



Hashtag hijacking and crowdsourcing transparency: social media affordances and the governance of farm animal protection

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Abstract

The post-war Western world has seen a gradual shift from government to governance, a process that also concerned the issues related to agro-food sustainability, such as food quality, environmental impact, social justice, and farm animal welfare. Scholars believe that social media are a new site that reconfigures relations between various actors involved in the governance of these problems. However, empirical research on this matter remains scarce. This paper fills this gap by examining the case of Februdairy, a Twitter hashtag campaign to promote the British dairy industry, hijacked by animal protection activists. For this case, I employ the relational perspective on technology affordances—as operationalised by Faraj and Azad (in: Leonard et al. (eds), *Materiality and organizing. Social interaction in a technological world*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012)—to highlight two distinct strategic modes of embracement of social media functionalities by the opposing groups: hashtag hijacking and crowdsourcing transparency. The analysis reveals also that a pre-existing social structure of the agro-food system conditions reconfiguration of social relations by technology in a way that actually strengthens the tendency to govern the issue of farm animal protection with market mechanisms.

Keywords Social media affordances · Hashtag hijacking · Governance of animal welfare · Animal protection movement · British dairy industry

Abbreviations

AFN	Alternative food networks
AHDB Dairy	Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board
NSMs	New social movements

Introduction

The post-war Western world has seen a gradual shift from government to governance (Jessop 1995; Stoker 1998), a process that involves going beyond the model of state management of public issues towards growing participation of non-state actors, which leads to the emergence of heterogeneous governance networks (Klijn 2008). This shift also concerns issues related to “agro-food sustainability” (Stevens

et al. 2016), such as food quality, environmental impact, social justice, and farm animal welfare.

Scholars believe that social media platforms are a new site for the governance of the issues above, as they bring together all involved stakeholders and—through their technical affordances—act to reconfigure relations between those stakeholders (Schneider et al. 2018; Stevens et al. 2016). Moreover, social media platforms are to enable the rapid spread of information about agro-food sustainability, activism, and self-organisation of food movements. At the same time, they also empower a countermovement, as criticised food corporations fight back and embrace social media to monitor opposition and rebrand themselves along with customer expectations (Stevens et al. 2016). Social media platforms also enable powerful but contested users to connect with or source favourable content from more trustworthy actors, such as scientists or farmers, to build on their legitimacy (e.g., Brewster 2015; Peekhaus 2010).

Only recently did Stevens et al. (2016) conceptually draw the field of social media governance of agro-food sustainability by basing on a creative review of dispersed literature in various overlapping fields. Therefore, systematic empirical work in this domain still lacks. This paper attempts to fill

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this gap with a study of an extreme case (Flyvbjerg 2006) of a Twitter hashtag campaign—Februdairy—aimed at promoting the British dairy industry, soon hijacked by animal protection activists. The campaign’s purpose was to source “positive” content, mostly from farmers and consumers, to regain legitimacy and secure sales of dairy in light of the growing market share of plant-based products and negative publicity spread online by animal protection activists.

Scholars already described the governance shift in the domain of farm animal welfare in relation to policy networks that emerged in the European Union as a result of the broader tendency of governments at the national and European level to withdraw from regulating animal welfare. Instead, the governments incentivise legally non-binding mechanisms and private partnerships, mostly quality assurance schemes developed in cooperation between businesses and non-profit organisations that advocate for animal welfare (Miele et al. 2005; Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013; Veissier et al. 2008). However, few publications consider the impact of a new generation of animal protection activism concentrated on the values of animal liberation and animal rights, on the governance of protection of farm animals. These actors often explicitly distance themselves from governmental mediation and strive for their goals by promoting a lifestyle inherently bound with consumption of particular products (Garner 2004).

Below, I develop the postulate of Schneider et al. (2018) who called to focus on social media affordances in the study of digital food activism, and I propose to expand it on other types of computer-mediated communication related to agro-food sustainability. The focus on technology affordances enables us to capture a link between the shape of technology and an “(IT)-driven social change” (Faraj and Azad 2012, p. 237). I employ a relational perspective on affordances provided by Faraj and Azad (2012), who reject conceptualisations that situate the definition of action in functionalities of technologies. Instead, they claim, affordances emerge out of the interaction between particular functionalities and social actors, with their specific goals, technical capacities, and social structures in which they are embedded. Employing such a tool allows me to develop the discussion on the governance of farm animal protection and the impact of social media on the governance of agro-food sustainability by highlighting two distinct strategic modes of embracement of social media functionalities: hashtag hijacking by animal rights activists and crowdsourcing transparency by the British dairy industry. The analysis also reveals how a pre-existing social structure of the agro-food system conditions reconfiguration of social relations by technology in a way that actually strengthens the tendency to govern the issue of farm animal protection with market mechanisms.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, I describe the shift from government to governance in the domain of

agro-food sustainability and specifically for farm animal welfare or, more broadly, farm animal protection. Secondly, basing mainly on Stevens et al. (2016), I discuss the impact of social media on the governance of issues related to agro-food sustainability and I introduce the category of technology affordances, as conceptualised by Faraj and Azad (2012), as a helpful theoretical tool to capture social media-driven reconfiguration of relations and action strategies of agro-food stakeholders. Then, I describe my methodological approach and findings. In the last section, I summarize results and discuss promising pathways for further examination of the relationship between communication technologies and the governance in the agro-food domain.

The shift from government to governance: implications for the agro-food system

Policy scholars widely conceptualise the post-war change in how Western countries manage the issues of public concern as a shift from government to governance (Jessop 1995; Stoker 1998). Although conceptualisations differ from one author to another, there is a general agreement that the shift involves a transgression of the state model of public issues management towards ever-growing participation of non-state actors (Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013). This shift led to the emergence of heterogeneous governance networks around issues of common concern, consisting of actors who differ in terms of power (e.g., Klijn 2008).

