

## Alternative Food Networks and Online Space: Summary of Canalside Community Food's Survey Results

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### Research context

Spaces of 'alternative' and 'local' food production and consumption have been the subject of considerable interest within agri-food research and policy making circles in recent decades. This is "in part a consequence of consumer reactions to a range of environmental, ethical, and health concerns which are associated with 'conventional' food supply systems that have become increasingly industrialised and global in reach" (Ilbery and Maye 2005, 823). At the same time, there has been a surge in the way that businesses, organisations and civil society use online and digital spaces, such as social networking sites and smartphones, to access and broadcast information. Indeed, in 2012, 44% of UK businesses used social media as part of their strategy and social networking was the fifth single most popular online activity amongst UK adults in 2013 (ONS 2013). This research is about understanding how these recent social changes apply in the context of AFNs in the UK; in particular how and why organisations and businesses involved in local food production and sales use online space to connect with an increasingly digitally literate civil society.

### Canalside Community Food

Canalside Community Food is an established Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme located near Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, England. They work on a member subscription basis and provide weekly organic vegetable shares to the local community. Canalside have an informative website with an embedded blog and a regularly updated Facebook page.

### Introduction

This summary document is based on the second phase of a study (funded by Coventry University, 2013-14) which looked at Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) and online space<sup>1</sup>; it explored how online space is used by different AFNs and to what extent is it useful to members and customers. During the second phase of the study, a survey was administered to members and customers of all participating AFNs, to explore their views around the online space of AFNs they engage with. Here, a descriptive overview is provided of the survey data focusing on the responses from those engaged with Canalside<sup>2</sup>. The study has revealed some interesting insights into the use of online space in the context of AFNs and how the material connections to land and food and personal interactions are considered important, with online space providing an additional resource to facilitate 'reconnection'. Online and social media may therefore be a useful tool to generate new custom and wider awareness, but does not act as a substitute for the important social relations which appear to sustain engagement. Further guidance on the use of online and social media will be provided to case studies who took part in the research based on the wider research findings. Please cite this study if using this information contained in this document (Bos and Owen, 2014).



<sup>1</sup> 'Online space' is defined as "the platforms that are used to disseminate information to others, in the format of a web page, electronic newsletter and news feed. Here, the flow of information is typically one-way; presented by the creator, such as an organisation to an audience or end user." 'Social media' is defined as "a more interactive format for online engagement; enabling networking, participation and sharing of information to occur, and dialogue to emerge." (Bos and Owen, 2014: 13) e.g. Twitter and Facebook).

<sup>2</sup> In total, 27 respondents from Canalside completed the questionnaire, however some question responses may not represent the full sample, as some respondents did not answer all questions.

### **Involvement in Canalside**

- Nearly 60% of respondents first heard about Canalside through 'word of mouth'; 26% heard about it at an event.
- 59% of respondents reported being involved with the scheme at least every two weeks.
- Over half of respondents have a longstanding relationship with Canalside with 57% stating that they have been receiving a veg share for one year or more.
- Evidence suggests that Canalside provides a space which family and friends enjoy with each other.

### **Awareness and Importance**

- A high number of respondents (76%) use the website regularly; 24% are aware of it, but do not use it.
- Half of respondents engage with the Facebook regularly; the other half are aware of it but do not use it.
- The vast majority of respondents recognised the importance of online presence (website) (96% of respondents) and engagement with social media (Facebook) (68%) but were however less convinced by the merits of Twitter (44% felt Twitter wasn't very important at all).
- If Canalside had a Twitter account, 71% of respondents stated they would not engage with it, 22% didn't know, and 7% said they would.
- Some felt that social gatherings are better advertised outside of social media, Facebook is a good way for the Canalside community to share information, and interaction with Canalside is covered by weekly emails and physical visits to the site.

### **Engagement with Canalside's Online Spaces**

- The majority of respondents that do use the website do so to find out information about Canalside; mainly about social events and their veg share.
- The majority of respondents informed that they have no problem navigating the website (84%); 11% felt that accessing the website was

straightforward but could be simpler, and 5% felt that navigating the website was difficult.

- 94% of respondents felt there was the right amount of content on the website.
- Only 11% felt the website could be improved, compared to 37% who felt it couldn't (53% were unsure). Respondents felt that more pictures of vegetable and more recipes could be included on the website.
- The main reasons why respondents use Facebook is to find out information about their social events, and to 'like' posts shared on the page. Smaller numbers use Facebook for other things such as to find out information about their veg share or other schemes for example.

### **Concluding comments and recommendations**

This summary document has provided a general overview of the data obtained from members of 'Canalside Community Food' and is presented to Canalside for their use, and is therefore not intended as a full summary of the project or a complete analysis of the data. The authors endorse Canalside's current social media strategies given the website is particularly informative and engaging. One possible strategy to enhance the current approach would be to include a Twitter account as although existing members appear to be ambiguous / undecided about this, it could be a means to engage new members and to efficiently broadcast information to other similar organisations. Finally it should be recognised that the development of online spaces requires resource, in a busy, work-based environment. The authors would like to thank Canalside Community Food for their valuable contribution to the study and their members for their participation which is greatly appreciated. For further information about the study please contact either:

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