

**Sharing foodscapes: shaping urban foodscapes through messy processes of food sharing**

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## Chapter 16

### Sharing foodscapes: shaping urban foodscapes through messy processes of food sharing

Monika Rut and Anna R. Davies

#### Abstract

Food sharing practices, including food sharing mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), are evolving across urban foodscapes globally. Using ethnographic case studies of ICT-mediated food sharing, this chapter explores the ways in which food sharing has developed in Singapore and connects with, or diverges from, broader narratives and practices around the smart governance of food in the city-state. This chapter first reflects on the methodological messiness inherent in researching social phenomena, such as food sharing, in different political and socio-cultural contexts. It is then argued that the milieu of food sharing itself is 'messy' as it includes a diverse range of practices and participants that ebb and flow over time and space connected through both physical spaces and virtual platforms. The research presented in this chapter highlights community actions related to food sharing that point towards a new understanding of what it might mean to transition towards a smarter and more sustainable city.

#### Keywords

Foodscapes; food sharing; sustainability; smart city; ICT.

#### Introduction

The concept of food sharing – defined as having a portion of food with another or others; giving a portion of food to others; using, occupying or enjoying food and food related spaces to include the growing, cooking and eating of food jointly; possessing an interest in food in common; or exchanging information about food - explored in this paper with respect to Singapore is an emerging phenomenon that is deeply entangled in contemporary urban foodscapes. Food sharing is becoming increasingly mediated by different forms of ICT tools from Google maps to social media networks. There are suggestions that this technological dimension is reshaping the way that people share food. Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken in Singapore over a period of three months, this chapter suggests that food sharing is formed and reformed within the dynamics of urban foodscapes, and through a complex of dynamic macro-meso interactions. The nature of these interactions will be explored by drawing on the concept of messy social realities developed by Law (2004) which

were encountered during research conducted with the Foodscape Collective, an informal group aiming to cultivate resilient communities through food sustainability (Foodscape Collective, 2017). This chapter explores food sharing through the mess of interactions that build connectivity through online and offline activities and which culminate in a vital food sharing movement driven by a plurality of entities. First, however, the methodological approach to examining the messiness of food sharing is delineated. This is followed by a discussion of food sharing practices in Singapore set within the wider foodscape of the city-state. Insights from the ethnographic case study of the Foodscape Collective are then presented before concluding with a reflection on the opportunities for embracing messiness to better understand evolving food systems and sustainability.

### Approaching food sharing

This chapter draws on ethnographic research of food sharing practices conducted in Singapore. The ethnographies represent the second level of analysis following a collaborative process of co-designing a food sharing database in 100 cities around the globe (Davies et al., 2017a; 2017b). The database provided a comprehensive overview of food sharing landscape in Singapore from which four diverse food sharing enterprises were selected for in-depth research. The Foodscape Collective discussed in this paper was one of the selected case studies and has an informal structure, participatory usage of ICT tools, and engages in a breadth of food sharing activities such as community farming, compost swaps, seed banks, and food rescue. The research presented in this chapter adopted methods that are commonly used in ethnographic fieldwork, including a case study approach and participant observation (Willis & Jost, 2007).

In Singapore, the researcher spent a considerable amount of time observing places, people and practices to better understanding how and why food is being shared. During the fieldwork, sixteen interviews were conducted with co-founders and participants from various activities that the Foodscape Collective organised. In addition, the researcher participated in a range of shared activities, including harvesting, foraging, dumpster diving, cooking, eating and organizing workshops. This led to numerous and diverse user engagements with those who share, which took place in multiple locations including the participants own homes, kitchens, and gardens.

Food sharing ethnographies in Singapore were deeply rooted in the practice of reflexivity, including conceptual, affective and ethical reflexivity. Conceptual reflexivity required openness to experimentation with the food sharing concept itself within the culturally diverse context of Singapore. The formation and circulation of ideas around the concept of food sharing varied depending on participants' age, ethnicity, gender and education. Also, the researcher needed to take a reflexive stand away from the broader conceptual vocabulary that food sharing represents in a western research context. Discourses touching on issues of food justice, food rights, and land access were sometimes unfamiliar to