Many observed this shift also in the agro-food domain (e.g., Busch 2014; Havinga et al. 2015; Higgins and Lawrence 2005; Marsden 2000). In the countries that gained significant geopolitical power after the Second World War, the state managed issues related to agriculture and food production, driven by the imperative of self-sufficiency of cheap food for a growing population. This goal was to be achieved by the adoption of industrial and intensive methods of production (e.g., Lowe et al. 1993; Woods 2003). At the same time, the state intervened to protect agricultural producers from the instability of international markets and low bargaining power in the value chain (Cardwell 2015). The protection of domestic producers happened mostly at the expense of markets in less powerful regions, made dependent on the cheap food from developed countries. Therefore, the resulting agri-food regime was a symbiosis of the nation-state, private companies providing emerging agricultural technologies, and growing farming lobbies, mindful of the pre-war market failures, thus pursuing mercantile policies (Friedmann 2005).

However, this “government-like” mode of managing food production began dissolving around the 1970s, as a result of the coincidence of several events, headed by global food crises. Most importantly, at that time, transnational food

corporations revealed their power and forced liberalisation of international trade in order to allow an ever-growing expansion. Paradoxically, this power emerged from previous state policies, which privileged industrialisation and specialisation of agricultural production, therefore fostering its dependence on input providers, processors, and retailers. As the World Trade Organization began to shape international trade, the power of a nation-state to impose food quality standards radically shrunk (Friedmann 2005). Governments also started to mostly abstain from intervening in the relations within the food chain (Cardwell 2015).

Meanwhile, what accompanied the state withdrawal from market regulation was the growing public criticism of the modern food production regime, which concerned its impact on a range of issues from public health and reproduction of environment to animal welfare and social justice. The key role in recognising agro-food as a political issue, which concerned not only specialised units of the government and industry members but virtually all citizens (Woods 2003), played the so-called new social movements (NSMs; Offe 1985). The same post-war “liberal-democratic welfare state consensus” (Offe 1985, p. 821) that enabled a productivist agri-food regime produced also an educated middle class, increasingly aware of the harmful externalities of the industrial mode of production. The middle class became the social basis of new movements, focused on “universal” values and personal emancipation rather than civic and class-related economic rights. Largely disillusioned about the established institutions of representative democracy, NSMs were instrumental in spreading the knowledge about agriculture problems, as they took advantage of the emergent mass media and developed new modes of action, based on targeting regulators via the public opinion (Offe 1985).

However, even though in their early phase social movements predominantly focused on enforcing state-level regulations, in the context of the shrinking power and interest of governments in regulating issues related to food quality, corporations largely overtook the task of governing them and responding to public concerns (Friedmann 2005). Some believe that this shift brings more effectiveness to the processes of governance (e.g., Fulponi 2006), although others indicate a number of its negative aspects. Corporations “selectively appropriate” social movements’ postulates by concentrating only on those economically viable and typically embracing traceability of produce rather than ethical or environmental values (Friedmann 2005). Furthermore, companies tend to treat widely understood quality as an opportunity for portfolio differentiation by targeting the market niche for premium products, rather than as a universal standard to which they should strive (Busch 2011; Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013). As a result, corporations contribute to the creation of class divisions between those who can and cannot afford quality food, without solving the problems inherent

to the system (Friedmann 2005). Moreover, the process of private governance is driven not by shared values but rather by the overlapping interests of actors who differ in terms of power (Konefal et al. 2005; Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013). Corporate appropriation of sustainability comes along with the promotion of the discourse of an “ethical consumer,” which reduces solutions of wicked problems to a consumer’s individual choice and, as an effect, allows capital to cede on consumers the cost of solving these problems by preventing state-led regulation of the industry (Guthman 2007).

Governance of farm animal protection

One of the problems created by the post-war productivist agro-food regime was the intensification of livestock farming, which raised serious doubts about the well-being of farm animals. This issue quickly gained public status in the United Kingdom, the cradle of the modern reflection and regulation over the treatment of animals, with the long tradition of animal protection societies that pursued regulations against animal cruelty (Kean 1998; Villanueva 2018; Woods 2012). The “tipping point” (Rushen 2008, p. 277) of the public debate was the publication of *Animal Machines* by Ruth Harrison (1964), who claimed that a farm animal suffers in ways not predicted by the 1911 Protection of Animals Act; that “[it] is not allowed to live before it dies” (Harrison 1964, p. 3). This publication was followed by the appointment of the Brambell Committee by the government to investigate what was called “welfare” of farm animals in intensive livestock systems and culminated in the 1968 Agricultural Bill (Woods 2012). Operationalisation of welfare as “Five Freedoms” on the basis of the Brambell Report (1965) and the British legislature served as a blueprint for legal solutions in the European Union and some non-European countries (Rushen 2008; Veissier et al. 2008).

However, farm animal welfare has continued to be an unresolved issue. Firstly, the term itself is highly ambiguous. Both veterinary science and agricultural industry conceptualise welfare as physical health and productivity, which is relatively unproblematic for measurement using the tools of the positivist natural sciences. Harrison and Brambell challenged this understanding by claiming that animals probably have mental capacities—“sentience”—that allows them to feel pain, fear, and discomfort. Therefore, a more generous moral consideration should dictate legislation, despite the lack of sufficient evidence in “hard” science. However, the agricultural ministry and the industry contested this postulate as “emotional” and “non-scientific” (Woods 2012). What Brambell called “the benefit of the doubt” since then marks the struggle over the meaning of the term, the viable ways of its study, the legitimate stakeholders that may participate in the discussion, and the extent to which we should

include progressive operationalisations of welfare in legislation (Bock and Buller 2013).

Secondly, the mode of governance of animal welfare leaves plenty of variation in the treatment of farm animals. The European model sets minimum standards of welfare with legal means and encourages more generous practices with other, legally “non-binding” instruments (Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013; Miele et al. 2005). In recent decades, governments especially support cooperation between private companies, which resulted in the establishment of private quality assurance schemes (Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013; Veissier et al. 2008). This tendency is characteristic to the European Union as such, which now prefers to rely on market-based mechanisms for assuring food quality, as “it is unclear how non-trade concerns, such as animal welfare, should be accommodated within the World Trade Organization (WTO) legal framework” (Toschi Maciel and Bock 2013, p. 220). However, while some countries strive to assure higher than minimal standards and give retailers the power to dictate conditions of market entry for domestic producers, it does not prevent retailers from importing cheap livestock products from countries with no welfare standards, which simultaneously triggers the indignation of domestic farmers (Bock and Van Huik 2007). These are mostly Northern European countries that implemented animal welfare regulations as a result of the pressures of their concerned societies (Garner 1998; Veissier et al. 2008).

