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Moving beyond direct marketing with new mediated models: evolution *of* or departure *from* alternative food networks?

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Abstract

For some time we have seen a shift away from direct marketing, a core feature and dominant exchange form in the alternative food world, towards a greater role for intermediation. Yet, we still need to better understand to what extent and in what ways new mediated Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) represent an evolution *of* or departure *from* core tenets of alternative food systems. This paper focuses on AFNs with new intermediaries that connect small-scale producers with urban end-consumers. Based on original research in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Calgary, we analyze three different types of mediated AFNs: one driven by consumers, one by an external intermediary, and one by producers. Our cases include non-capitalist, capitalist, and alternative capitalist economic practices as identified by Gibson-Graham. Conceptually, we base our analysis on the three-pillar-model of alternative agri-food systems, which we further refine. Besides comparing our cases with each other, for heuristic purposes we also compare them with an ideal-type model that adheres to core tenets of alterity in all three pillars. Our empirical analysis shows that intermediary organizations can bring important benefits and that mediated AFNs are in principle able to hold true to the core tenets of alternative agri-food systems. However, it is very important to develop models of democratic control and ownership as well as economic arrangements in which created value is fairly shared. Only then can the potentials of new mediated models be realized while the pitfalls of the conventional systems they seek to replace be avoided.

Keywords Alternative Food Networks (AFN) · Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) · Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) · Direct marketing

Abbreviations

AFN	Alternative Food Networks
AOTM	Agriculture of the Middle
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
SFSC	Short Food Supply Chain
VBSC	Value Based Supply Chain

Introduction

We are experiencing a transformation of the alternative food world and its established tools and models. New alternative food initiatives are developing along a continuum between two opposing poles. On the one hand, there are groups working for a radical transformation of our current agri-food system. Beyond just focusing on healthy and organic products, they seek to avoid traditional distribution systems (i.e., wholesale and retail) and wish to create an alternative economy. Such an economy shall be based on principles of solidarity, of food as a human right and not a commodity, and of sufficiency instead of continuous growth (Kalfagianni and Skordili 2018; Tilzey 2018; Vivero-Pol et al. 2019). On the other hand, alternative agri-food systems, including alternative systems of provisioning, are receiving increased attention from the more traditional food, retail, and e-commerce sectors. These sectors see significant market and profit potential in alternative food (Clapp and Scrinis 2017; Forcum 2014; Phillipov and Kirkwood 2019; Sexton et al.

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2019). Hence, we observe two contradictory trends: attempts to radically de-commodify food and attempts to bring the alternative food world under corporate control.[1]

Importantly, and the focus of this article, both trends rely on forms of mediation, and as such are indicative of the ongoing shift away from direct marketing as a core feature of and the dominant exchange form in the alternative food world. In direct marketing, exemplified by farmers' market or on-farm-sales, producers sell directly to consumers without involving any third-party actor (Feagan 2008). As has been discussed for some time, direct marketing has many advantages (most importantly, producers retaining a greater share of sales revenue), but adds labor and marketing costs, limits scalability, and may be unreliable for producers (Argüelles et al. 2018; Bloom and Hinrichs 2011a; Dimitri and Gardner 2019). Introducing intermediary organizations that connect producers and consumers may be a particularly promising way of addressing these challenges. However, this approach raises many questions, such as: How can such mediated networks be organized in a way that still holds true to the ideals of alternative agri-food systems? How can intermediaries help producers reach a greater customer base without losing the ethical standards of sustainable and just food systems? How do these new mediated models of producer–consumer relations alter the types of relationships made possible in established forms of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs),[2] and with what consequences? This leads us to our main research question: In what way do these new mediated models represent an evolution *of* or departure *from* core tenets of alternative food systems? Following earlier works exploring similar tensions (especially Mount 2012; Mount and Smither 2014),[3] our paper addresses this question by focusing on recently established forms of mediated AFNs that connect small-scale and mostly urban and peri-urban producers with end-consumers, i.e., private households, by introducing an intermediary organization.

Intermediation has mostly been discussed so far with a focus on how to better connect mid-size farms with businesses like restaurants and small grocery shops; with schools, universities, or hospitals through institutional procurement arrangements (e.g., farm-to-school or farm-to-hospital); or through food hubs (Blay-Palmer et al. 2013; Brislen 2018; Conner et al. 2011; Feenstra et al. 2011; Friedmann 2007; Klein 2015; for an excellent overview see Dimitri and Gardner 2019). Related developments are also captured within the evolving Value Based Supply Chains (VBSCs) debate with its specific focus on how to support the declining Agriculture of the Middle (AOTM) (Brekken et al. 2019; Hardesty et al. 2014; Hooks et al. 2017; Stevenson and Pirog 2008; Tewari et al. 2018), and in debates on local food distribution by conventional market channels, or what could be called 'hybrid food networks' (Bloom and Hinrichs 2011b; Ilbery and Maye 2005).

While our cases experience some similar challenges to those identified in this literature, they are not 'piggybacking' on the pre-existing, conventional local food system infrastructure (see Bloom and Hinrichs 2011b, p. 153). Rather, they are developing or adopting entirely new mediation models that create new forms of AFNs. We recognize the importance of intermediated market channels in the alternative food world; in fact, in the USA, as in other countries, the majority of local and organic food is not distributed via direct marketing but through various forms of mediated—including conventional—food supply chains (Dimitri and Gardner 2019; see also for the conventionalization debate Buck et al. 1997; Guthman 2004a, b). Instead of further exploring distribution channels for local food, however, our focus is on what these new forms of intermediation in direct-to/with-consumer networks mean for the alterity of those networks. Finally, while the extensive review provided by Dimitri and Gardner (2019) shows the increasing significance of intermediated marketing channels, less attention has been given to *who* initiates and mediates a network, in what ways, and to what end. These questions are at the core of this paper. Furthermore, while the majority of the above-cited literature centers on external intermediaries, we pay particular attention to new intermediary organizations that have been initiated by either consumers or producers.

In order to provide the necessary conceptual foundation for our analysis, in the section that follows this introduction we first clarify the meaning of 'alternative' in agri-food systems—hence its core tenets—by reviewing what we know about AFNs and by introducing the three-pillar model (Rosol 2020) as an analytical framework. Next, after briefly describing out methods, we present and analyze three recently established AFNs, based on original research in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Calgary in 2017 and 2018. Our three cases represent different ways of overcoming the

[1] Both trends are facilitated and supported by the ubiquity and availability of digital and internet tools. Space does not permit to further explore here, but see, for example, Carolan (2017, 2020) and Rotz et al. (2019).

[2] Generally speaking, AFNs seek to provide a spatial, economic, environmental, and social alternative to conventional food chains. They are usually based on Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs), which are food chains involving fewer actors, more direct connections between producers and consumers, and shorter geographical distance between locales of production and consumption. The shortest option for such food chains is direct marketing.

