustainability issues and show how the social, economic, and environmental domains intersect. During the 20th century, the production and commodification of food increased, due to which food became 'one of the largest industries across the globe', a source of enormous profits but also a major source of environmental pollution (e.g. monocultural production, use of artificial fertilisers, etc.) (Leahy, 2009) and greenhouse gas emissions (Germov & Williams, 2009, p. 11; Myers et al., 2017). An important Sustainable Development Goal refers to 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture' (SDG2) and insists on recognising and applying an integral approach that connects 'supporting sustainable agriculture, empowering small farmers, promoting gender equality, ending rural poverty, ensuring healthy lifestyles, tackling climate change…' (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Sustainable Development, n.a.; see also UN Sustainable Development Goals/Zero Hunger, n.a.).

Increased demand for food began in the 1950s and has grown continuously, and estimates indicate that this growth will continue. Myers et al. (2017, p. 260) point out that, unlike earlier periods, this growth is now accompanied by greater restrictions in the appropriation of new resources (e.g. water, land, etc.) in order to meet needs. The food industry (food system) is not reduced exclusively to food production but includes food distribution and consumption as well as related industries such as media, advertising, transport, health sector, etc. (Germov & Williams, 2009, pp. 11, 12). However, the dominant and environmentally unsustainable model of food production associated with global capitalism (Leahy, 2009) has not solved the issues of hunger and food security, which opens up space for finding efficient and quality alternatives. Leahy (2009) emphasises the importance of local food cultivation, 'ruralisation and suburban farming' (p. 69), and the gift economy, which affirms 'creativity and choice' (p. 71). Moore Lappé (2009) suggests a model that (1) frees political systems and systems in general from the control of wealth and profit and educates, also informs and trains citizens to participate in solving problems (pp. 38, 39); (2) food is a human right; therefore, it is necessary to create 'fair and efficient economies by ensuring that access to life's essentials' while supporting fair business (p. 38) and financial models aimed at empowering the poor (p. 43); (3) development of 'knowledge-intensive, ecologically sound agriculture by the ongoing learning of farmers who increase available food as they sustain eco-systems' (p. 38). Meta Robinson and Hartenfeld (2007) point out how local food cultivation cultivates communities and makes real steps towards sustainability.

In addition to food, an important issue in the discourse of sustainability is the water issue, which is due to water pollution, extreme droughts, floods, etc.,

globally intensified in recent years. Water issues are visible in the media and science as well as in governmental discourses (Schulz & Gros, 2024). However, there is still insufficient literature on the social aspects of water, and the lack of interdisciplinary dialogue is also evident (Schulz & Gros, 2024, p. 2). According to Schulz and Gros (2024, p. 10), it is not enough to investigate and understand the 'water crisis' only from the perspective of the natural sciences, but it is necessary to include approaches developed within the social sciences that conceptualise debates and research on water policies respecting different dimensions: '(national) state-configured power, economy with a focus on neoliberalism, the gender relation – or more precisely the water-relation of genders –, the convergence of racism and modern water ontology – particularly in the context of (post)colonialism and imperialism –, and the politics of water-related technologies' (Schulz & Gros, 2024, p. 10).