Finally, the notion of animal welfare as such received criticism for being “philosophically flawed” (Garner 2006, p. 161). Utilitarian philosophy that underpins the idea of welfare assumes animal subordination towards people’s needs, which is to be justified by the difference between them. The criticism of this argument was crystallised in Peter Singer’s famous book *Animal Liberation* in 1975 (Singer 1975). Singer argues that animals as sentient beings capable of suffering have their vital interests which we must take into consideration, even if animals are not morally equivalent to people. Other authors reject utilitarianism entirely and claim that animals have rights; therefore, instead of regulating their use, people should stop using them altogether (Garner 2004).

The “new morality” (Garner 2004, p. 5) necessarily revitalised the movement. It linked the issue of human domination over animals to the postulates of emancipation raised by other NSMs (Munro 2012). For many in the movement, welfare started being an obsolete and ambiguous term when it comes to defining what constitutes “unnecessary suffering” (Garner 2006, p. 163). They associated it with a “conservative” viewpoint, “insider status,” and a “political compromise” (Garner 2006, p. 161, 162). Moreover, some animal protection activists believe that the notion was appropriated by farmers and scientists experimenting on animals who embraced the language of welfare to justify their practices (Garner 2006). The acceptance of

a higher moral status of animals incited activists to a more radical, direct action (Garner 2004). “Animal rights elite” played a crucial role in this revitalisation by creating new organisations and radicalising some of the old ones (Garner 2004, p. 70). Traditionally comprising national groups who follow expert opinions, the new movement consisted of a plenitude of international, national, and local groups of support, the last ones often spontaneously emerging around ad hoc campaigns, “decentralised and unhierarchical” in their nature and directly putting new philosophy in action (Garner 2004, p. 72).

Disillusionment with governments and a new political climate also led to the shift in the movement’s strategy. The breakdown occurred on the line of a disagreement “whether animal protection groups should, on the one hand, seek to engage in a regular dialogue with government, accepting the need for compromises inherent in a pluralistic decision-making structure or, on the other, whether moral purity should be retained in the form of mass campaigns to alter the social climate through influencing consumers and voters” (Garner 2004, p. 6; also see Munro 2012). Scholars also notice the popularity of so-called DIY tactics: the simple cheap spontaneous actions (Munro 2005) that aim to evoke a “moral shock” in the audience by the use of “condensing symbols,” which activate cultural meanings that drive people to join the movement and take action (Jasper and Poulsen 1995). Spontaneous actions comprise such activities as performances in public spaces or distributing leaflets that pamphleteer animal treatment in society and appeal to compassion for animals (Munro 2005).

Moreover, activists embraced ethical vegetarianism, and later veganism, as an identity mark and actively fought against the agricultural industry (Villanueva 2018), also by picketing on farms (Reisner 1992). Already Singer criticised the modern dairy farming for causing animal suffering throughout its lifespan: the manipulation of a cow’s reproductive system to increase productivity, the separation of cows and calves, and the extermination of unproductive animals like older cows and baby bulls (Munro 2012). Meanwhile, celebrities made veganism mainstream (Doyle 2014). Activists embraced this opportunity and promoted veganism as a viable lifestyle choice that simultaneously is a political action (Haenfler et al. 2012). The vegan movement emerged as a “diffuse cultural movement” (Cherry 2006) by including people unaffiliated to any organisation but acting through their everyday purchasing choices. Vegan activism also takes the form of “commodity activism” of promoting plant-based products and delegitimising the products of livestock agriculture, and by that constituting a direct existential threat to the dairy industry (McCrow-Young 2014).

Social media and the governance of agro-food issues

From their very beginning, media technologies played a vital role in the governance of the agro-food domain. Flagship evidence is the role of media in pressuring regulators in the early days of social movements' struggle against the abuses of the agricultural industry (e.g., Seymour et al. 1997; Woods 2012). As Stevens et al. remark, "agro-food institutions, policies or products ultimately build on legitimacy, public opinion or consumer demand, which is constructed through communication in the public realm" (2016, p. 100). The authors were the first to explicitly conceptualise social media as „an important new playing field in the governance of agro-food sustainability" that links "commercial, political, and public interests" in an environment characterised by "the rapid and fluid interaction" (Stevens et al. 2016, p. 99). "Traditional" mass media as one-to-many technologies shape a specific communication environment, often criticised by agro-food stakeholders who feel a lack of influence on news' content and framing (e.g., Reisner 1992; Whitaker and Dyer 2000). However, the specific character of social media as many-to-many media, which enable masses of users to communicate directly and easily generate content, creates new dynamics of communication with the potential to reconfigure relations among agro-food stakeholders.

Drawing on the original review of various disconnected strands of critical literature, Stevens et al. (2016) identify three potential "pathways" of social media influence on agro-food governance. The first pathway concerns the way social media reinforce hypes over agro-food sustainability. Social media enable the viral spread of information across and discursive ramification within filter bubbles. Moreover, social media make possible a direct conversation of all stakeholders, which also allows lay citizens to affect policy directly (Stevens et al. 2016).

The second pathway focuses on self-organisation of the so-called "food movement," or rather various bottom-up local and global "movements," whose common trait is a contestation of the dominant agro-food system. In this domain, Stevens et al. distinguish between alternative food networks (AFNs) and activism. Thanks to social media, various stakeholders connect to create AFNs to bypass powerful intermediaries of conventional food networks. Furthermore, social media support the self-organisation of activism and enable the coalitions of various dispersed groups on a global scale, hence producing temporary connections of movements of different "space, time or ideology" around the issues of common concern (Stevens et al. 2016, p. 103).