[3] Mount and Smither (2014, p. 117), for example, in their conclusions present the question of "whether the conventionalization seen in intermediary-led chains is an inevitable outcome in alternative markets (…), or if the cooperative (…) practices common to small-scale, direct marketing groups can be replicated" as the main further research need.

limitations of direct marketing models while still supporting regional, small-scale, and predominantly organic food production and promoting regional and seasonal food systems. We selected one consumer-driven model, one driven by an external intermediary, and one by producers. As the analysis will show, they also differ in their relation to the capitalist economy and include non-capitalist, capitalist, and alternative capitalist economic practices (Gibson-Graham 2006a). We employ and further operationalize the three-pillar model introduced previously for the analysis of our case studies, paying particular attention to their underlying economic models.

In addition, and for heuristic purposes, we not only compare the three cases with each other but discuss them in relation to a particular—and often considered the most radical—type of an AFN, that of an ideal-type Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). We use this 'ideal-type'—in the Weberian sense—as heuristic benchmark. Note that 'ideal-type' as used here does not mean ideal in the sense of 'best' or 'most successful' or even 'most desirable' but refers to an abstract construct against which to compare social reality.[4] A core feature of this ideal-type CSA model is that consumer-members share both risks and rewards of farming, usually by paying anticipated costs of the farm operation and the farmer's salary upfront and, in turn, by benefitting from bumper crops. More than in other alternative food supply chains, CSAs engage in an economic alternative to the industrial corporate driven food system—one based on co-production, reciprocity, and solidarity (Rosol and Schweizer 2012). They therefore serve as a valuable point of reference for our analysis that focuses on economic alternatives. While acknowledging that only one of our cases claims to offer an—already adapted—CSA, we pay specific attention to the extent that all three resemble the ideal-type CSA model and its related (dis)advantages for producers and consumers.

We conclude with reflections on what we can learn from our analysis and derive further research needs in an outlook. This paper does not seek definitive judgement as to which might be the best model, as this will invariably change through collective efforts and according to specific needs. Rather, the contributions of this paper are three-fold: first, within wider debates on the evolving landscape of alternative agri-food systems, we draw attention to the emerging phenomenon of mediated AFNs that connect small-scale producers and end-consumers by introducing an intermediary organization. Second, we provide a conceptual framework that enables scholars, practitioners, and activists to critically interrogate the further development of AFNs. Third, by applying this analytical framework to our three empirical cases, we test and refine the framework while also generating significant insights in response to our main research question.

Our research shows that mediated Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) do not necessarily go against core tenets of alternative agri-food systems. However, the question is not whether or not this is the case, but rather which characteristics of mediated SFSCs we need to pay special attention to. Our approach of differentiating and analyzing three types of intermediaries based on the three-pillar-model shows the significance of: who initiates and controls a network; who owns the necessary infrastructure including platforms and data; whether the value created is shared fairly; and whether, and through which mechanisms, democratic control of the network and equal and free cooperation between all actors is enabled and guaranteed; ultimately, whether and how new mediated networks enable further commodification or instead work towards de-commodification of food. With our conceptual contributions as well as empirical insights we hope to inform debates on evolving ways of connecting urban consumers with rural, peri-urban, and urban farmers, with the aim of fostering fairer and more sustainable agri-food systems.

Situating emerging models of mediated alternative producer–consumer relationships

The three-pillar model of alternative agri-food systems

To determine the extent to which the introduction of intermediaries brings about a departure from core tenets of alternative agri-food systems, we must first clarify what these core tenets are; in other words: what makes 'alternative agri-food systems' alternative? Alternative agri-food systems can be understood on a basic level as alternatives to the conventional or industrial food system in response to environmental, health, justice, and ethical concerns (Kneafsey et al. 2008; Maye et al. 2007; Tregear 2011). However, acknowledging that the alternative versus conventional binary is rarely clear-cut, we need to further dissect the term 'alternative'. Watts et al. (2005) introduced a helpful distinction between alternative *food* (1) and alternative *networks* (2):

[4] The German sociologist Max Weber conceived the notion of 'ideal-types' as methodological tools to help understand and analyze social reality: "(…) we can make the characteristic features of [the relationship between empirical data and an abstract construct] pragmatically clear and understandable by reference to an ideal-type. This procedure can be indispensable for heuristic as well as expository purposes. The ideal typical concept (…) is not a description of reality (…) In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a utopia. (…) research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal-construction approximates to or diverges from reality (…)" (Weber 1949 [1905], p. 90).

(1) The first variant denotes alternatives to nutritionally poor and conventionally produced foods. These *alternative foods* include, for example, organic or high-quality products. Regional products and regional labels also play a special role (see e.g., Parrott et al. 2002). Corresponding research often focuses on consumption (Goodman and Goodman 2009, p. 209; Barnett et al. 2010) and the emphasis is on the *turn to quality* (Goodman 2003), triggered in part by various food scares. The definition of quality is, of course, highly contextual and may include different factors, such as taste, origin, animal welfare, agroecological practices, local food, absence of additives and genetic engineering, safety of production and processing, and environmentally-friendly packaging.

(2) The second variant refers to *alternative distribution channels and production-consumption relations*, which define AFNs in a narrower sense. AFNs can be understood as a critique of and practical alternative to the dominant industrial food (distribution) system. They are economic networks that seek to transform production-consumption relations by providing a spatial, economic, environmental, and social alternative to conventional food chains (Renting et al. 2003; see for a recent review Rosol 2018a). AFN models include, for example, farmers' markets and weekly (organic) food-box-delivery-schemes. Many farmers, including those within our sample, use these mostly direct marketing channels (Feagan 2008).

A main characteristic of AFNs is that they are based on *Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs)*. SFSCs are food chains involving fewer actors and can be understood both spatially and functionally (Renting et al. 2003; Watts et al. 2005). In contrast to conventional food supply chains, wholesalers and retailers usually play a subordinate role, or no role at all. Countering the highly complex and now largely global value chains, AFNs aim to connect consumers whose food consumption is guided ethically or ecologically (Clarke 2008) with food producers. Producers depend on urban demand and are mainly from rural or peri-urban areas (Jarosz 2008), although some are also urban farmers (Mincyte and Dobernig 2016; Rosol 2018b).

Participating producers are able to charge higher prices and retain a far larger portion of revenues compared to conventional distribution systems. Importantly, AFNs are geared towards economic feasibility in order to secure livelihoods (Hinrichs 2000, p. 299; Follett 2009, p. 33). At the same time, they are guided by normative ideas of more ecologically sensitive, direct, and small-scale food production, distribution, and consumption cycles. AFNs are often based on trust and personal interaction (Jarosz 2008). Lee (2000, p. 138) speaks of companies that operate within market logic but outside the capitalist norm of sole profit orientation. That producers must make a living is very important to keep in mind when evaluating new forms of SFSC.

