

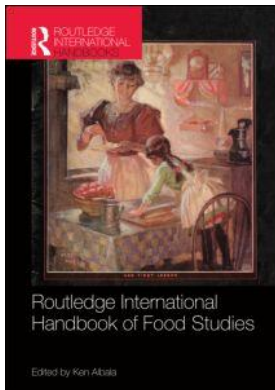
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Ken Albala

### **Food and communication**

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# Food and communication

Arthur Lizie

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*Two major themes arise from this review of literature. First, there is the idea that food is a central aspect of the ways in which we represent ourselves to ourselves and to others. Second, and more politically oriented, there is an understanding that public discourse around food is controlled by powerful interests within our society (typically corporations), and this has led to the promotion of unhealthy foods, and the misrepresentation and misappropriation of traditional foodways, all at the expense of the less powerful. The academic study of communication is concerned with understanding the ways in which humans share verbal and nonverbal symbols, the meanings of the shared symbols, and the consequences of the sharing. Broadly viewed, communication food scholarship looks at how, what, and to what effect meaning is created as message producers (typically, but not exclusively, corporations) create messages about food (advertisements, commercials, films) that circulate in culture and are interpreted by audiences. This chapter explores the theoretical and methodological approaches that communication scholars have used to investigate and explain how humans use food to create and share meaning, and then offers some ideas about future research and ways to get started in the field.*

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## **Historical background of food scholarship in communication and major theoretical approaches in use**

While this chapter is of interest to food studies scholars who want to know what's up in communication food research, it is designed primarily to offer a solid foundation in the current state of and opportunities in communication food scholarship for those in communication who are looking for guidance (or reassurance) in structuring their thinking about food or contemplating a foray into the field. As such, a principal assumption is that communication scholars

conceptualize food studies from broad historical and intellectual traditions within communication rather than from singular theoretical approaches. So while the story here weaves in theoretical approaches, which are often unstated in the literature, it is designed so the reader can readily locate herself within the field of research.

The four intellectual fields that appear most often in the communication food studies literature are rhetoric, public relations, media effects and advertising, and cultural studies. Before looking at the history and current landscape of these four areas, it's important to mention what is and what is not being covered and why. The focus is on research that has appeared in communication books (mostly edited collections), in communication journals, and at communication conferences (the National Communication Association and International Communication Association conferences in particular). This methodological emphasis gives a strong indication of what the researchers and the communication discipline think of as counting as communication scholarship. However, within this wide look at communication food scholarship, some food-related communication scholarship and some communication-related food scholarship are not covered in depth for two reasons.

First, there are the research areas in which food-related communication scholarship is important but ultimately subsumed by larger disciplinary concerns. The two big areas here are health communication and marketing communication. While the communication aspects of health communication are salient and occasionally appear in the food-oriented literature, the concept of health (diet, nutrition, exercise, obesity, etc., but also, to a degree, food safety and food policy) is not reducible to concepts of food. In other words, health communication, which would cover everything from USDA information campaigns to doctor–patient communication, is its own field. While marketing uses communication techniques and there is a lot of research about the marketing of food, marketing is not reducible to communication and, further, one gets the sense that food in much of this research is simply an interchangeable commodity, no more or less relevant than if the subject were cars or watches or dishwashers.

Second, there is food scholarship that is essentially interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary in nature to which communication scholars contribute. In these areas, this article is just the communication hand grasping the interdisciplinary trunk: for a better sense of the whole elephant, check out this book's section on food studies and popular media, especially the chapters on film, journalism, television, and cultural studies.

### *Rhetoric*

Rhetorical analysis looks at how messages are constructed, by whom and the persuasive effectiveness of the messages. Rhetoric is historically linked to the analysis of public and political speech through Aristotle. Brummett (1981) followed this traditional political approach when he looked at how the 1980 US presidential candidates were rhetorically associated with gastronomic terms.