Schneider et al. (2018) believe that surprisingly little scholarship concentrates on what they call the "digital food

activism." Literature tends to concentrate on the individual practices related to food and social media and their role for identity and community building. Moreover, food activism scholarship ignores the use of the Internet by activist groups, while digital activism scholarship overlooks digital activism related to food (Schneider et al. 2018). While attempting to fill this gap, Schneider et al. define digital food activism as "an Internet-based, organised effort to change the food system or parts thereof in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media" (2018, p. 8). In this framework, "digital platforms are conceptualized not as *supporting* consumer action, but as *fostering* and *mediating* activism," thus changing the ontology of objects, publics, and platforms; regardless whether activism is "Internet-based" or only "Internet-enhanced" (Schneider et al. 2018, p. 8). Digital food movements succeed new social movements; social media enable them to embrace affordances of connectivity and visibility to enforce transparency of food production (Lewis 2018).

Stevens et al. (2016) believe that the first two pathways represent the way forces of counter-power embrace social media, while the third pathway represents a reappropriation of those technologies in an attempt to secure market hegemony and capital accumulation. This pathway concerns the strategic use of social media data to monitor the activities of consumers and activists. One example is the Peekhaus' study of Monsanto—an agricultural biotechnology giant—whose strategy is to monitor social media data so as to identify the activity and criticism of social movements and distribute own online content about the controversial issues. At some point, Monsanto exceeded mere issue management and started actively framing the conversation on agricultural biotechnology. The result was the creation and dissemination of the discourse about the pivotal role of biotechnology in feeding a growing world population with the use of ever scarcer resources. Monsanto's rebranding as a "green" company attempts at positioning it as the key actor in a sustainable future (Peekhaus 2010).

The third pathway also comprises the use of social media for the marketing of food products, or even shaping consumption trends. In this aspect, social media reflect and strengthen offline relations of power, as powerful actors can afford engagement with data to market their products or ideas, not to mention predict and shape consumption trends. There is evidence that the food and beverage industry is the leader in this race, with retailer companies acquiring social media analytics companies (Stevens et al. 2016).

We may suggest a fourth pathway on the basis of the observation of social media activity of the members of the agricultural industry, along with a combination of various dispersed pieces of literature. This pathway breaks the binary distinction on social media use by forces of power and forces of counter-power. It is about social media as a

tool to appropriate, mobilise, and coordinate communicative labour (Carlone 2008; Greene 2004; Lazzarato 1996) of industry stakeholders. Peekhaus reveals that Monsanto involved its employees in spreading favourable messages about the company; it also practised “plugging in” to “independent” scientific blogs to capitalise on the credibility of more trusted actors and organisations (Peekhaus 2010; see also: Stasik 2017). In fact, agricultural companies also partner with organisations that attempt to involve farmers in advocating for the industry (e.g., AgChat Foundation or Agriculture More Than Ever). On one hand, this advocacy draws on spontaneous vernacular online activity of farmers (Burgess et al. 2015), while, on the other hand, agricultural communication experts attempt to animate this activity for the benefit of the industry by providing communication training for farmers and organising campaigns, aiming at sourcing content from farmers (Brewster 2015; Rotz 2018). Involving farmers in communication work seems problematic due to their largely vulnerable position in the value chain. Nevertheless, despite the size and type of their holding, some farmers willingly engage in action. There are two disconnected streams of the literature, the one supporting the phenomenon with communication expertise (Goodwin et al. 2011; Meyers et al. 2011; Telg and Barnes 2012) and the critical one (Brewster 2015; Luymes 2012; Rotz 2018).

Technology affordances and organising

Schneider et al. state that “examining the affordances of digital platforms is central to the study of digital food activism” (2018, p. 8), as many believe the notion of technology affordances highlights the link between the shape of technology and social change (Faraj and Azad 2012). This statement can be extended on any computer-mediated communication. However, the meaning of the notion of technology affordances is highly contested. My analysis builds on the understanding of technology affordances presented by Faraj and Azad, who define them as “action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology” (2012, p. 238).

Borrowed from works in ecological psychology, the notion of affordances focuses on the mutual relation between an organism’s cognition and environmental conditions. However, Faraj and Azad (2012) note that conceptualisations of affordances tend to situate the definition of action in “the material.” That is, one extracts technology from its social context as imbued with pre-assigned delimited functionalities, which can enable or constrain particular types of action. Simultaneously, the materiality of technology places a limit on social agency (e.g., Treem and Leonardi 2016). Thus, Faraj and Azad suggest following the “relational ontology,” which situates affordances in the interaction

“between particular environment feature and the actors’ specific abilities or circumstances” (2012, p. 251). Rather than analysing “the material” and “the social” separately, Faraj and Azad argue that researchers should focus on the “constitutive entanglement” or “technology enactment in practice” (2012, p. 249).

Furthermore, they argue that this approach will resituate technology use within the social context of user capabilities, goals, social structure, and relations of power. The bundle of features that constitute technology affordances will change depending on the goal of a user and the social context of use. Therefore, affordances are “both functional ... and relational” (Faraj and Azad 2012, p. 253), as material functionalities allow or constrain particular kinds of action, but users may appropriate the same functionalities of the system differently.

Methods

This study follows Faraj and Azad’s imperative of analysing “technology enactment in practice” (2012, p. 249). The Februdairy campaign is an extreme case (Flyvbjerg 2006) of mediated communication in the agro-food domain. In response to an overwhelming criticism by animal protection activists online, the campaign—hijacked by the activists—mobilised key actors, coalitions, and discourses on farm animal protection around one hashtag. As I was specifically interested in the strategic adoption of social media functionalities, I focused my analysis on the publications emerging around the campaign, which goal, among others, was to mobilise participants to enact technology in a particular way.