(3) *Alternative economies*: In order to address the ongoing incorporation of alternative food characteristics by conventional food industries for profit-making purposes, Rosol (2020) argues that we must look beyond products or distribution systems alone, and need to address the economic organization of these networks and their participants. Over time, aspects of alternative food (e.g., food safety and health, organic, regional, and Fair Trade) have been appropriated by conventional producers and retailers, with most sales of organic products achieved in conventional retailing (Bernzen 2014). More transformative goals, such as living wages, fostering small-scale, sustainable agriculture, and improving long-term soil fertility, have not been incorporated to the same extent, and the problematic socioeconomic relations and production conditions of the current industrial food system are largely ignored (Goodman and Goodman 2009; Follett 2009). The massive entry of large companies into now lucrative organic markets, referred to as conventionalization of organic agriculture (for California see Guthman 2004a; see also Goodman and Goodman 2007), is a testimony to the limits of individualizing consumerist framings of 'alternative food', which neglect social and economic conditions of production and consumption.

Watts et al. (2005) already note that a sole focus on product quality without paying attention to the networks that put them into circulation leave them vulnerable to conventional food supply chains while not countering the problematic trends within the industrial food sector. However, even a focus on alternative distribution channels does not guarantee that these can, intend to, or do counteract the currently dominant food system structurally. To address this challenge, Rosol (2020) enhances the analytical distinction proposed by Watts et al. (2005) by adding the dimension of the economy itself. Instead of speaking of two *types* of AFNs, as Watts et al. (2005) do, Rosol (2020) proposes to distinguish between different *dimensions* or *pillars* (see Table 1). Such conceptualization allows for a more precise empirical analysis of existing agri-food systems. Using this approach, we are better able to consider whether the alterity of an AFN relates to the products, to the production-consumption relationships, or to the forms of enterprise organization—or to what extent all three dimensions of alterity may work together.

AFNs are not necessarily based on alternative economies. To untangle hybridity and explore alternative-capitalist and non-capitalist economies, the heuristic framework by Gibson-Graham provides five economic categories: enterprise, labor, property, transactions, and finances (Gibson-Graham

Table 1 The three pillars of alternative agri-food systems with examples (slightly modified from Rosol 2020)

Alternative Food	Alternative Networks	Alternative Economies
Organic food Quality and specialty food Regional/local food labels and marketing …	Direct marketing (e.g., farmers' markets, direct deliveries, on-farm sales, Community Supported Agriculture—CSA) Urban agriculture Fair Trade …	Social enterprises Co-operatives (land, food co-ops) Solidarity economy Food sharing Volunteer and in-kind labor …

2006a, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). Considering these categories, we see that many AFNs, like conventional enterprises, are geared towards economic viability, treat food as a commodity, and are based on wage labor, private property, and classic financing methods (Watts et al. 2005, p. 33). Producers and other AFN actors (e.g., processors, distributors) must maintain economic considerations precisely because they seek to make a living (Lee 2000, p. 140). However, AFNs that operate outside of capitalist economic frameworks do exist. They may seek to de-commodify food by distancing it from market forces and from market-based value systems. They may be characterized by other forms of economic transactions (e.g., barter, donation, gifting, collecting, production for self-consumption), work practices (e.g., unpaid work of members, equal pay for all employees regardless of rank), economic organization (e.g., co-operatives, collectives), and financing (e.g., member loans, co-operative shares, crowdfunding). These kinds of diverse and already existing non-capitalist practices are precisely what the diverse economies approach seeks to uncover, acknowledging that not all such approaches are desirable or inherently progressive (Gibson-Graham 2008).

Integrating the three pillars: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

We argue that emerging AFNs, such as our cases, can be evaluated against an ideal-type—in the Weberian sense (see footnote 4)—of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), as this is the model that best integrates all three pillars of an alternative agri-food system. While an ideal-type is an abstract construct, our ideal-type CSA was inspired by early and more radical conceptions of CSAs and with a specific emphasis on their alternative economic practices. We will therefore briefly explain the history, key characteristics, and evolution of CSAs before we define the ideal-type.

History and general features

The CSA concept was developed in Japan in the late 1960s (Kondoh 2015) and in Europe in the late 1970s. Since the mid-2000s, CSAs have gained wide popularity in Europe and North America (Cone and Kakaliouras 1995; Hinrichs 2000; Pascucci et al. 2016). Like other AFNs, CSAs allow consumers to access fresh, local, environmentally-friendly food through SFSCs while simultaneously supporting local and regional farmers (Jarosz 2008; Macias 2008). Most CSAs are based on vegetable production, but some also include fruit, honey, eggs, and bread, or offer these products as a possible add-on from other sources. CSAs are generally committed to ecological farming principles, albeit not necessarily certified organic. The model predominantly attracts younger, often urban, consumers with higher income and above-average education (for a recent review on benefits, CSA participants and their motivations, see Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019). A recent study identified CSAs as achieving the highest overall social, economic, and environmental benefits of urban SFSCs (Schmutz et al. 2018).

CSAs are unique for their specific economic model. In its original conception, CSA members pay for shares upfront and contribute to farm work, CSA management, or deliveries. This creates unique social and economic bonds between producers and consumers. Farmers in turn commit to regularly supplying food, usually through weekly deliveries to collection points in the city. This arrangement essentially decouples farm income from unpredictable yields and allows farmers to plan production according to members' demand. The model provides farmers with better prices for their crops and some financial security, while providing consumers with high quality food and opportunities for reconnecting with the land and with food production (European CSA Research Group 2016; DeLind 1999; Feagan and Henderson 2009; Hayden and Buck 2012).

A definition that comes very close to the original idea of a CSA was developed during a recent meeting of CSA representatives from 22 European countries. They defined a CSA as a "direct partnership between a group of consumers and producer(s) whereby the risk, responsibilities, and rewards of farming activities are shared through a long-term agreement. Generally operating on a small and local scale, CSAs aim at providing quality food produced

in an agroecological way" (European CSA Research Group 2016, p. 8).[5] Although acknowledging that the reality of a CSA can take many different forms, participants of this meeting insisted on long-term agreements and direct partnerships as defining features. While this definition likely goes beyond much of the CSA reality in North America today, it must be noted that it is based in real-world experiences of European CSAs.

Evolution and adaptation

As CSAs are reflexive partnerships between farmers and CSA consumer-members, practices evolve according to specific needs and arrangements and vary across geographies (amongst many others see DeLind 1999; Feagan and Henderson 2009; Lang 2010; Nost 2014). Such adaptation often happens in reaction to certain limitations of the model. Running a CSA requires work and skills from a farmer beyond the actual farming, including communication and group management (DeLind 1999). Like other direct marketing networks, it also requires processing and distribution infrastructure. In turn, consumers need to provide a considerable amount of money upfront, which makes this arrangement unviable for those with limited income (see also Kato 2013 for barriers beyond economic constraints).[6] Consumers also have to deal with uncertainty regarding the type and amount of food they will receive and may be exposed to produce they are not familiar with, know how to prepare, or like. This again increases barriers for low-income families that cannot afford to pay for food that will not be eaten (Hanson et al. 2019).