The earliest rhetorical food analysis pointed the way toward both linguistic and intercultural analysis of food discourse. Among these early studies, Penzl (1934) researched how different terms for poached eggs appeared throughout New England, Wagoner (1957) was bemused at the lack of culinary words in textbook French language instruction, and Teller (1969) looked at consistency in the use of French, Italian, German and Yiddish, Spanish, and “Oriental” culinary terms across 190 restaurant menus in Chicago. More recent rhetorical work has looked at health claims in food labeling/advertising (Welford, 1992) and tactics that American organizations use to frame obesity as an issue of personal responsibility (Thomson, 2009); the latter article mixes rhetorical analysis with a combination of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of articulation and

Foucault's spectacle of the scaffold. Also worth noting in this general realm are Janis, Kaye, and Kirschner's (1965) study, which found that food increases acceptance of persuasive information (but sadly felt the persuasion was sullied with "the extraneous gratifying activity of eating") and Lippincott's (2003) analysis of texts related to a gender-related controversy about how to present cooking information at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory of dramatism anchors both Meister's (2001) analysis of the commodified "Good Life" on the Food Network and Heinz and Lee's (1998) look at the rhetorical construction of beef as a discourse of tradition and masculinity in US culture. The latter research is augmented by a Marxist theoretical approach, which also serves as an intellectual backdrop to many cultural studies approaches to food and communication detailed below.

Rhetorical analysis at some point overlaps with discourse analysis, which looks at lived discourse (often interpersonal communication) and adopts a psychological approach to attempt to understand what is said and how it is said. Along this intellectual edge, Amberg and Hall (2010) used rhetorical theories of discourse analysis to look at the manner in which journalists present information about farmed salmon; Cook, Reed, and Twiner (2009) drew on discourse analysis to analyze how consumers think about organic food in the UK; and Sprain (2006) looked at internet discussion groups to establish two disparate sectors of organic-food audiences, tasteful consumers and political actors.

### *Public relations*

Public relations is an applied field of communication concerned with the maintenance of a public image for a public entity (a corporation, a celebrity), or, more generously, with managing effective communication between an entity and its publics. In its analysis of effective communication strategies it shares ties with rhetorical communication studies and, in its focus on using those strategies to communicate information to consumers, it is closely related to marketing.

There are two major public relations areas of communication food studies research. The first cluster of research looks at marketing and branding strategies, such as Pendleton's (1999) examination of Procter & Gamble's introduction of Crisco, Blue's (2009) look at the branding of beef by the Alberta beef industry, and Ragas and Roberts' (2009) case study of how the Chipotle food chain builds brand loyalty through its corporate social responsibility program. The second cluster is associated with risk or crisis communication, designed to determine how best (for the entity) to communicate sensitive and/or controversial information to consumers. In this area, Qin and Brown (2006) tried to figure out how best to present information about genetically engineered salmon to the public, Rodriguez (2007) studied how people assess information about food safety (finding that ensuring trust rather than actually communicating information might be a better communication strategy), and Greenberg and Elliott (2009) analyzed the management of a 2008 Canadian food contamination outbreak.

### *Media effects and children's ads*

Media effects research seeks to discover what mediated messages do to people. Research in this area is mainly quantitative and, within the communication field, is typically set against cultural studies, which uses qualitative methods to discover what people do with messages. The theoretical backbone for media effects research is cultivation theory. Cultivation theory was developed in the late 1960s by George Gerbner and his research team to study the effects that television viewing (programs and commercials – the television environment) has on its audience. Cultivation theory found television contributes to the shaping of an individual's social reality, and that heavy viewers

tend to hold more mainstream opinions and to think of the world less optimistically than lighter viewers. Cultivation analysis is often buttressed by Bandura's social learning theory, which posits that attitudes and behavior are learned through observing modeled behavior. Cultivation analysis is closely linked with content analysis as a method.

Food cultivation analysis has been concerned with how food and eating have been portrayed in the media, what types of food have been portrayed, and how these portrayals impact attitudes and behaviors. This approach has historically converged on health issues, especially in the case of children, and now tends to focus on the role of mediated communication in the obesity crisis. While some studies focused on program content (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorelli, 1981; Nucci and Kubey, 2007; Ochsenshirt and Kim, 2008; Greenberg and Elliott, 2009) – mostly finding that “bad” food choices are most often depicted – most studies look at the influence of commercials and advertising.

With a few exceptions (e.g., Aronovsky and Furnham, 2008), the advertising research breaks down into two major, overlapping areas, the effects of healthy/unhealthy food messages and the effects of messages on children (technically a subset of the first area). All forms of media come under scrutiny within this research, including television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet. The emphasis here is on research that focuses on how the advertising of food influences audience attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about food, excluding most studies that focus more specifically on related but broader issues of health, nutrition, obesity, etc.