I collected available online publications about the campaign, mainly articles in traditional and online press, blog posts, YouTube videos, and podcasts. I manually sifted through the first 200 results in Google to choose the most relevant and informative pieces. Then, I classified the collected issues based on their source. I identified 59 items from 52 agricultural sources (or sources openly supporting the dairy industry), 62 items from 49 activists’ sources (or sources openly advocating the vegan cause), and 23 items from 23 general media outlets and other non-farming and non-activist sources. Moreover, I classified each of them according to the type, authorship, place, and date of publication. The degree of fullness and representativeness of the dataset collected with a commercial search engine is not known. However, due to the interpretive character of the study, this sampling method allowed me to acquire a saturated understanding of the strategic approaches of social media use of Februdairy participants. Using NVivo 10 software for qualitative data analysis, I coded items, creating a separate tree of codes for each cluster of publications. I coded inductively by tracing emerging facts, actors, and

themes to reconstruct two visibly distinct strategies of social media functionalities' adoption.

Case study

Februdairy campaign

Februdairy was a campaign launched on Twitter by Dr Jude Capper, livestock sustainability researcher and expert in agricultural communication, to promote the British dairy industry in February 2018. The concept of the campaign was created by "industry experts" in the previous year, as a result of anxiety over the growing market share of plant-based products and shrinking legitimacy of dairy farming, to which vegan activists actively contributed. However, it was the proclaimed success of the Veganuary campaign that directly triggered the launch of Februdairy (*Ontario AgCast—Dr. Jude Capper 2018*). Veganuary is a yearly campaign that promotes switching to a vegan diet for the month of January. In 2018, its organisers announced a record-breaking number of participants who declared themselves as omnivores (Land 2018).

Capper recalls (*Ontario AgCast—Dr. Jude Capper 2018*) that the atmosphere of anxiety related to the success of Veganuary during the Semex conference in Glasgow between 14th and 16th of January 2018 directly inspired her to challenge the audience to "embrace #Februdairy" (Parrott 2018). On the 19th of January, Capper initiated the campaign by tweeting: "Let's make #Februdairy happen this year. 28 days, 28 positive #dairy posts. From cute calves and #cheese on crumpets, to belligerent bulls and juicy #beef #burgers—who's in?" The tweet was accompanied by the picture of calves on pasture. The tweet became viral. It was also widely disseminated on other media platforms.

The goal of Februdairy campaign was to produce positive online content about the British dairy industry and its products in order to counterweigh the negative publicity created by the vegan movement (Parrott 2018). The Februdairy hashtag was created for this purpose. Hashtag (#) is a functionality of social media platforms that organizes a conversation on a particular topic. Agricultural magazines invited all industry stakeholders to participate, including consumers who were urged to express gratefulness to farmers and share recipes and images of food. However, they especially emphasised farmers, encouraged to post and retweet materials to promote the benefits of dairy, tell their own story, and share authentic images of their work. However, animal protection activists immediately hijacked the hashtag, that is, they used it to post masses of content changing its original meaning (e.g., Gilkerson and Tusinski Berg 2017) so that it dismisses the dairy industry (Parrott 2018). Although Twitter was the main site of the campaign, materials related to

Februdairy also appeared in other online places. Moreover, there was considerable coverage of the event in local and national British mass media, with programs that directly confronted main figures of the animal protection movement and representatives of the farming community.

Februdairy as an Outcome of a Struggle between the British Dairy Industry and New Social Movements

The United Kingdom is the third largest producer of milk in the European Union according to Eurostat. In 2017, the country delivered almost 15 billion litres of this commodity (*Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2017 2018*). Between 1992 and 2012 it was also the tenth milk-producing country in the world (FAOSTAT; cited in: Bate 2016). Moreover, milk is the most important agricultural commodity in the UK, in 2017 worth £4.34 billion of value of production (*Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2017 2018*).

However, this bright picture is complicated by acute struggles within the sector. In the productivist era, the competition among farmers was buffered and their bargaining power enhanced by statutory milk boards, whose goal was to sell milk on behalf of each farmer, while the profit was redistributed proportionately to the input of milk. However, as a result of the state's neoliberal withdrawal in the 1980s and 1990s from regulating agriculture, milk boards were dissolved. Farmers—prevented by policy-makers from organising substantial cooperatives and more and more exposed to global commodity markets—saw a year-to-year fluctuation of farmgate milk prices. This was caused, according to the farming community and some commentators, by the weak bargaining power against consolidating dairy processors and retailers (Cardwell 2015), with the top five of the latter owning currently around 70% of liquid milk market (*Dairy statistics: An insider's guide 2016*) and occasionally selling milk cheaper than bottled water. In the peak of one of the crises in the summer of 2012 the average farmgate price fell below the cost of production. Fluctuation of prices sparked a series of protests, largely aimed at gaining the sympathy of the public opinion as a currency against the more powerful actors of the supply chain and the government (Cardwell 2015). In Cardwell's (2015) opinion, we should interpret the milk protests as an expression of belief that the market is dysfunctional and requires state correction. However, the state mostly abstained from any formal intervention in favour of farmers and even undermined attempts of floor price fixing within the supply chain by arguing that it goes against the interest of consumers.

Moreover, the economic pressure initiated a thorough restructuring of the dairy sector, similar to the one observed in the United States and the European Union

countries. At present, there are fewer overall holdings and cattle while the general proportion of concentrated holdings that rear higher-producing cows increases constantly (e.g., March et al. 2014). To give a sense of the situation, only from April 2002, the UK has lost more than half of its dairy holdings (*Producer numbers* 2019). Intensive farms show resilience to price fluctuations due to greater efficiency and scale. However, they also cause unrest within the farming community, as they may “squeeze out” smaller farms and change the rural socio-economic structure by removing farms to urban suburbs (Levitt 2010).