Thus, CSAs—as AFNs in general—do not work for all farmers nor for all consumers. Galt et al. (2019) even speak of 'CSA people', who enjoy, or at least tolerate, eating what is seasonally available and a lack of choice, who are willing and able to cook from scratch (which requires knowledge, skills, time, and a stable living condition including an appropriately equipped kitchen), who can retrieve their shares at a fixed time and place, and who can pay in advance for an unspecified amount of produce, at least for several weeks if not for the whole season. Those conditions make it obviously difficult for low-income households to join. Additionally, according to Galt et al. (2019), CSAs also go against norms and trends of North American consumers socialized as 'supermarket people', who expect year-round availability of a wide variety of produce, cook with at least partly processed ingredients, and are used to eating out several days a week.[7]

Because of these limitations, the CSA model has been adapted. Adaptations include using online ordering platforms (such as Harvie or Farmigo), aggregating products from multiple farms (for an example see Nost 2014), providing add-on options like fruit shares sourced from other producers, and offering home-delivery and shorter subscription times among others, which in general offer greater convenience, choice, flexibility, and lower risks for the consumer. More generally, Adam (2006) distinguishes two types of CSA. First, there are farmer-driven *subscription CSAs,* which make up more than 75% of CSAs in the USA, and which are sometimes organized as farmer co-operatives (like our third case study). Second, Adam (2006) identified the consumer-driven *shareholder CSA*, where a core group recruits subscribers and hires a farmer. This type of CSA represents a minority in the USA, but seems to be of equal or greater importance in European countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.[8] Feagan and Henderson (2009) identify different CSA types along a continuum of three modes: instrumental—functional—collaborative, the first two mirroring in some ways the subscription model, the last one the shareholder CSA model. The notion of a subscription CSA is already used by DeLind (1999) to describe the difference to the original idea of a CSA (in which CSA members participated in hedging farm risk and also in farm labor). Also, Henderson and Van En (2007, cited in Nost 2014, p. 153) distinguish between subscription and member-driven CSAs. Similarly, a recent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report stresses the importance of risk sharing, the close cooperation between consumers and farmers, and higher financial security as well as better prices for farmers, in what the authors call the *traditional CSA model*. They point out that current business models include flexible shares, multi-farm systems, and

[5] The source for this definition is a report prepared for 'urgenci—The International Network for Community Supported Agriculture' (a grassroots network of European CSAs) that analyzed the diverse forms of CSAs emerging across Europe in a collaborative, citizen-led, and self-managed manner.

[6] There are, however, solidarity models in which members pay according to their abilities (personal observation in Germany and e.g., Grasseni 2018 for Boston, MA).

[7] Those expectations can't possibly be met from the supply side, i.e., the CSA farmer. Instead of following an unattainable supermarket ideal through even more customization of CSA shares for example, Galt et al. (2019) therefore suggest to 'cultivate CSA people' through communication and education in a collective effort of producers and consumers (see also DeLind 1999). A recent large quantitative study on perception by non-participants of CSA in Germany also emphasizes education on transformative benefits of the model, integration into everyday life, as well as connecting it to a pro-environmental and pro-social image (rather than just advertising fresh and regional food as this can be obtained elsewhere); and highlights the significance of social peer-group influence and a raised public profile (Diekmann and Theuvsen 2019).

[8] More internationally comparative empirical research would be needed to confirm this initial assessment which is based on information provided in European CSA Research Group (2016).

value-added products to increase scale and scope (Woods et al. 2017).

Defining an ideal-type CSA

These developments raise the question of how adapted models alter the types of relationships made possible in a traditional or ideal-type CSA system and with what consequences. We define this ideal-type CSA, based on the original CSA conception as discussed in DeLind (1999), the definition established by European CSAs (European CSA Research Group 2016, p. 8), the *traditional* model according to the USDA (Woods et al. 2017), and the *collaborative CSA model* taken from Feagan and Henderson (2009) as: a direct partnership between a group of consumers and a farmer, organized around one farm, whereby the risk, responsibilities (including—at least to some extent—work on the farm, in the CSA management, and in distribution), and rewards of farming activities are shared through a long-term agreement. The CSA can be initiated by a farmer or by a group of consumers that hires a farmer. Generally operating on a small and local scale, CSAs provide quality food produced in an agroecological way.

For our purposes, we emphasize the economic relations between producer and consumer CSA members implicit in this ideal-type definition, which are based on solidarity and shared risk, responsibilities, and rewards. These relations most distinguish CSAs from other models that also provide (urban) consumers with local and organic food. We employ the ideal-type CSA as heuristic benchmark for our subsequent case study analysis precisely because we fully acknowledge the real-world evolution of the CSA model over time and in response to both internal and external factors, such as subscriber calls for more convenience and market pressures. Our approach seeks to better assess new mediated models that resulted from such pressures.

New forms of mediated Short Food Supply Chains: three case studies from Germany and Canada

The preceding literature reveals the potentials of SFSCs, but also their limits. Consumers who wish to support locally-grown organic food may seek greater convenience and more choice than an ideal-type CSA can offer. Farmers may look for alternative marketing channels because the higher prices they receive through models like a CSA may not offset the increased labor and time commitment required for successful direct marketing. Partly in response to these limitations, we see the emergence of new forms of mediated AFNs both in the literature as well as in practice. Three of such new forms of mediated AFNs will be presented and analyzed in this section.

Research design and methods

Our three case studies in Frankfurt, Berlin, and Calgary were chosen for theoretical reasons from a larger sample of urban-based alternative food initiatives and networks in German and Canadian cities. They are all newly-founded and mediated AFNs, they all support local food and small-scale farming systems, they all allow for direct contact between consumers and producers, but they represent contrasting models in terms of initiation and mediation. Based on findings from the literature calling for alternatives to intermediary-led food supply chains (e.g., Mount and Smither 2014) as well as our own observations, we started from the assumption that it is significant who the intermediaries are and how they shape an AFN. Therefore, we chose cases that are representative of various origins: those started either by consumers, by an external intermediary, or by producers. Furthermore, following Gibson-Graham (2006b), our three cases differ widely in their relation to the capitalist economy and include non-capitalist, capitalist, and alternative capitalist economic practices. Note that this paper does not seek to compare Germany and Canada, given their very different agricultural traditions and social contexts, but to compare the types of mediation and the underlying economic models of each case.

Our research methods included semi-structured interviews with key informants, which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with help of NVivo qualitative data analysis software. In addition, we used participant observation in meetings as well as during collection and open farm days. The second author (Barbosa, Jr.) also conducted participant observation while volunteering with the producer co-op that represents our third case and at select member-farms. Furthermore, we analyzed relevant websites, media coverage, grey literature, newsletters, reports, and other relevant sources. During analysis, in a first step, the data gathered on each case was synthesized into separate, detailed case profiles. In a second step, based in intensive discussion within the author team, these profiles were compared and analyzed with the help of our conceptual framework.

In what follows, we first present a brief analysis of each case before comparing their main features with the help of several tables. We analyze our cases employing the three-pillar framework of alternative agri-food systems (see section "The three-pillar model of alternative agri-food systems") and compare them with each other and with the ideal-type CSA model (see section "Integrating the three pillars: Community Supported Agriculture CSA"). The objective is to assess whether emerging models of mediated alternative producer–consumer relationships represent an evolution *of* or departure *from* core tenets of alternative food systems

by analyzing—based on the discussion in the previous section—in what ways these new models adhere to alterity principles within all three pillars.