participants and lay outside their common understandings or experiences. In the process of collecting ethnographic data it was important to acknowledge the affective dimensions generated by the research that occurred when cultivating researcher-participants relationships. A number of circumstances confronted in the fieldwork led to a blurring of the boundaries between the “researcher” and the “researched” and culminated in friendship. Finally, ethical reflexivity was needed as the research began to shift towards to a more collaborative approach in which the researcher became the co-organiser of events and thus in the position of influencing the understanding and practice of food sharing experienced by the community of sharers being researched. For the reasons mentioned above, keeping a fieldwork diary and dedicating time to think reflexively were an important part of the food sharing ethnographies research. Furthermore, as ICT-mediated food sharing was the unit of analysis for the research, meaning that contemporary food sharing practices use some form of ICT in their everyday activities, the researcher had to consider interactions and practices within online environments as well as real world contexts. Interacting with participants online allowed for the cultivation of new relationships through connections, communications, and observations, which ultimately deepened the understanding ICT-mediated food sharing practices.

### **Foodscaapes and food sharing**

Foodscaapes are comprehensive assemblages which include nested sites of food production and consumption, systems of food commodification, sites of waste decomposition, human-nature relationships, technical infrastructures and regulatory frameworks (Lake et al., 2010; MacKendrick, 2014). Having malleable infrastructures, foodscaapes are, above all, places where food related skills, stuff and spaces can find convergence in an interplay between formal and informal transactions, propelled in part by locally-specific norms and values. Clearly, contemporary cities are suffused with, and characterised by, multiple and co-existing foodscaapes that are not just sites where food is found, but are an important locus of multiple layers of urban food environments. As suggested by King (2009: 26), a foodscape can be “personal, social, or public, reaching from the body to the community to the nation, respectively”. The existing literature on foodscaapes suggests that they can be distinguished at macro, meso and micro scales (Mikkelsen, 2011; Lake et al., 2010). Mikkelsen (2011) sees the macro scale as the overall national and societal level of interaction, the meso scale as the sub-national community and micro scale as comprised of household and domestic spaces. Suffice to say that foodscaapes at macro, meso and micro scales are interconnected and offer a useful analytical tool for understanding how food related ideas and practices, spaces and people interact.

Through multi-sited field visits, participant observations, and interviews it was possible to gain in-depth insight into the food sharing practices that make up Singaporean foodscaapes. Whenever the researcher was participating in potlucks, volunteering at food redistribution events or talking to governmental representatives, food sharing emerged at the intersection

of macro and meso foodscapes. The macro foodscapes in Singapore were described by the food sharers as landscapes of food abundance and food commodity. Ranked fourth in the Global Food Security Index (2013), Singapore imports 90% of food that it consumes (AVA, 2017). High levels of food imports are being justified with the narrative that Singapore is too land-scarce to produce food for even the present populace, never mind the 6.9 million people projected to live in Singapore by 2030 (*The Population White Paper*, 2013). However, the accuracy of the land-scarcity narrative outlined above needs unpicking, because local food production practices are undermined in the state-led food security debates despite growing farming interest from citizens, as indicated in an interview extract with an aspiring urban farmer:

*“When I was growing up I thought that, in Singapore we cannot do farming, because we don’t have enough land. But when I understood urban farming [...], I understood that we are not land limited, we are actually people limited. We don’t have knowledge and we don’t have people who want to dedicate their life to this career”*

(Interview 1, Urban Farmer, 02.06.17).

The lack of farming knowledge and the historical state-led emphasis on imports have led to declining proportions of homegrown food within the city-state. In addition, consumers regard their macro foodscapes as abundant while cosmetic filtering of imperfect fruits and vegetables and more stringent conventions of freshness have led to avoidable food waste. Despite plans of becoming a Zero Waste Nation by 2030, the lack of institutional guidelines on food donations (and redistribution of surplus food) have left food waste problems in the hands of corporate social responsibility programmes and a few charities, which are often too understaffed to handle the volumes they are being confronted with. Within this scenario, macro foodscapes in Singapore appear as productivity-driven networks of food commodities through which food sustainability is practiced as a set of strategies focused on achieving food security in land-scarce Singapore.