Moreover, intensive farms that mostly keep the animals in-house (March et al. 2014) are also at odds with the image of the British countryside as dominated by an all-summer grazing regimen and the public association of welfare with the outdoors (Ellis et al. 2009; March et al. 2014). March et al. (2014) point at leg and feet diseases, mastitis, and retained placenta as health-related problems more likely in the housing systems; on the other hand, grazing cows are more exposed to the risk of lameness, milk fever, and weather conditions. The proponents of in-house systems argue that they allow greater veterinary and nutritional care due to technology and presence of employed experts; at the same time, these systems enable environmental gains due to better manure management and the increased productivity of cows which enable a reduction in their numbers. Some industry experts call to “embrace [the] diversity” of available systems and techniques in order to respond to complex demands of the current economy, involving market demand, growing population, animal welfare and reproduction of ecosystems. They also frame criticism of large-scale in-house farming as being based on emotions as opposed to voices based on science (*Dairy farming systems in Great Britain* 2010). Nevertheless, the Farm Animal Welfare Council (2009) notices that there is a direct relationship between tightening margins and the capacity of smaller-scale farmers to assure the expected level of welfare. Therefore, securing farmers’ income is a necessity.

Furthermore, the British dairy sector experiences growing criticism from the side of social movements. Seymour et al. (1997) describe how the controversy over farm pollution in the 1980s recalibrated the agenda of the environmental movement, concerned mainly with the issues of biodiversity and landscape, and marked a breakthrough in the public perception of farming. This shift occurred partly due to the intensified activity of environmental organisations, partly due to the in-migration of urban middle classes to rural areas, attracted by their idyllic public image. The legitimacy of farmers as stewards of the countryside and patriotic food producers—perpetuated in the “productivist” period—was undermined to the extent that they became “environmental others” (Seymour et al. 1997). Moreover, Seymour et al.

(1997) highlight how farmers struggled to acknowledge the industrial character of their practices and how the monitoring of farms by neighbours and activists contributed to their defensiveness towards activists and newcomers, framed as urban, middle-class, and misinformed about the actual farming practices. As mentioned above, the UK simultaneously is the cradle of reflection on and activism for farm animal welfare (Woods 2012). With the revival of the movement in the 1980s, farmers saw locally-organised grassroots groups in direct action (Garner 2004). Moreover, the 1990s and 2000s brought numerous outbreaks of infectious diseases, which raised the public awareness about the link between animal welfare in intensive farm systems and food safety (Miele et al. 2005), along with the controversies about the welfare of animals in intensive in-house systems (Levitt 2010; March et al. 2014).

The coincidence of deregulation and the growing political power of social movements marks the transition from rural politics to the politics of the rural; from state regulation of the sector in favour of farmer groups to the relative lack of government’s intervention, accompanied by the involvement of social movements in the shaping of policies that affect agriculture (Woods 2003). For farmers, this change engendered several consequences. Firstly, they became much more exposed to price fluctuations and forced to increase even more efficiency of their operations to keep up with the market pressure. Secondly, they were forced to bargain with other actors of the supply chain—mainly dairy processors and retailers—in order to capture what they perceived as a fair share of value. Thirdly, they had to bargain with the government to prove their economic and social importance. Finally, they found it necessary to create a direct connection with non-farming citizens, who became new mediators of agricultural and rural politics, also by voting with their wallets (Cardwell 2015; Woods 2003).

Regaining the tarnished public support demanded a “re-imaging” of British agriculture (Holloway 2004). Holloway (2004) summarises various instances of such efforts: from targeting the national and the EU government with particular images of farming through rural protests borrowing NSMs tactics aimed at the public opinion to the “quality turn” in marketing. Holloway studied farmers’ involvement in displaying and explaining farming practices during agricultural shows and describes how the discourse proposed by participants stems from framing non-farmers as disconnected from actual farming and misguided by “non-scientific” social movements, therefore in need of education about farming practices and the significance of farming for the national and rural economy and culture (Holloway 2004). In recent years, numerous similar initiatives emerged, such as the Open Farm Sunday (<https://farmsunday.org/>). They usually organise as a cooperation of various industry stakeholders, from charities and farmer unions to the agricultural ministry,

input providers, processors, and retailers. All these initiatives emphasise the key role of all farmers in the endeavour of creating positive publicity of British agriculture and agricultural industry as such. Despite the problematic image of farming in recent decades, farmers still enjoy a relatively high public trust. Moreover, farmers can take advantage of their key position in the food chain and claim the “authenticity” of their representation (Brewster 2015; Holloway 2004).

Attempts to maintain the legitimacy of dairy agriculture are thus another manifestation of “re-imaging” agriculture that links the potentially conflicted actors—farmers and agribusiness companies. In the “productivist” era, the Milk Marketing Board—an organisation representing dairy farmers—used to spend some of its profit for memorable milk advertisements, prepared by professional advertising agencies. Those campaigns promoted milk as nutritious and enjoyable, which strengthened the image of milk as a necessary element of the British everyday culture (Maynard 2018). However, the Board dissolved as a consequence of deregulation. At the moment, one must distinguish between the advertising of branded dairy products by processors and the efforts to secure the legitimacy and demand for dairy as such, undertaken by the various farmer and industry organisations. AHDB Dairy (Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board), a statutory levy financed by a percentage of farmers’ profit on each litre of milk, spends a fraction of its budget on the creation of a positive image of dairy farming, for instance by targeting schools with materials that promote dairy. AHDB Dairy cooperates in this respect with other actors, mostly Dairy UK, an organisation of dairy processors. For instance, they run a website “Tell It Like It Is” (<https://www.tellitlikeitis.co.uk/>) which provides farmers with content they can use to communicate the benefits of dairy to the public. Recently, they jointly launched the campaign “Department of Scrumptious Dairy Affairs,” which involves conventional means of advertising, but also encourages farmers to get involved on social media (*Consumer campaign. Be scrumptious* n.d.). Those initiatives mostly concentrate on communicating the health properties of milk, but also attempt to address other emerging concerns, such as environment and welfare.

According to Agridata (2015), a commercial survey of media use by British farmers, already 85% of farms had Internet access in 2015, while it was only 29% in 2000. 94% of respondents who have Internet access use it “for farm business.” 16% of respondents declared to access the Internet for this purpose several times a day, while 21%—once a day. Of those that use the Internet daily, 56% access it via smartphone, 43% via tablet, and 38% via desktop or laptop. (Agridata 2015: *Connectivity* 2015). Probably no quantitative data is available on the use of social media by farmers; however, an exploratory observation of online platforms and farming press reveals a substantial presence of farmers.