Brief analysis of each case study

Consumer-driven: Futterkreis, a consumer food co-operative in Frankfurt, Germany

The first case, *Futterkreis*, founded in April 2017 in Frankfurt, Germany, revived the idea of a food co-op in response to the conventionalization of organic food production. In contrast to other consumer buying clubs and some food-co-ops, *Futterkreis* sources only directly and in close cooperation with regional small-scale farms. The model depends on consumers organizing collectively and democratically, providing all the necessary distribution labor without pay. It is attractive to farmers as they can set their own price, do not need to market their product, and only deal with one order instead of 45 (the current number of members). *Futterkreis* is able to offer products with the quality members demand at prices fair to both producers and consumers. The organization is driven by a critique of capitalist consumption and has an explicit understanding of being non-commercial. Its founders deliberately rejected an inevitably competitive business or store-front model which would require organizing along the principles of cost cutting and consumer convenience. With their model, *Futterkreis* does not have to sell anything and does not make a profit.

Overall, we see this model as a fair value distribution and labor model that facilitates ethical consumption. Because it rests on active participation by members who are practicing grassroots democracy, its democratic potentials go beyond the realm of food. However, it has limitations. First, models based on collective organizing and unpaid labor are generally not accessible to everyone. Being able to engage in such organizations already requires a certain amount of privilege (see for a similar observation Gross 2009) and may also lead to a 'third shift' for women (Som Castellano 2016; see also Brady et al. 2017). Second, *Futterkreis* demands less financial obligation from members than a CSA with pre-paid shares, meaning less mid- and long-term security for farmers. However, the monthly membership fees and the active engagement of members assure a high level of commitment. Furthermore, resigning members are quickly replaced from a waitlist. A third limitation of *Futterkreis* is that unless it is able to scale-up, direct benefits may be limited to a small group of people with the necessary material and non-material resources. This is, however, a challenge for most AFNs. *Futterkreis* shows us two avenues toward overcoming this obstacle: first, by supporting the replication of their model by like-minded organizations in other places, and second, through their advocacy and networking. They provide educational videos on their website, are engaged in zero waste, sustainability, and municipal climate action campaigns, offer recycling and upcycling workshops, host discussions on food co-ops and on sharing as part of sustainable lifestyles, take part in and advertise demonstrations for food systems change, and more. Members are also involved with the Frankfurt Food Policy Council, founded in 2017, and cooperate with Transition Town Frankfurt. Given increasing demand for fair and organic food from smaller and local producers, we see high potential for the replication of the model.

External intermediary-driven: Marktschwärmer, a hybrid local food platform in Berlin, Germany

"*Marktschwärmer*" (original *La ruche qui dit oui*!)[9] seeks to foster local food networks by connecting small local producers and buyers through a combination of an online platform with face-to-face pop-up farmers' markets (in Germany called "*Schwärmereien*"). Originally from France, the venture was started in Germany in 2014, and now operates in several other European countries with almost 1,400 local '*ruches*'.[10] The model actively embraces entrepreneurship and technology and is clearly growth-oriented.[11] *Marktschwärmer* offers important marketing support to farmers and other producers. Producers pay a service charge to the two intermediaries: 8.35% to the local host and 10% to the company behind *La Ruche qui dit Oui*! for platform use. Of our three cases, it is the most convenient for purchasing local food, demanding the least financial and time commitment from consumers. This could make it attractive to the wider public and is, as such, an important way of fostering local food systems in general. Because it is based on a central online platform, the model can be replicated and extended to new regions fairly easily.

This case, however, raises important concerns: it rests at least in part on unpaid labor of the local hosts (who are independent entrepreneurs), does not entail a democratic governance model, and the value distribution model remains opaque. The companies behind *Marktschwärmer,* Equanum GmbH (a limited liability company under German law) and

[9] We refer to the German model only. Note that beyond media coverage and some entries in Wikipedia, academic publications on *Marktschwärmer* are sparse and, apart from brief mentions in other studies, limited to two student theses (Bajer 2017; Roth 2018) and a working paper (Scherf and Kampffmeyer 2020).

[10] In the UK, where the model was called Food Assembly, it only operated from 2014 to 2018.

[11] Its growth strategy has been relatively successful in Germany where numbers of *Schwärmereien* doubled from 2017 to 2018, and has in early 2020 reached 130 (see https://marktschwaermer.de/de, last accessed 2021/03/24).

its French mother company Equanum SAS (a joint stock company under French Law, based in Paris with almost 80 staff members) are in the legal sense classic for-profit-corporations. *La Ruche qui dit Oui!* founders are the main shareholders but significant start-up funding was raised from e-commerce and investment funds.[12] According to Auchard (2015), Equanum SAS profited from venture capital firms that sought to enter Europe's expanding 'tech food' market (for the increasing interest and influence of tech and internet start-ups in food and agriculture see Forcum 2014). In the French public discourse, *La Ruche qui dit Oui!* has already been accused of "uberization" (Makdeche 2015) because of the low remuneration of assembly hosts. There is no visible democratic control of the business by 'members' (as customers are emphatically called). Even though *Marktschwärmer* Germany was not generating profits at the time of field research (2017–2018), there are no visible measures in place to prevent the sale of the business were it to become commercially attractive to 'Big Food' or other investors.

Finally, AMAPs, the French CSA model, have criticized *La Ruche qui dit Oui!* for negatively influencing their model by introducing a competing commercial intermediary (Morice 2014).[13] Confronted with these criticisms, both a host and staff member agreed, in separate interviews, that a CSA is the best model for producers because it presents the least risk and the most reliable source of income (Interview 17/2017 and 40/2018). In their view, however, *Marktschwärmer* is an addition to rather than a substitution for CSAs, because the model caters to different kinds of consumers—those who, while also wanting to support regional agriculture, are less committed and expect greater choice and product variety. It remains the task of further research to determine whether and in what ways *Marktschwärmer* may negatively impact other AFNs.

Overall, this model holds strong potential, particularly because of its ability to attract capital and because it can be easily replicated. However, it also demonstrates the limitations of a business approach, notably the considerable growth pressure due to its dependence on investors and its profit-orientation as well as a lack of transparency and democratic control, all of which may come at the expense of the most vulnerable network members.

Producer-driven: YYC growers and distributors, a farmer co-operative in Calgary, Alberta, Canada

YYC Growers and Distributors is a farmer-owned co-operative in Calgary, Alberta.[14] The co-op sources food from its multiple member-farms and organizes what Flora and Bregendahl (2012, p. 330) call a *collaborative CSA* where "two or more producers work together to serve a common set of customers". *YYC Growers* is remarkable for its rapid growth and for bringing urban and rural farmers under one organizational umbrella. Since 2014, it has operated a CSA-like subscription program as its primary sales outlet while also selling at farmers' markets. As demand for their CSA increased, the founding urban farmers sought cooperation with rural farmers to allow for increased product volume and more diversity. Together, they formed a producer co-operative in 2017 (see also Beckie and Bacon 2019; Clark et al. 2021). The co-op is strongly mission driven.[15] A volunteer board, composed of member-farmers elected by popular vote (each farm has one vote), is responsible for higher-level governance. Paid managers, some of whom are member-farmers themselves, handle day-to-day tasks. A paid driver sorts the produce dropped off by farmers at the co-op warehouse and delivers it to CSA pick-up locations. Volunteers, occasionally including a member-farmer, and paid summer students supplement the warehouse work force.