Water crisis and climate change are connected in 'complex ways', for example they can worsen water shortages but also increase/intensify 'water-related hazards' (UN Climate Action, n.a.; see also Hedegaard et al., 2020; Holy, 2020). According to Dietz et al. (2020, p. 135), climate change is 'one of the greatest ecological and social challenges of the twenty-first century' and is strongly related to sustainable development (Pachauri, 2008; UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2022). The topic of climate change was discussed as early as 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit and in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2022). Also, in the Sustainable Development Goal 13, the need to initiate 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impact' was highlighted (UN, 2015, p. 5; UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2022). Climate change will affect economies, policies, health, and ecosystems (Pachauri, 2008), as well as the availability of water, energy, and global food security and food production (UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2022). Myers et al. (2017, p. 270) point out that 'there are substantial uncertainties regarding the degree to which environmental conditions will change; the response of plants, animals, and farm labor; and potential adaptations to these changes' but despite all potential changes and challenges, preparation 'for a wide range of possible outcomes' is needed. Dietz et al. (2020, p. 135) emphasise the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue and sociological questioning of the impact of climate change at the macro level (communities/states/countries) (p. 137), meso level (groups, associations, and institutions) (p. 139), and micro level (everyday interactions/decisions), as well as the necessity of intersectional climate justice research (p. 141). The focus of meso-level research is corporations and climate change, more precisely the behaviour of corporations, their responses, and impacts on the climate, climate change, and society (Dietz et al., 2020, p. 139). Issues of sustainability, environmental challenges, and climate change issues are present in the public and media landscapes, and sustainable communication has taken a visible position on social media (Topić & Lodorfos, 2021, p. 5), which opens up space for discussion about the culture of responsibility and the role of PR in its formation and promotion. This is particularly relevant because food is also a socio-cultural issue.

## 2. Food Issues Through Socio-cultural Lenses

On the most basic level, food issues are primarily related to questions of survival, therefore, in the most general sense, food truly represents 'a basic human preoccupation' (Murcott, 2019, p. 2), just like the preoccupation of every living non-human being. Considering the unquestionable importance of food at the level of survival and daily living, food is still much more than nutrition and calories. Lupton (1996, p. 6) points out that food and the practices of its production, distribution, and consumption are 'always mediated through social relations'. If we position food issues in the context of social sciences and humanities, numerous material, symbolic, economic, political, social, and cultural aspects and dimensions of food open up and become evident. Lupton (1996) presents key theoretical perspectives interested in food and eating practices: (1) 'nutritional or sociobiological perspective' characterised by 'instrumental view' on food, eating, habits, and preferences in relation to body functioning (p. 6); (2) 'functional structuralist approaches' question food as an important part of social life and supporting structures (p. 8); (3) 'critical structuralist approaches' that introduce critical perspectives and the category of power as key in understanding food issues (p. 10); (4) 'poststructuralist approaches' based on analyses of meanings and discourses about food produced and reproduced on different sites (pp. 12, 13).

The most elementary contradictions related to food are the ones that position food within the nature-culture dualism. When thinking about food, Montanari (2006) points out two crucial things: (1) the culture-nature dualism 'is in large part fictitious' (p. 10); (2) the inaccuracy and haste of associating food with nature because people do not only consume what they find in nature but create their own food. Through the process of preparation and consumption, 'food becomes culture' and a significant part of human identity (Montanari, 2006, p. xi). This is visible in many ethnological and anthropological studies that question the significance of food in groups and for social dynamics, its symbolism, communication, and the development of culture in general, while sociological research looks at food in the context of social class, social stratification, work, and consumption (Clark Burnett & Ray, 2012; Ehlert, 2021). Murcott (2019) presents and analyses all the social and cultural opulence as well as the meaningful variety of food in different private and public, institutional, systemic, media, everyday, and professional contexts. Also, the importance of researching different forms of social inequalities and distinctions in access to healthy and nutritious food should be highlighted (Motta, 2021). Namely, food choices, food practices, and food habits are influenced by various (historical, economic, political, social, cultural, etc.) factors (Germov & Williams, 2009, p. 5).

Bourdieu's theoretical framework occupies an important place in the sociological analysis of food and eating issues (Sato et al., 2016). Bourdieu describes healthy lifestyles (which include a healthy diet) in the categories of class distinction and taste – 'high socioeconomic groups differentiate themselves from low socioeconomic groups by adopting healthy lifestyles' while on the other hand,