Due to the ease of data collection, magazines have been a prime artifact for media effects research. Lord, Eastlack, and Stanton (1987), Klassen, Wauer and Cassel (1991) and Parker (2003) all looked at the role of food and health messages in magazine ads. Fay (2003) looked at food advertising New Zealand in 50 years of magazines, finding that advertising increasingly depicted a world that diverged from real-world social trends in terms of convenience, tradition, and “naturalness.” Mastin and Campo (2006) looked at *Essence*, *Ebony* and *Jet*, finding the ads filled with high calorie/low nutrient items while the articles preached balancing low calories with exercise; this study also used media advocacy theory, which states that since media help to shape public and individual perceptions, they have a responsibility to promote pro-social messages.

Research on the effects of food advertising on children has a history stretching back a half century, with much of the research coming in the areas of applied developmental and social psychology and, more recently, marketing and advertising (Livingstone, 2005). Even more recently, this research area has been the domain of public policy bodies, especially within the European Union. The current thinking on the effects of advertising on children is that it has a “modest” (but nevertheless important) direct effect on food attitudes and behavior, but that other environmental factors that aren't being measured probably have greater effects (Livingstone, 2005). Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this research, this article does not offer a full review of the literature on advertising to kids. Instead, for the most comprehensive meta-reviews of the area check out Livingstone (2005) and Livingstone and Helsper (2006), for the extension of the debate into the cyberworld, seek out Sanberg (2011), and, for a broader analysis, take a look at the other relevant chapters in this book (e.g., psychology, law, television).

Interesting advertising-to-children analysis that doesn't take a strictly content-analysis approach includes Gorn and Goldberg's (1982) experimental attempt to find a correlation between ads and children's food choices, Gram *et al.*'s (2010) look at how Danone combines health and entertainment (“nutria-tainment”) messages in European television commercials, Elliott's (2009) study of how children make sense of and respond to “fun foods” marketed toward them, and Thomson's (2009) investigation of the dangers involved in the performative aspects of “advergaming” and online food marketing aimed at children.

### Cultural studies

The study of food and communication from a cultural/ritual point of view has its deep roots specifically in the often-cited Barthes (2008/1961) work on the semiotics of food in everyday life, and more generally (but less frequently cited) in Foucault and Baudrillard's post-modern theories of power and culture, Bourdieu's work on class and distinction, various aspects of Marxist criticism, and the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools' critical cultural analysis of culture. The cultural studies approach looks at how industries, texts, and audiences share symbols to create meanings. Beyond the act of explaining how these symbols circulate to construct culture, critical cultural inquiry also seeks to understand and illuminate cultural areas of contestation, especially ideology and all manner of individual and social identities. Arising from these varying influences, cultural studies is by nature an interdisciplinary field, one with many theoretical and methodological interests that map efficiently onto the interdisciplinary field of food studies. Cultural studies is also covered in the popular culture and media section of this book; this article focuses primarily on cultural studies approaches from communication points of view. For an introductory volume that incorporates many of the research concerns of communication/media food scholars through a cultural studies framework, see Parasecoli (2008), which begins to move disciplinary boundaries and simply tackles food studies issues.

There are a number of early communication-specific articles that tackle food from a cultural/ritual communication point of view. Among the earliest is Henderson's (1970) "Food as Communication in American Culture," which relies heavily on anthropological viewpoints, including the work of Margaret Mead, and ponders the development of a "special kind of scientist" who, in essence, is a food studies scholar. Goode (1989) takes a similar approach in the "food" entry of the *International Encyclopedia of Communications*. Goode bases her understanding on the work of Levi-Strauss; curiously, she fails to consider the relevance of mediated communication in the relationship between food and communication.

As with general academic interest in food, the years since the turn of the twenty-first century have seen a wealth of food-centric cultural studies research. In addition to the individual articles that appeared in numerous publications covered below, this scholarship explosion has included edited volumes on food and film (Bower, 2004), eating and culture (Rubin, 2008), the ideology of mediated food representations (LeBesco and Naccarato, 2008), and food as communication (Cramer, Greene and Walters, 2011). These volumes cover a wealth of communication and food cultural studies scholarship and include essential background for anyone interested in this area. As such, the individual articles within these volumes aren't covered here, but the reader is advised to consult these volumes as foundational material for future research.