YYC Growers offers more product diversity than an ideal-type CSA, a stable supply to consumers, and a convenient marketing outlet for farmers. The model avoids the pitfalls of introducing a for-profit intermediary—as seen in our second case and most of the cases described in the literature (see a recent review by Dimitri and Gardner 2019)—while still creating sufficient revenue to pay farmers a fair price. Moreover, it enables efficient distribution and, like in the other two cases, allows some producers to specialize their production (e.g., specific herbs, micro-greens, mushrooms). It demonstrates that running a business, securing livelihoods, and introducing an intermediary organization can be organized in a democratic way, and while maintaining producers' control.

Yet, as our research also showed, greater control over pricing, distribution, and marketing is only possible with active participation in co-op management and governance (see also Österberg and Nilsson 2009, who point out that the success of a co-operatives is directly related to members' commitment), which not all members may be prepared to do. Some farmers joined the co-op after it was formed and may not be fully invested in co-operative ideals and in

[12] See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Ruche_qui_dit_oui_!, last accessed 2021/03/24.

[13] See https://rue89bordeaux.com/2014/12/ruche-dit-oui-amap-paysans-circuit-court/, last accessed 2021/03/24.

[14] YYC refers to the Calgary airport acronym and is commonly used to replace the city's name.

[15] See https://yycgrowers.com/movement/, last accessed 2021/03/24.

the additional commitment and work entailed (Interview 22/2018 and personal communication with farmers). Some of these farmers see the co-op solely as an additional sales outlet that buys wholesale and pays a high price for products. Stimulating broad and active participation within the co-op will be important for the long-term success of *YYC Growers*.

Furthermore, the fair treatment of volunteers and workers needs to be monitored, since—in contrast to farmers—not all of them may be fairly compensated. Finally, in its expansion, the co-op has moved away from its original CSA model based on a strong partnership between producers and consumers. Consumers now share neither risk nor abundance, are not expected to participate in management or farm work, and can opt in and out for short periods of time. As of today, *YYC Grower's* primary sales outlet more closely resembles a box-scheme, which is also reflected in the current term 'harvest box' (rather than 'CSA').[16] This shift may be in part a branding strategy designed to attract consumers familiar with box-schemes, which have gained wide popularity in North America. It could nevertheless signal an important shift in relations among network actors.

Comparing the case studies with the help of the three-pillar-model

In this section we discuss and compare the case studies with each other and with the ideal-type CSA. As detailed above, our ideal-type CSA is based on a specific economic model (collective, supportive, equitable, sharing of risks, work and rewards, shared responsibility for ensuring viability of the CSA), timeframe (medium to long-term, up-front payments), scale (small and local), and farming practices (agroecological, not necessarily certified organic).

Pillar 1: Alternative food

As a result of our theoretical sampling, the differences between the three cases regarding the first pillar are minor (see Table 2). We specifically chose cases where the available product is similar and adheres to the ideal-type CSA concept: food products are almost entirely sourced locally/regionally, most are organic (with the strictest demands made by *Futterkreis*), and most are from small producers (with the strictest requirements again by *Futterkreis*). The product diversity is in all cases greater than in an ideal-type CSA because all cases source from different producers. In the first two cases, consumers have more choice than in a CSA because they can choose from a range of items in their weekly order. In the third case, products are selected by the co-op manager while subscribers can only trade some items during the weekly pick-up. In this sense, the third model is comparable to an ideal-type CSA. It offers, however, greater variety and reliability since it sources from multiple producers.

Pillar 2: Alternative network

All three cases share some common characteristics. They represent SFSCs with one or more (two in the second case) intermediaries. All cases enable direct interactions between producers and consumers, and all engage in activities beyond the sale of products, such as education, farm visits, and to some extent also advocacy (which goes beyond the aspirations of the ideal-type CSA). They differ somewhat regarding flexibility for customers, which allows them to cater to different types of consumers and, in their diversity, to potentially reach a larger customer base. Interestingly, we also found an inverse relation between who initiated a network and for whom it is most convenient. None of the models is based on the strong partnership and frequent interaction characteristic of the ideal-type CSA.

The three cases differ starkly in their type of organization, governance, and decision-making processes (see Table 3). These factors are directly related to who initiated the network and their motivation for doing so. While they are all mission-driven (supporting small-scale local producers, re-localizing food systems, and making them more environmentally sustainable), the latter two also seek to create financial revenues for the organizations themselves, as does the ideal-type CSA (see section "Defining an ideal-type CSA").[17] Importantly, the first and the third case are both member-controlled models, though based on different versions of democratic governance and with different levels of member interaction (one being a civic association and the other a co-operative). The second case is a for-profit company with a centralized governance and decision-making model, is non-participatory, and lacks transparency. In this case we see a departure from core principles of alternative agri-food systems.

In sum, critical differences between the three cases become visible when analyzing the second pillar. The question of organizational structure and governance of the

[16] Although CSAs and box-schemes are distinct, they are sometimes conflated in practice. Box schemes home deliver fresh produce and other products, source from different producers, potentially also internationally. Customers can usually order specific items. While box schemes also promote 'good' food, they do not share the economic principles of CSAs (see section "Integrating the three pillars: Community Supported Agriculture CSA").

[17] More empirical research is needed to determine in what way those goals and motivations conflict with each other and if and how they can be reconciled (see Kirkwood and Walton 2014 for an example).

Table 2 Evaluation of alterity with regard to the first pillar—Food (categories and case analysis by authors)

Food				
Name	Ideal-type CSA	Futterkreis	Marktschwärmer	YYC Growers
Product	Local/regional; organic/agroecologically produced (strict standard)	Local/regional; organic/agroecologically produced (strict standard)	Local/regional, mostly organic	Local/regional, mostly organic
Sourcing	N/a (no additional sourcing)	Bulk orders directly from (small) producers only	Predominantly directly from (small) producers	Predominantly directly from small and mid-sized producers
Product diversity	Low	High	High	Medium[a]
Can consumers choose product?	No or only by trading with other members	Yes	Yes	Limited (trading a few items during pick-up)

[a]High if add-ons are factored in that can be purchased at *YYC Growers'* online-store or market stalls.

intermediary organizations as well as of the whole network turn out to be central. These differences are even more apparent when we turn to the third pillar, the economic model itself.

Pillar 3: Alternative economic model and practices

When we compare the economic models of the three cases according to the categories provided by Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2008) and Gibson-Graham et al. (2013), i.e., along the domains of enterprise, transaction, labor, property, and finance, we find the most critical differences between cases (see Table 4).