On the meso scale, foodscapes are formed through spontaneous actions driven by social and environmental consciousness of individuals. Food interactions and food-related ideas are traceable through messy organizational models of self-organised food networks in which standards of food practice are negotiated through relational understanding and knowledge sharing. Meso scale foodscapes are formed through passionate enthusiasts, environmentalists and foodies who are motivated by an interest in grow-your-own movements, zero waste or simply seeking to reconnect to nature, food and each other. Participants may act as keepers of indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants, as owners of insect homesteads, as DIY food growing inventors, and as performers of forgotten food practices such as foraging, fermenting, composting, and beekeeping. Common in Singapore, meso foodscapes are bringing a more locally and socially generative dimension to the urban

food systems and elevating the role that community can play in food security. In Singapore, this becomes apparent through food sharing activities, which include building permaculture gardens to demonstrate where the food comes from, volunteer-run soup kitchens that serve people who are food insecure in public rental apartments or meal sharing platforms that promote healthy food choices through the sharing and selling of home cooked food.

Fieldwork in Singapore emphasised that food sharing is a nexus practice linking macro and meso scales and has developed through by spatial, temporal, and socioeconomic practices driven by individuals, communities, institutions, businesses, and regulatory frameworks. These assemblages of interlinked practices, actors and meanings are increasingly seen as having potential to cultivate ‘smart food cities’, because they highlight the importance of social practices in innovating urban food systems (Maye, 2018). While vaguely defined in the policy documents, smart governance of food in Singapore emerged through plans to achieve greater food security by “working together with industry stakeholders to diversify food sources and innovate for increased local food productivity” (Borrelli et al., 2016: 1). While the role of meso scale urban food movements in contributing to sustainable food systems is undefined, food sharing ethnographies revealed that community actors are in a position to soften technocratic imaginaries of smart food governance. The nature of these processes is messy with ICT playing an important role in mobilising community food ideas. In the following section messy food sharing interaction will be explored using the findings of an ethnographic case study with the Foodscape Collective.

### The Foodscape Collective

The Foodscape Collective started in the aftermath of Growell Pop Up event organised in collaboration with Edible Garden City in 2015 (Growell Pop Up, 2015). The event was attended by community groups interested in food growing, healthy eating, and food rescue and made a strong statement about the disconnect between people, food practices and nature in Singapore. Although its lifespan was just a few months, the event attracted over 2000 online followers and resulted in the creation of a number of new food groups which, like the Foodscape Collective, have continued to connect individuals concerned about food sustainability, and exploring ways to “collaborate and nurture understanding by acting upon food system, that support initiatives that cultivate resilient communities” (Foodscape Collective, 2017). As one of the co-founders mentioned in an interview;

*“for me, Foodscape Collective is about learning the landscape of food. It is a platform currently for the exchange of information, raising of awareness about different stakeholders in the food value chain”*

(Interview 2, Foodscape Collective, 03.08.17).

As an online community group, the Foodscape Collective initiated food sharing initiatives that took root and grew through active participation of individuals interested in the

foodscapes. This has led to various ICT-mediated collaborations such as plants swaps, compost exchanges, potlucks, workshops and exhibitions. Food sharing activities organised by Foodscape Collective have added a certain drive to a growing urban food movement towards sustainable and social dimension of food systems from a perspective of smart citizens. As mentioned in an interview with one participant, the Foodscape Collective organically connected dispersed communities of environmentalists in Singapore:

*“I see the value of networking and people starting to get together [...] Because if you talk about environmental awareness, green activities, ten years ago in Singapore, it’s probably non-existent; nobody had heard of it or even thought about it. But now it seems like there’s a little spark. It’s starting to glow brighter and brighter”*

(Interview 3, Foodscape Collective, 18.06.17).

Following the Foodscape initiative, food sharing has evolved around a range of online and offline activities. Online activities include ongoing mapping project of edible spaces and food growers in Singapore and a Facebook group known as “Community for food sustainability and food resilience” that acts as an interface for real-world exchange for swapping and bartering food related stuff, skills and spaces, and as an advocacy platform for those interested gaining a critical perspective on current food systems in Singapore. Offline activities result from online interactions and include regular meet-ups, guided tours and workshops.