Twitter saw the emergence of communities mostly organised around hashtags and accounts, either general or involving producers of particular commodities (Burbi and Rose 2016); for example, #clubhectare and #teamdairy. @AgriChatUK account, potentially the biggest farming community, has 25.5 k followers. Some actors in the industry discovered that the “re-imaging” of agriculture can be extended to embrace online sociality, as farmers’ “personal publics” (Schmidt 2014) consist of either industry-related or non-farming followers. Recent years saw various campaigns aimed at sourcing favourable content from farmers with hashtags (see e.g., #felfies, #glyphosateisvital, #farm24); #Februdairy was one of them.

Vegan activists: the affordance of hashtag hijacking

The analysis of empirical material revealed two different strategies of social media use by two antagonistic groups. The first group consists of animal protection activists – called “vegan activists” by the industry—and users who support the vegan cause. Some of them use their accounts on social media platforms to target the accounts and hashtags related to the livestock industry and disseminate counter-messages, sometimes by combining numerous hashtags in a single message to increase post reach. However, the Februdairy hashtag constitutes an example of a critical mobilisation. The empirical material revealed that the calls to participate appeared on Twitter, third-party platforms dedicated for mobilising online activism, and websites for activists, organisations, and projects that promote vegan nutrition and lifestyle, which clearly follow the “animal liberation” or “animal rights” philosophy. The event mobilised activists and organisations based in the UK, but also in other English-speaking countries along with France and Germany. International organisations also appeared in the sample. The analysis revealed no distinct leaders but distributed leadership instead. However, influential vegan activists supported the cause and represented it in programs broadcasted in traditional media.

The message that clearly emerged from virtually all publications was that one must reject dairy agriculture based on the ethical grounds that animals are sentient beings. The argumentation was based on comparisons that suggested the moral equivalence of humans and animals. What in the eyes of vegan activists makes the dairy industry even worse than the meat industry is the constant suffering of animals through their whole lifespan. The fact that “in order to maximize milk production, cows are subjected to a relentless cycle of impregnation, birth, lactation, and re-impregnation” (Neff 2018) was presented as “rape” or “sexual assault,” while the separation of cows from new-born calves—as inhumane treatment. The slaughter of unproductive animals, including male calves and exploited milk cows, was framed

as murder, even if people were later to consume their meat. Moreover, drinking the milk intended for other species' offspring was presented by some not only as theft but also as unnatural, disgusting, and repellent, while the use of animal bodies for profit was interpreted as exploitation. Some publications supported the ethical argument with additional argumentation that dairy is also bad for health and the environment; therefore, its existence is unjustified. Switching to plant-based agriculture was, thus, presented as a solution to all the pressing agriculture-related problems of the contemporary world.

The above message was to appear in tweets and other publications, both in textual form and accompanied by embedded materials: infographics, memes, links to articles, images, and films presenting the abuses of animals. Furthermore, some publications strived to deconstruct the strategy of the other side, but also discussed the proper online behaviour based on the experience of online interactions. For example, one of the British activists suggested that “[t]he most effective attacks on the industry were ones relying on *common practices*, ones farmers knew they could not deny. The fact that calves are *usually* separated from their mothers, the fact that dairy cows almost *always* go to slaughter and sharing real images of this happening gained the most online traction” (*Why Februdairy failed* 2018; emphasis mine). Therefore, the ultimate goal should not necessarily be to stigmatise particular organisations and incidents, discuss necessary welfare improvements, or praise particular management regimens, but rather to undermine the very logic of dairy production, which cannot be concealed with ethics. Interestingly, for exactly this reason, some industry participants criticise vegan activists' arguments and the supporting materials for inauthenticity and inaccuracy.

Moreover, a clear message emerges from the sample about the broader strategy. In order to achieve the goal of protecting animals along with protecting public health and natural resources, consumers should switch to a vegan lifestyle. Therefore, activists are urged to promote it along with particular plant-based products and their producers, while simultaneously destroying the value of livestock-derived products. This is to bring market disruption that would make livestock agriculture infeasible. Some authors urged farmers and other industry members to change their profession or switch to plant production. The authors almost unanimously framed Februdairy as a failure and a sign of industry's “desperation:” the amount of content produced on Twitter, the actions of big companies switching to plant-based production, and the market results of plant-based products all prove the general trend of the British society's veganisation. Some authors also mocked Februdairy participants for low social media campaigning literacy—in their opinion—and debunked them for not being a “grassroots” movement. Some argued that the industry's message cannot

be trusted as its representatives have a financial stake in the exploitation of animals.

Dairy industry: the affordance of crowdsourcing transparency

In the case of the second group, there was a clear leader (Dr Capper) who advertised the campaign during the industry conference and then launched it on Twitter (Yates 2018). The mobilisation tapped into existing online professional and personal networks among farmers and other industry representatives, mostly processors and businesses that provide inputs and services to dairy farmers. Activists' mobilisation occurred via Twitter, but the most important agricultural magazines disseminated the call, along with Capper's list of tips on how to conduct conversations on social media. Participants not only produced tweets but also used other channels or even organised happenings. Some of them used this opportunity to promote their businesses.

The campaign had a number of goals widely repeated in publications. One of them was the use of the #Februdairy hashtag to produce “positive” content about the dairy industry that would counteract the negative content created by activists. Agricultural magazines encouraged farmers to use ready-made content available, for example, on “Tell It Like It Is” website, but also to post “authentic” content from their farms. On the other hand, consumers were urged to publish images of their food and share recipes. Another goal of Februdairy was to “celebrate” the “diversity” of the British dairy industry. This celebration concerned either the diversity of tasty and healthy products or the diversity of management regimens, all supposedly providing necessary care for animals. The goal of the campaign was also to “debunk myths” about dairy farming, as organisers framed some of the messages spread by activists.

