ABSTRACT

The low-carb high fat (LCHF) diet, a buzz diet in Sweden, is stirring dogmatic conflict between dieters and representatives from the National Food Agency (NFA), even gaining international reputation. After gathering materials from social media and press reports covering the popular diet, a thematic analysis has been conducted. The aim of this study was to investigate how three non-conventional experts and influential promoters of the LCHF movement transact their criticisms of current nutrition authorities, and how they utilize social media for their purpose. The diet has been highly politicized, creating distrust against the established scientific community. Findings indicate that events on the national level led to an increased public awareness of the LCHF diet, providing the supporters with invaluable opportunities to criticize the established nutritional community. This enabled certain prominent advocates of the diet to gain momentum while using features of social media to further the diet’s believability.

Keywords: Anecdotal Evidence, Blogs, Fad Diets, Media Convergence, Postmodern Medical Paradigm, Science Popularization, User-Generated Content

INTRODUCTION

Diets 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 a decade ago; the public is more knowledgeable about food politics than ever (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Kaplan, 2012). One explanation for this may be 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 has permanently reformed the way we approach

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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 (O’Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Duggan & Smith, 2014).

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). One arena where this has been noticed is in the ever-growing blogosphere (Bonetta, 2007; Närvänen et al., 2013). 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 paper will focus on how three influential promoters of the low-carb high-fat (LCHF) diet—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. 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).

LOW-CARBOHYDRATE, HIGH-FAT: A CONTROVERSIAL DIET AND THE START OF A FOOD WAR

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 alluring message. Considering the popularity of the diet and its variants, advocates of low-carb diets are often in open disagreement with nutritional authorities.

The current widespread version of the LCHF diet generally involves a more drastic restriction of total carbohydrate intake than that of the Atkins diet (normally less than 12% of energy intake) and large unrestricted intakes of foods rich in saturated fat (Mann, McLean, Skeaff, & Morenga, 2014). In Sweden, this regime has been the source of public conflict and debate between various supporters of the diet and representatives from the NFA since 2004 (Mann & Nye, 2009). The LCHF diet has become increasingly popular; its cookbooks have been on the bestseller lists (Bokus, 2015) and the media has reported on grocery stores running out of butter due to its widespread use in the food regime (Martin, 2011).

However, representatives from the NFA are not convinced because the diet goes against the advice of the reputable Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014) on which the agency bases its nutritional recommendations. In one of Sweden’s leading newspapers, representatives from the agency published a statement arguing against the diet’s proposed health benefits (GP, 2012). It is primarily the replacement of carbohydrates with satu-
From the Streets to the Net? The Political Use of the Internet by Social Movements
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