low socioeconomic groups distinguish themselves by practicing behaviours that result in a feeling of 'freedom from convention' (Pampel et al., 2010, cited in Kamphuis et al., 2015, p. 2). According to Bourdieu, taste develops through cultural capital, and it is significantly connected with economic capital (Kamphuis et al., 2015), which is also reflected in the sphere of food choices and food habits. In his influential work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1996), Bourdieu presented the results of quantitative research whose focus was on topics such as household consumption and food consumption, temporal cooking engagements, the gender division of household work, and the preferred delicacies of members of different professional groups (Sato et al., 2016). In that research, Bourdieu (1996, p. 175) established 'two taste categories': (1) 'the taste of necessity' characteristic of the working class, which prefers fattier, heavier food and more abundant meals; (2) 'the taste of luxury' associated with the dominant class that has more privileged access and prefers lighter and refined food (e.g. fruits, vegetables, fish, and the most expensive meat) (see Sato et al., 2016; Topić & Round, 2024). If food issues are viewed through intersectional lenses, the dramatic challenges of food insecurity and food poverty come into the focus of the analysis. Taylor and Loopstra (2016, p. 3) define food insecurity as 'limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways' while Morris (2022, p. 727) points out that it is an indicator 'of the more complex issue of food poverty, which captures the underlying economic, socio-legal, and political causes of hunger'. Inequalities in access to food are part of 'structural subordination that builds on and deepens pre-existing disparities along race and class lines' (Freeman, 2007, cited in Morris, 2022, p. 743). In addition to the class, ethnic, and racial aspects, food issues also intersect with the gender aspect, which has taken a visible place on the map of food research in recent decades and has taken an important and prominent place (Mauriello & Cottino, 2020).

Feminist approaches significantly influenced the development of this research area by unmasking 'gender hierarchy in food production, selection, choice, preparation, sale and consumption in various places and times' (Mauriello & Cottino, 2020, lines 9, 10). du Pontavice (n.a., passage 1, line 15) points out 'Food is a Feminist Issue' and highlights to numerous topics and challenges that point to complex and urgent relationships between women and food: malnutrition, food insecurity, and hunger in Asia and Africa, which rural women face in particular; different forms of gender inequality and discriminatory practices in the agricultural sector; invisibility and underrepresentation of women in top positions in the professional kitchen and restaurant sector; patriarchal traditions related to the preparation, serving, and consumption of food (e.g. women prepare meals and eat after men finish eating and leave the table) (see also Wolf, 2002); procuring food, preparing and serving meals, and cleaning up after meals are still considered women's domestic work (Jagoe et al., 2020); women are more exposed than men to the effects of dieting culture and unrealistic body standards that include restrictive diets and a disciplined attitude towards food (see Blackman, 2008; Bordo, 2003; Davis, 1995; Jovanovski, 2017; Lupton, 1996).

Analysing the different facets of gender and food, du Pontavice (n.a., passage 5, lines 1–4) concludes:

> Women have always faced disadvantages when it comes to food. From accessing it & securing it, eating it & working with it, to learning about it & consuming it. It is appalling that despite decades of resistance, all over the world, women still face inequalities regarding food.

Sociological research has shown changes in the gender distribution of household chores and the softening of strict traditional divisions between men's and women's chores in the household, which in turn indicates changes in: (1) household practices; (2) traditional discourses of the home, which is culturally coded as a primarily feminine space; (3) changes in masculine identities under the influence of (1) and (2) (Meah, 2014). In addition to the gender aspects of domestic food work, the focus of studies of masculinity and food are topics related to male food practices, dietary regimes, and food preferences that play a role in gender identification processes (Fidolini, 2021), gender self-representation (Unsain et al., 2020) in heterosexual and gay men. Gender-based analyses show that through food practices and food choices, men conform to 'traditionalist tastes of manhood' and thus construct 'strong male identities and relationships' (Newcombe et al., 2012, p. 392). For example, in many cultures, the consumption of alcohol and meat is coded as masculine, while the consumption of fruits, vegetables, sweets, and light meals is attributed to feminine characteristics (Newcombe et al., 2012, p. 392). Queer perspectives add a new dimension to food studies that includes critical questioning of gender binaries and heteronormative ideologies related to food, its preparation, and consumption (Ehrhardt, 2006).