Some sources provided information that the Februdairy campaign targets the “middle ground—[the] people who simply don't understand what [farmers] do every day”—rather than vegan activists (Parrott 2018). While the latter are to be “convinced” and constitute a minority of society, the former are to be negatively affected by the content flowing through social media and then picked up by more established media outlets. Therefore, consumers were to be misinformed, confused, and full of remorse. In such a situation, it is the obligation of the industry to provide accurate information “for those who want to learn about [the dairy sector]” (Ashworth 2018). It seems that the goal of such a discursive strategy was not to show the vegan diet as illegitimate, but rather to secure a market niche of those who would continue purchasing milk and its products. As noted by a representative of an input company, “[t]here is space for each of us to exist and exercise our rights as an informed consumer and business” (Talbot 2018). The same participant

raised the need for transparency of the supply chain to satisfy consumer expectations.

Interestingly, many practices that raise the ethical doubts of activists actually do occur in the dairy industry. Therefore, the question arises how the transparency and myth-debunking of the dairy industry are to be understood and practised. We may infer some techniques from the empirical material. Firstly, participants may deny “obvious lies;” the instances of false information disseminated by activists. Secondly, participants may object to generalisations about the dairy industry: cases of “abuses” should be perceived as exceptions that could happen everywhere. Finally, participants may avoid addressing accusations—following Capper’s advice not to engage with “emotional content.” It is not because they deny that the contentious practices occur, but rather because they perceive comparisons that imply symmetry between animals and humans as inadequate and, therefore, abusive and irrelevant to the participants. The industry participants operate in the epistemic paradigm that justifies the use of animals by humans, although in compliance with all the standards of welfare that they claim to guard.

Some participants enriched the aforementioned arguments by including further social benefits of the British dairy industry. The consumption of British dairy was to provide environmental benefits as it preserves British pastures, with their capacity to absorb carbon dioxide and maintain biodiversity. It also supports local food systems and thwarts the necessity to transport food over long distances. On the other hand, plant-based agriculture is to promote crop monocultures and emissions from transportation. Furthermore, participants referred to the issue of social justice by underlining “the work that goes behind the humble glass of milk” (*#FebruDairy: Social media aims to celebrate whole month of dairy* 2018) along with the positive impact of dairy farms on the rural economy and culture. Moreover, one of the viral tweets created by a farmer indicated the specificity of the British farmland, largely unsuited to the production of crops. Finally, participants positioned themselves as guardians of animal welfare who warn of the destruction of the British dairy industry with its high welfare standards, which would allow the import of cheap meat and dairy from unregulated markets.

Conclusions and further research

The application of Faraj and Azad’s (2012) perspective on technology affordances enabled this study to highlight two distinct manners of the use of a similar bundle of technical features across Twitter, other online platforms, and old media platforms: hashtag hijacking and crowdsourcing transparency. Although different, they both exploit the idea that social media allow to highlight the “truth” about

food production. Importantly, we may mostly associate these two types of technology affordances with pre-existing social relations within the agro-food system, centred around particular ethics, epistemologies, and interests. The functionalities of social media platforms that seemingly enable open and direct dialogue about issues of common concern—as implied by the “affordances-within-technology” scholarship—in the studied case seem to strengthen a specific social structure.

Hashtag hijacking aimed at mobilising mostly animal protection activists associated with the agenda of animal liberation, animal rights, and a lifestyle-driven social change in the way we treat animals. The goal was to delegitimise the dairy industry by undermining its ethicality and rationality, convince consumers to abandon dairy, promote the consumption of plant-based products, and praise corporations that change their business models. The hashtag actually became a platform to create social change with the means of market disruption. However, differently than the mechanism of governmental regulation, the market mechanism in a globalised economy does not necessarily solve the ambiguity in the treatment of farm animals on a given territory, as corporations continue running their business as usual simultaneously to developing vegan solutions targeted at ethical consumers. Moreover, dismantling the industry in one country does not prevent retailers from importing livestock products from other markets, as long as there is a demand. Finally, disruptive market mechanisms do not offer food producers a sustainable path of transition towards a different animal management regimen or plant-based production.

Crowdsourcing transparency, on the other hand, aimed at sourcing “positive” messages about the British dairy industry from industry stakeholders, especially farmers and—hopefully—consumers. The goals were to counteract negative publicity and familiarise the public with the perspective of the dairy industry with the support of data and first-hand materials. Here, interesting issues emerged. Firstly, veterinarian scientists and agricultural input providers played a substantial role in framing within the dairy industry an understanding of social movements, agro-food issues, and ways of governing them. This agrees with the results of the research conducted in the United States and Canada (Reisner 1992; Rotz 2018). Secondly, the language of farmers’ struggles—both class-based and identity-based—conflated with the promotion of the dairy industry as it did in other instances of “re-imaging” agriculture (Holloway, 2004). As the realisation of economic value via market exchange (Fontenelle 2015) appears to be endangered by activists, the dairy industry actors unite to maintain consumers’ disposition to purchase domestic dairy products. We may ask to what extent does the online visibility of anti-industry activism drive this anxiety regardless of its actual impact? Or, even,

does it not serve as a pretext for some actors to channel the energy of the dairy industry actors towards communication on welfare rather than solving challenges related to welfare and internal struggles.

The following study presents a snapshot of online interactions based on a limited set and type of data; therefore, further studies should overcome its limitations. Stevens et al. (2016) conclude that governance scholarship should understand the outcomes of feedback loops enabled by mediated communication by applying the computational analysis of social media data, accompanied by contextual knowledge. Burgess et al. (2015) conducted such a study on the sample of tweets contributing to the Australian Twitter chat on agricultural issues; however, they focused mostly on providing quantitative metrics. Further research may expand the current study by collating the analysis of the strategic approach to technology use with its actual use through a comprehensive analysis of Twitter data containing the Februdairy hashtag. Moreover, in-depth interviews with participants would allow us to better understand their reasons for engagement in action and the choice of adopted tactics and strategies, but also the impact on those tactics and strategies of direct interaction with opponents, the creation of new unexpected coalitions, and the changes in the perception of the problem of farm animal well-being or the perception of a contested group. Finally, for the purpose of comparison, scholarship still needs studies on social media governance of other agro-food sustainability issues, such as food quality, the environmental impact of its production, and the situation of food producers and rural areas.

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