Chapter 2
Using the Blogosphere to Promote Disputed Diets: The Swedish Low-Carb High-Fat Movement

Christopher Holmberg
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Widely influential low-carb high fat diet (LCHF) promoters have been using social media to marshal support when contesting the nutritional recommendations provided by the National Swedish Food Agency (NFA). Political events led to an increased public awareness of the LCHF diet, which in turn provided the advocates with vital opportunities to contest the established nutritional authorities. This study explored how three of the leading promoters transact their criticisms of nutrition authorities, and how they use social media for this purpose. A longitudinal thematic analysis of the diet promoters' social media presence demonstrates that they made full use of media convergence to form opinion and attain their goals. The LCHF promoters utilized a rhetorical arsenal based in science popularization to appeal to the public and social media allowed for the spread of anecdotal evidence of individual dieters. Interestingly, social media also facilitated the advocates to network their expertise and to start science initiatives evolving from merely anecdotal methods to conventional approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Dietary habits and food preferences bear political and sociocultural implications as our dietary practices are a part of who we are—individually, collectively, and even nationally (Cwiertka, 2006; Kaplan, 2012). The politicization of food concerns the consumption of food, as well as the production, inspection, regulation, and marketing. As cookbooks are chart toppers and cooking shows abundant, the level of public discourse about diets and health is more sophisticated than it was years ago; the public is more knowledgeable about food politics than ever (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Kaplan, 2012). One explanation for this is the pace and magnitude of information regarding food and diets and how they are transmitted in this connected day and age (Wansink, Tal, & Brumberg, 2014). The digital revolution

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has permanently reformed the way we approach food, and our food culture has become digitized. With the emergence of the interactive Web, or Web 2.0 (Freeman & Chapman, 2008), individuals can create and share user-generated content (UGC) in applications and platforms known as social media, e.g., Web logs (blogs), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube (Holmberg, Chaplin, Hillman, & Berg, 2016; Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015).

A specific feature of social media is the way it can attract advocates of certain ideals and stances, such as diets (Rousseau, 2012). These proponents have increasing influence as conventional expert knowledge regarding food and nutrition faces mounting criticism in a wide range of contexts (Närvänen, Kartastenpää, & Kuusela, 2013; Pellizzoni, 2003). Healthy eating is a continually salient topic in public discussions, for which the issues of knowledge and understanding are essential but commonly disputed. In the public domain, recourse to nutrition science is no guarantee of dietetic credibility. According to Shapin (2007), scientific claims need to be carefully constructed to appear as epistemically credible as possible in a cultural climate where various actors compete for their understanding of healthy eating to be recognized as the most convincing. What constitutes healthy eating is thus experiencing ongoing public debate, and this debate is increasingly taking place online. One arena where this has been noticed is in the ever-growing blogosphere (Bonetta, 2007). The disputes around online activists' pseudoscience trials of conventional and regulatory expertise are expected to become increasingly polarized and substantial over the next few years. Citizens' trust in institutions such as national health organizations is decreasing, due to amongst other things, heightened cultural awareness of the risks related to technological and scientific development (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2012). Hence, according to Thompson (2005), different peer groups and networks that criticize and offer alternatives to the official expert systems play a significant role in guiding consumers.

This chapter will focus on how three influential promoters of the low-carb high-fat (LCHF) diet— Dr. Dahlqvist, Diet Doctor and Fernholm—have utilized social media, such as blogs, as means to undermine the expert authority of the Swedish National Food Agency (NFA). These three promoters all possess certain scientific credentials but function as non-mainstream experts since they do not abide by the state-sanctioned dietary recommendations. Sweden has a long tradition of national nutrition policies, and the first recorded governmental dietary guidelines were set in Sweden, Finland, and Norway in 1968 (Kjaernes, 2003; Lang & Heasman, 2004). The three LCHF promoters have challenged the established nutritional community through social media by using science popularization as an instrument against established scientists (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012), all while gaining international attention (Mann & Nye, 2009).

Disputed Low-Carbohydrate Diets

Low-carbohydrate diets have moved through stages of popularity since the nineteenth century (cf. Banting, 1863), with increases in the late 1920s and 1970s (cf. Atkins, 1972; Lieb, 1929). Of late, low-carbohydrate diets arose in popularity in English-speaking high-income countries and the Nordic countries, during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Knight, 2011). These food regimes consist of diets such as the South Beach Diet and the Montignac method (Agatston, 2003), but the best-known low-carbohydrate diet is probably the Atkins diet, proposed by the American cardiologist Robert Atkins (1972). Dismissing traditional dietary recommendations, the Atkins diet asks dieters to lose weight by avoiding carbohydrates while continuing to eat proteins and fats. Losing weight and gaining better health by consuming more lavishly is the tempting message.