Futterkreis is essentially a non-capitalist model: its finances, labor, type of enterprise, and property are non-capitalist. Also, we argue, its transactions—although money mediated—are non-capitalist, since members pay producer-set prices, and the association does not take any commission and consequently does not extract surplus value. *Marktschwärmer*, however, follows essentially a standard business approach to address the problems of our current food system. Using Gibson-Graham's framework, it can be classified as a mainstream capitalist venture with alternative and non-capitalist elements (because it partly relies on volunteer labor and uses alternative markets). *YYC Growers* offers an alternative-market or alternative-capitalist model (based on an alternative economic model regarding enterprise, finance, transactions, and partly also labor combined with a mainstream model of wage labor). It is able to secure livelihoods and mediate production-consumption relations with farmers remaining in control over the AFN. The ideal-type CSA also combines non-capitalist and alternative-capitalist elements.

These critical differences concerning the economic model demand closer exploration. While the categories provided by Gibson-Graham (Table 4) offer us an initial basis to compare the economic models of our three cases, the following comparison of their economic operations help to better elucidate their specificities (see Table 5).

As summarized in the first column in Table 5, the ideal-type CSA involves collectively working towards economic viability by sharing work, risks, and rewards through a medium- to long-term commitment. No profits are generated (as members only pay what is needed to cover costs and any potential surplus will be reinvested into the CSA) and value extraction is prevented.

Across all three cases—and in stark contrast to conventional food supply chains—producers set the price and receive a large portion of sales revenue. *Marktschwärmer* and *YYC Growers* add a surcharge to cover operational costs. *Futterkreis* can substitute a surcharge by relying on members' volunteer labor. All models have also put in place mechanisms for managing internal competition that are specific to their own needs.

The three cases differ in terms of scalability, marketing potential, profitability, and, relatedly, the risk of value extractions and overall fairness for the actors involved. *Futterkreis*, run by a consumer group, makes no profit and there is no risk of value extraction. It has low marketing potential and, as it deliberately limits its own growth, can only expand through replication by other organizations. *Marktschwärmer*, which is run by an intermediary company, is set up to be profitable at some point and has high marketing potential with international reach. Because it partly relies on unpaid labor by hosts, and because the company holds sole control of the platform and its terms of use, we see a risk of extracting value should it assume a dominant market position. It could, for example, raise the surcharge, as it has done in the past. *YYC Growers*, run by producers, has a high marketing potential at a regional level and is able to expand by either growing its membership base or by replicating the model elsewhere. As the goal is to secure producer's livelihoods, *YYC Growers*, although potentially profitable, does

Table 3 Evaluation of alterity with regard to the second pillar—Network (categories and case analysis by authors)

Network				
Name	Ideal-type CSA	Futterkreis	Marktschwärmer	YYC Growers
Type of AFN	SFSC (direct partnership)	SFSC (consumer or food co-op)	SFSC (online platform and pop-up market)	SFSC (producer co-operative, initially CSA)
Type of organization	Collective economic entity of consumers and producer (various legal forms possible)	Registered civic organization	GmbH—Limited liability company under German law; SAS—joint stock company under French law	Registered co-operative
Initiated by	Consumer-group or producer	Consumers	External intermediary	Producers
Motivation	Mission driven; revenue-creating	Mission driven	Mission driven; revenue-creating	Mission driven; revenue-creating
Network members	Consumers and producers	Food-coop members and individual farmers	Consumers, hosts, farmers, umbrella company in France and country branches	Co-op member farmers, consumers through adapted CSA model
Organization members	Consumers and producers	Consumers (consumer co-op)	Staff and management (intermediary firm)	Producers (producer co-op)
Number of members	Small	45 (active membership)	About 20 *Schwärmereien* in Berlin, 130 in Germany; minimal number of members (customers) for each is 150, studied *Schwärmereien* have between 600 and 1,600 members each, the majority not active though	20 member farms
Membership fees	Possibly	Monthly association fees on sliding scale	No fees	One-time co-operative share for member farmers
Flexibility for consumers	Low	High	Very high	Medium
Most convenient for	Producers	Producers	Consumers	Consumers
Producer–consumer contact	Regularly (consumer members participate in farm and delivery work and CSA management)	Occasional (farm visits; harvest stints)	Weekly (pop-up markets); occasionally other (e.g., open-farm days)	Weekly (farmers' market, CSA pick-ups); occasionally other (e.g., open-farm days)
Governance	Grassroots democracy	Grassroots democracy	Hierarchical; non-participatory	Mix of representative and participatory democracy
Decision-making	Consensus-based; horizontal	Consensus-based; horizontal	Vertical; centralized; opaque	Predominantly by managers and an executive board, but democratically controlled by member farmers
Activities beyond sale of products	Regular meetings to manage CSA	Regular meetings to manage co-op, Education, organizing, advocacy, farm visits	Blog, education, farm visits, platform development	At least yearly meetings to manage co-op, Education, organizing, advocacy, blog, farm visits

Table 4 Evaluation of alterity with regard to the third pillar—Economic Model (authors, based on the five categories provided by Gibson-Graham 2006a, b, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013)

Economy				
Name	Ideal-type CSA	Futterkreis	Marktschwärmer	YYC Growers
Enterprise	Non-capitalist or alternative capitalist	Non-capitalist (civic association, non-profit)	Capitalist (limited liability company under German law—GmbH; joint stock company under French law—SAS, for-profit)	Alternative capitalist (registered co-operative, revenue creating)
Transactions	Alternative market (advance payment for shares)	Alternative market (directly sources food, pays producer prices without surcharge); non-market (harvest stints)	Combination of mainstream market (e-commerce) and alternative market	Alternative market (adapted CSA/harvest box)
Labor	Wage (farmer, farm workers); unpaid (participation in farm work, distribution, and CSA management)	Unpaid (volunteers only, active membership)	Wage (staff, hosts partly); unpaid (hosts partly)	Wage (co-op staff); partly paid (farmers' markets workers); some unpaid (volunteers at warehouse, farmers' markets, CSA pick-ups)
Property	Collective ownership	No property (rented storage room), model is open access	Private (model, platform, possibly data)	Alternative private (co-op managed, collective property, e.g. freezers); rents warehouse and truck
Finances	Alternative market	Non-market (monthly association membership fees, mostly to pay rent)	Mainstream market (start-up capital from investors to develop platform and enter new markets; sales fees to pay hosts and company)	Alternative market (co-op capital from member shares; sales revenues to pay farmers, co-op staff, and workers)
Overall[a]	Alternative capitalist and non-capitalist	Mainly non-capitalist	Capitalist, with elements of alternative and non-capitalist	Mainly alternative capitalist

[a]Note that Gibson-Graham consider the boundaries between the various alternative modes of coordination as fluid and dynamic; the table is used as a heuristic model and is not meant to strengthen a dichotomist thinking. Therefore, it is not surprising that our empirical cases do not completely fall into one category only.