Communication-food cultural studies research has primarily focused on the analysis of two related areas of social discourse, lifestyle construction and identity construction. Central to both areas is an interest in the ideological construction and normalization of the lived consumer-oriented environment. This research typically manifests itself in the analysis of texts that message producers – typically corporations – produce and how they are received by audiences (although there is not much communication food research in reception studies).

Lifestyle construction studies break off into two branches, corporate identity construction and consumer lifestyle construction. The corporate identity construction area shares a kinship with marketing and public relations scholarship, with all interested in issues of branding, corporate image and identity – it's really a matter of one side hoping to find out consumer preferences to exploit them and the other side hoping to find consumer preferences to protect, empower, and understand consumers/citizens. Among the more interesting articles in this area, Reynolds (2004) used an ethnographic approach to look at how Monsanto created identity through

advertising, Beverland *et al.* (2008) used informant interviews to look at the construction of authenticity for Trappist and Abbey beer brands, finding that consumers have a difficult time judging authenticity through advertising, Girardelli (2004) used semiotic analysis to look at the Fazoli restaurant chain's mythical construction of Italian food, and Ketchum (2005) used close textual analysis to look how cooking shows on the Food Network constructed consumer fantasies.

The idea of constructing consumer fantasies ties in with the construction of consumer lifestyles. This area of research looks at how mediated texts normalize consumption and respond to/create market segments. Hanke's (1989) look at the production of a food lifestyle in Philadelphia publications in the 1980s is an early and instructive entry in the communication-oriented cultural analysis of food, but is rarely cited in the literature. Other important texts in this area include de Solier's (2005) look at how Australian TV cooking shows both educate consumers and create class distinctions (i.e., they produce cultural capital for viewers), Yang's (2005) look at how the US media supported food rationing efforts during the Second World War, and Schneider and Davis's (2010) look at the role of the magazine *Australian Women's Weekly* in societal taste arbitration around health foods. Dickinson *et al.*'s (2001) look at the relationship between mass media and food through a lens of consumption is also worth searching out.

Work that investigates the role of food in the creation and maintenance of group and individual identity clusters around intercultural and gender concerns. Intercultural research primarily focuses on how concepts about food translate from one culture to another (Gallagher, 2004; Ogan, 2007; Cheong, Kim, and Zheng, 2010), often focusing on the analysis of the use (often revulsion, then incorporation) of co-cultural and subcultural foodways by dominant national cultures (Fonseca, 2005; Pearson and Kothari, 2007; Chiaro, 2008; Lindenfeld, 2007; Han, 2007; Chand, 2007; Shugart, 2008; Hoecherl-Alden and Lindenfeld, 2010).

The social construction of gender roles is a primary area of research for cultural studies scholars. This area of communication food research has been conducted almost exclusively on mediated artifacts, such as Brownlie, Hewer and Horne's (2005) look at cookbooks as a site of gendered cultural construction, Swenson's (2009) look at how celebrity TV chefs both challenge and reify gender roles, and Cooks's (2009) look at the performance of food-as-social-act as a site of identity construction and resistance. Historically gender-oriented media analysis has been concerned with investigating how women are portrayed in the media, the imbalances of power in mediated presentations of women, especially in advertising images, and with celebrating empowering moments. Examples that continue this tradition in the communication food realm include Lindenfeld's (2005) look at how the film *Fried Green Tomatoes* at once empowers and undercuts its gender and race narratives, Shroff's (2005) analysis of the Indian film *Mirch Masala* (*Spices*), which discusses the use of the chili pepper as a symbolic device of female resistance, West's (2007) look at the construction of a politicized version of women and motherhood in a cookbook, and Nathanson's (2009) look at cooking shows and female temporality.

The past few decades have seen a greater interest in the study of the mediated construction of masculinity/ies. This look at food and masculinity has revealed that men are as constricted in their food-associated gender roles (e.g., TV chef) as women, but that constriction offers more privileges and tends to come at the expense of women. In terms of magazines, Hollows (2002) looked at the construction of cooking as a male practice in *Playboy* magazine in the late 1950s, while Parasecoli (2005) used a semiotic approach to discuss the discourse of the male body in men's fitness magazines. In terms of television, Brownlie and Hewer (2007) looked at masculine practices in the construction of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, Smith and Wilson (2004) looked at how a local cooking show positioned the viewer and created a feminized contemporary

southern male, and Buerkle (2009) looked at the production of masculinity against femininity and metrosexuality in beef advertisements from Burger King.