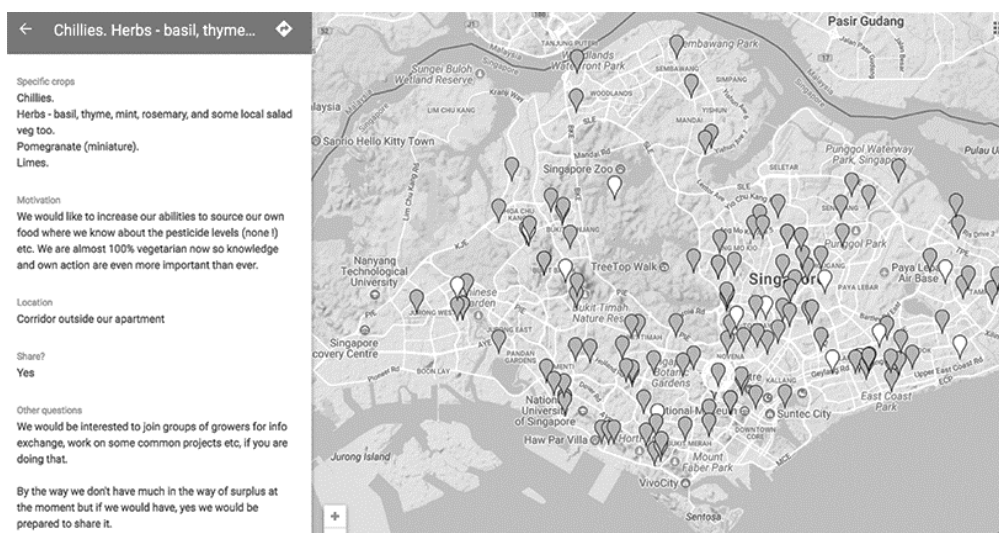


Figure 1.2

There are a number of factors that have helped the Foodscape Collective to maintain a high profile, articulate its identity and expand its activities by accruing a network of followers, and gaining impetus to mobilise a movement towards food sustainability in Singapore. An important factor is that the Foodscape Collective has created a space to meet and experiment in a city-state that is not only land-scarce for farming but also civil-scarce (Lee,

2002). Civil society actors in Singapore are considered as neutered and left in the shadows (Sadoway, 2013). Laws and regulations restricting access to public space and freedom of speech and expression have increasingly become a concern of activists, artists and civil society actors in Singapore. Thus, by being connected virtually, Foodscape Collective followers can orientate themselves and determine their role and level of interest and engagement in a particular activity of cause. They can prime themselves for meetings that take place in real space and stay informed on all developments without being physically present, as well as get motivated and motivate others towards participation and affirmative action. Importantly, they can connect with individuals and groups with similar interests, even develop new communities of interests and practice focusing on a subset of any interests encountered. By meshing online and offline interactions and activities Foodscape Collective managed to integrate food sharing into the local milieu but also attract interested parties from the governmental agencies such as National Environmental Agency (NEA), as mentioned in the interview with the co-founder:

*“I guess we have managed to connect from both bottom-up and top-down [...] We need to decide how we can evaluate what the regulators do and gain the regulator’s support for what we do with the connections that we already have, so that we can influence policy, if ever, be it a Good Samaritan law or any other legislation that impacts food sustainability.”*

(Interview 1, Foodscape Collective, 03.08.17)

The messily arranged connective tissue that permeates online and offline spaces gives visibility to social practices performed by community groups in relation to food systems and permits engagement with forms of non-organizational collective action (Sadoway, 2013). In this sense, the Foodscape Collective can be seen as an informational intermediary that advocates collective imaginaries of sustainable food systems from the bottom-up. Through cultivating such connectivity, a basis of engagements with macro foodscapes is formed as Foodscape Collective develops critical perspectives on new smart food citizenship. Thus, building on the ethnographic research of food sharing in Singapore, it is important to explore not just state-led interventions framed through food security discourses but to engage with food practices on the meso scale. For the researcher, this process is messy, as it recognizes the heterogeneity of all possible associations, as well as is being co-produced with participants with diverse knowledge and experience. The Foodscape Collective showcases this.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of messiness provides an opportunity for ethnographers to identify and better understand complex social realities rooted in contemporary urban foodscapes. The use of ICT as connective technology is central to this endeavour, enabling the scaling-up and out of activities and the development of networked communities of



interests and practice. It also provides a useful point of intersection with wider state narratives around smart cities and food, allowing opportunities for diverse agendas to establish common ground. In this regard, the example of the Foodscape Collective can be seen as an archetypal case, where food sharing enables interactions between the state and community actors, with the goal of increasing the sustainability of foodscapes.

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