King (2007, pp. 177, 178) by asking the seemingly simple question 'What does it mean to eat well?' points to the layered meanings of food because the answers to the question it raises can be multiple in a way that points to nutritional, aesthetic, cultural, political, economic, and moral aspects of food. According to King (2007, p. 178) 'eating creates relationships' that extend in different directions, for example towards ourselves, other people, and communities (ethnic, ancestral, cultural), specific localities, as well as wider (regional and/or global) contexts. These relationships also include relationships with non-human beings which, according to the ecofeminist position, in patriarchal culture result from multiple 'connections between male dominance and meat eating' which shows 'one aspect of male control' as well as 'the ways in which animals' oppression and women's oppression are linked together' (Adams, 2010, p. 25). Ecofeminist perspectives pointed out traditional gender roles/expectations/divisions related to food, its preparation, and consumption. Greenebaum and Dexter (2017, p. 1465) emphasise the increasing visibility of the topic 'that men use food as a means of subscribing to and reinforcing the norms, expectations, and behaviours of their gender'. This is also present in the media, where meat eating is symbolically associated with masculinity and the anthropocentric/androcentric idea of control and dominance over nature and non-human beings by men (Adams, 2010; see also Mycek, 2018).

Numerous advertisements continue to perpetuate popular cultural images and gender stereotypes about men as consumers of (red) meat and women as consumers of salads (Mycek, 2018), which shows the prevalence of the gender 'rigid regulatory frame' (Milani, 2015 cited in Brookes & Chałupnik, 2022, p. 2). However, masculinity and femininity are not homogenous categories but are intertwined with other important social and cultural categories (e.g. class, race, sexual orientation, age, etc.). Some masculinities are considered 'normative', such as hegemonic masculinity, which is understood as 'the currently most honored way of being a man' (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832) and is also associated with 'heavy food' such as red meat (Brookes & Chałupnik, 2022, p. 2; Lupton, 1996, p. 107). In this context, practicing veganism by men represents 'the transgression of the gender order' (Brookes & Chałupnik, 2022, p. 2) and 'challenging heteronormative masculinity' (Potts & Parry, 2010, p. 53). In addition to the fact that food and its consumption are gendered, the practices of meal preparation are also gendered. Unlike women, who in patriarchal culture are associated with the private world of the household and housework, men are presented as actors in the public domain (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). This traditional gendered pattern is also transferred to the world of cooking and meal preparation – women are responsible for the daily preparation of 'ordinary' meals, while men are associated mainly with the world of professional cooking or with cooking as an occasional 'fun leisure (and lifestyle) activity' (Andersson & Eriksson, 2022, p. 254; see Holy in this publication; see Geiger Zeman et al., in this publication).

Lebesco and Naccarato (2018, p. 1) point out that in recent decades food has become ubiquitous in (traditional and new) media and the global cultural landscape in general, referring to the *Time* magazine online photo gallery, which defines food as a 'popular culture'. 'Popular food culture' has important political, economic, social, and ideological influences that intertwine in different ways (Lebesco & Naccarato, 2018, p. 1). Lupton (2020, p. 1) points out that from religious writings to medical journals and television shows, media portrayals for centuries have played a significant role in creating and reproducing 'cultural meanings and knowledge associated with food'. In recent decades, the development of digital technology has opened up new spaces and created new opportunities for creating and sharing content that is an important part of 'food cultures' (Lupton, 2020, p. 1). According to Lupton (2020, p. 2), 'digital food cultures' include 'representations and practices related to food across a variety of digital media' (e.g. vlogs, blogs, apps, online discussion forums, social networks, etc.). The digital domain represents a stimulating landscape for the representation of different types of food, dietary practices, and diet styles. For example, social networks are significant environments for informing about veganism and popularising the vegan lifestyle (Kadel et al., 2024; see Krpan in this publication). However, veganism is often positioned on social networks within the discourse of health and wellness, which neutralises its social and political potential (Braun & Carruthers, 2020; Scott, 2020). Herring (2015, p. 3) points to significant political and social dimensions of food that 'express both overt political action and deeper structural elements of political economy, in societies of different scale,