There are a few analytical approaches that don't fit neatly into the above categories, but are worth a mention. In terms of general communication studies, Reagan and Collins (1986) simply surveyed people about mediated sources for recipes, and Eaves and Leather (1991) looked at contextual communication in the relationship between McDonald's and Burger King restaurant design and consumer behavior. In media history, Collins (2009) looked at the evolution of televised cooking shows and Bonner (2009) looked at the early development of cross-promotion between television and cookbooks, focusing on the work of Graham Kerr. With globalization theories as a backdrop, Huey (2005) considered the most effective ways to transmit food information in the new media world.

## Research methodologies

Communication food scholarship can broadly be broken down into three methodological approaches: rhetorical analysis, quantitative analysis, and qualitative analysis.

Not surprisingly, rhetorical studies tend to rely on rhetorical analysis (which, for our purposes, is a method). Straightforward rhetorical analysis investigates how texts create persuasive arguments (Brummett, 1981; Welford, 1992; Pendleton, 1999; Amberg and Hall, 2010). Other types of rhetorical analysis employed in the study of food include Burkean (Heinz and Lee, 1998; Meister, 2001), critical-rhetorical (Thomson, 2009), and historical-rhetorical (Lippincott, 2003).

Quantitative methodologies allow for hypothesis testing and the generation of statistical evidence to support claims, but they tend to lack real-world applicability. Media effects research is almost exclusively joined with content analysis as a methodology (e.g., Kaufman, 1980; Lord, Eastlack, and Stanton, 1987; Klassen, Wauer, and Cassel, 1991; Fay, 2003; Parker, 2003; Mastin and Campo, 2006; Harrison, 2006; Aronovsky and Furnham, 2008; Nucci and Kubey, 2007; Gram, Le Roux, and Rampnoux, 2010; Cheong, Kim, and Zheng, 2010). The content analysis method consists of identifying a sample, such as food commercials aired during the Super Bowl in 1990–2010, and then coding and counting what happens in the sample. This gives a strong indication of what happens in the commercials, but it's unclear how real people in the real world use or make sense of this information. The other quantitative methodology used on occasion is experimental research design (Janis, Kaye, and Kirschner, 1965; Gorn and Goldberg, 1982; Rodriguez, 2007).

Qualitative methods incorporate a wide range of analytical techniques. The most encompassing method is a cultural critique, which typically combines aspects of ethnographic participant-observation methods with critical textual analysis. To varying degrees, most of the cultural studies work cited here employs this technique (Hollows, 2002; Ketchum, 2005; Gallagher, 2004; Brownlie, Hower, and Horne, 2005; Lindenfeld, 2007; Parasecoli, 2005; Pearson and Kothari, 2007; Han, 2007; West, 2007; Chiaro, 2008; Shugart, 2008; Cooks, 2009; Swenson, 2009; Buerkle, 2009; Hoecherl-Alden and Lindenfeld, 2010). Some studies also use a more straightforward ethnographic analysis (Eaves and Leathers, 1991; Reynolds, 2004; Huey, 2005; Fonseca, 2005).

Beyond this cluster of qualitative methods, there are numerous other qualitative methods that have been employed, including straightforward textual analysis (Teller, 1969; Wagoner, 1957), interviews (Reagan and Collins, 1986; Dickinson *et al.*, 2011; Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink, 2008), critical visual analysis (Brownlie and Hower, 2007), semiotic analysis (Girardelli, 2004), history and cultural analysis (de Solier, 2005), focus groups (Qin and Brown, 2006; Elliott, 2009), historical research (Bonner, 2009; Yang, 2005), and survey research (Lazerson, 1980;



Knodell, 1976; Ochsenshirt and Kim, 2008). Discourse analysis (not the conversation-analysis type) also appears in the analysis of cultural and mediated discourses. Case studies or research projects have combined methods, such as viewer letters, textual analysis, and ethnographic research (Smith and Wilson, 2004), interviews, surveys, textual analysis (Ragas and Roberts, 2009), textual analysis and interviews (Ogan, Çiçek, and Kaptan, 2007), corpus analysis, interviews, and focus groups (Cook, Reed, and Twiner, 2009), and discourse analysis and interviews (Chrysochous, 2010).

### Avenues for future research

Aside from any discussion that would deal with the cumbersome moniker communication food studies, there are two meta-questions that serve as a productive initial position from which to think about the future of communication food studies research. First, is communication food studies viable as an “area of concern” within communication, distinct from its divisional roots as outlined above? Put another way: do we need communication food studies, per se, or do we just need communication researchers to study food? The lack of common texts and an at-times willful ignorance of literature across the different sub-fields within communication food studies seem to make the establishment of a distinct field a difficult proposition. Perhaps a different thematic synthesis of the material outlined above would lead to the necessary foundation.

Second, if the answer to the first question is yes (or even maybe), will we be able to produce communication food theory that is distinct from a simple application of communication theory to food and food-related issues? From a review of the literature it is apparent that communication researchers find the study of food an apt, interesting, and productive application of intellectual propensities and skills, but is there anything intrinsically different about the ways in which we communicate about food as distinct from the ways in which we communicate about other areas of our lives? What would communication food theory look like?

Whether or not these larger questions get answered (or even discussed), there is still a great deal of work to be done expanding on the research here and exploring how food works in other communication divisions. Here are some possibilities.

For rhetoric, the big area of research is to establish a rhetoric of food. Food certainly has a large influence on how we live our lives: what are the rhetorical means by which we are persuaded about food and how does food qua food persuade us? In terms of rhetorical analysis, there are large swaths of public discourse that have gone unexplored from a communication point of view. Some avenues: How have public leaders (presidents, prime ministers) talked about food? How has food been used rhetorically (and visually) in election campaigns? What would a rhetorical analysis of the discourse surrounding the US Farm Bill reveal (and how has the discourse changed over time)? What rhetorical devices do message posters use in online discussion forums about food? Further, we lack an understanding of how ideas about food circulate within cultural arenas divorced from (or peripheral or parallel to) mediated areas. For example, what role does communication (persuasive or not) have in the CSA, farmers’ market, and community gardens cultural arenas? Within the restaurant workers community?

For cultural studies, it’s probably necessary to take a step back and ask the big question: What is the ideology of food? There have been discussions about the ideology of hunger, of food production, etc., but is there a bigger ideological landscape that needs to be mapped? Is it possible to answer this question in any meaningful way without falling into a trap of grand narratives, or is it simply a matter of asking about ideologies in relation to specific cultural iterations of nation, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.? Beyond the “big” question, Parasecoli

(2008) points toward the multiplicity of mediated locations for the analysis of food in popular culture beyond those already discussed at length – animation, advertising flyers, popular music, etc. There is also a lack of audience-reception research on the social/cultural uses of food (and food media) and a lack of communication-oriented research on the role of pleasure in food and food-media consumption.

### **Practical considerations for getting started – funding, programs, archival sources, tools, data sets, internet resources, scholarships and awards, etc. (where and how?)**

There are no undergraduate degree programs specifically dedicated to communication food studies, although food studies degree and certificate programs typically offer a smattering of communication courses, usually in media production and/or analysis. At the graduate level, there are two major programs conducted in English. Boston University has a communication concentration in its Master of Liberal Arts in Gastronomy program, and the University of Gastronomic Science (Italy) offers food and communication masters programs. In addition, aspects of the Open University of Catalonia's (Spain) Food Systems, Culture and Society Program are appealing to communication scholars.

Funding communication food studies projects is no more or less difficult than funding any project in the humanities and social sciences. In other words, it's hard. Lacking more reliable sources of funding found in the hard sciences, it's more a process of working the system. Wear out internal institutional sources (could your food project in the community be funded by your service learning office?). Scour NEH, USDA, and Fulbright grant opportunities. Piggyback research on conference or personal travel. Beg.

Fortunately, a good deal of communication food research can be done inexpensively. Most mediated sources for analysis are available for free online or through libraries. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other qualitative data collection methods are typically supported through academic institutions and require more time than money. The same often goes for the use of data analysis software, such as SPSS and NVivo.

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