Table 5 Evaluation of economic model and economic practices (author's compilation and analysis, some categories based on Chiffoleau et al. 2019)

Case	Ideal-type CSA	Futterkreis	Marktschwärmer	YYC Growers
Price setting	Collectively	Producers, no surcharge added	Producers, surcharge of 18.5% added to pay hosts and company	Co-op, unspecified surcharge for overhead costs added
Percentage of sale price that remains with producers	100%	100%	Approx. 80%	Approx. 70%
Managing internal competition	N/a (no competition)	Co-op (usually only one producer per product)	Host (assembles a good mix of producers; usually only one producer per product)	Co-op (equal price for same product paid to producers and by consumers, regardless of origin; preferential treatment of urban farms)
Scalability, replicability, and growth	Potentially, through replication of model by other groups, open-access model; own growth limited	Potentially, through replication of model by other groups, open-access model; own growth deliberately limited	Easy replication through online platform and centralized model, market extension or franchise model; clearly growth-oriented	Potentially, by including more producers (i.e., growing as co-op) and through replication of model by other groups
Profitability	None (goal is securing livelihoods not profit-making)	None, not the goal	Potentially, currently not	Potentially, goal is to secure livelihoods not profit-making
Marketing potential	Low	Low	High; international	High; regional
Risk of value extraction	No (potential profits remain with CSA collective)	No (potential profits remain with producers)	High risk (company and external investors)	No (potential profit remains with co-op)
Fairness for all actors involved	Very fair	Very fair	Relatively fair (currently); risk of value extraction through changing terms of network cooperation to the disadvantage of producers and/or hosts, lack of democratic governance, labor concerns	Fair; some labor concerns for staff and workers as well as risk of self-exploitation of select farmers

not pose the risk of value extraction, as any profit remains with the co-op owned equally by all farm members.

All models are currently fair to some degree. *Futterkreis* is very fair to farmers as they get paid fair prices and a consumer group takes on all organizational and logistical work, based on voluntary labor and rejecting the market imperatives of profit maximization and constant growth. The group is strongly committed to pay fair prices (as they are fully motivated by very strong sustainability and solidarity concerns); they support this through direct partnerships with producers and through engaging in education of self and others. Additionally, their partner producers are not dependent on *Futterkreis* and could end the partnership if the price was no longer deemed fair. *YYC Growers* is fair, but there are some concerns over the self-exploitation of select farmers and the labor of non-farm workers associated with the co-op. Moreover, labor conditions on farms that employ (migrant) farm workers are not monitored by the co-op. Finally, although *Marktschwärmer* is, at present, relatively fair and driven by the intrinsic motivations of staff, hosts, and consumers, it has the greatest potential for commodification and value extraction because a company external to the producer–consumer relation controls the model and can, at any time, alter the established conditions. There are, as far as we can tell, no mechanisms in place to prevent such changes.

Discussion and conclusions

What can we learn from analyzing and comparing the three cases, in terms of whether the shift away from direct marketing presents an evolution *of* or departure *from* core tenets of alternative agri-food systems? Applying the three-pillar-model reveals that the main differences between new mediated SFSC models, and also the starkest diversion from the ideal-type CSA, concern network relations and governance (pillar 2) as well as economic practices (pillar 3). While all models involve some type of intermediary organization, our findings show that it matters profoundly who initiates the network, and even more importantly, who controls it. Interestingly, when we analyzed the three cases comparatively, our analysis suggest that the model started by consumers tends to work better for producers, and the one started by producers are more convenient for consumers (see Table 3), something worth exploring in further research. Less surprisingly, we also found that the more convenient a model becomes for consumers and producers by introducing an external intermediary (who manages marketing, distribution, purchasing, and customer relations), the more power and influence those intermediaries will have in the network. The better a model works for a farmer, the more likely they are to become dependent on this particular network and intermediary. Additionally, none of these intermediary models allow farmers to share risk with consumers, as they would in the ideal-type CSA. Thus, all farmers must engage in risk management, usually by diversifying sales outlets. There was little difference between the cases in terms of the type, quality, and origin of food they provide and the producers they engage with (pillar 1), and it was here where our cases bear close resemblance to the ideal-type CSA.

The following conclusions can be drawn from our findings. First, and assuming that new mediated AFNs continue to adhere to the high standards of alterity concerning the type of food produced and distributed (pillar 1), we need to pay special attention to network governance in mediated AFNs (pillar 2). Given that certain types of intermediaries may introduce unequal power relations or change power dynamics in a network significantly, we see a democratically controlled governance model as a particularly important core tenet of AFNs—regarding governance of the whole network as well as of participating organizations. To prevent centralized control and dominance in a network, all network actors, and especially intermediaries, need to be held accountable to other actors in the network, as in the ideal-type CSA. This is consistent with other research that shows that organizational approaches that AFNs take are "likely to influence the transition pathways they advance" (Duncan and Pascucci 2017, p. 316).

Second, we need to pay particular attention to the underlying economic model of the whole network and especially of the intermediaries (pillar 3). The economic models in our case studies differ widely and are related to the type of intermediary that initiated and drives the network. In the categories of the diverse economies framework (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2008; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013), our case studies are organized either as a non-capitalist enterprise (*Futterkreis*, a non-profit association), as an alternative capitalist one (*YYC Growers*, a producer co-operative), or as one that combines a capitalist enterprise (*Marktschwärmer*, GmbH and SAS) and capitalist property and finance with elements of alternative markets and non-wage labor. *Futterkreis* and *YYC Growers* show that setting up an intermediary organization that manages marketing and distribution collectively can increase the potential reach of alternative agri-food systems through a variety of economic models and practices (non-capitalist and alternative capitalist, fully mission-driven and also revenue-creating) while still holding true to core tenets of alternative agri-food systems. Although based on the not-so-new organizational model of member-owned, member-controlled, and member-benefitting co-operatives, the ways in which the first and third case respond to current issues and demands may inspire further evolution of alternative agri-food systems. The case of *Marktschwärmer*, however, needs to be carefully monitored. While its regional and small-scale producer focus is clearly distinct from most digital food platforms (Scherf and Kampffmeyer 2020), it shifts control and

potentially profits—through appropriating collectively-created value—towards a new external intermediary. Because of its governance and economic model, *Marktschwärmer* potentially represents a departure from core principles of AFNs.

In sum, all three models discussed here are, in principle, valuable additions to the alternative food landscape. They all show that it is possible to establish new mediated models, which can help producers to reach a greater number of customers while catering to the concerns of small-scale producers (fair prices for their products without the full burden of self-marketing) and those of consumers (choice and convenience without compromising standards of quality, traceability, and ethics). Overall, our findings also show that new models of mediated SFSCs are potentially able to hold true to the core tenets of alternative agri-food systems and, therefore, that alterity does not require direct marketing per se. What matters are the questions of network control, whether value created is fairly shared, and whether new mediated networks enable further commodification or de-commodification of (alternative) food. Based on our analysis, we conclude that the danger of commodification of alternative food—in essence the transformation of not only a crop, but services, values, and ideas into tradeable commodities to be exchanged in capitalist markets with the aim of profit maximizing (Vivero-Pol 2017; Zerbe 2019)—increases in a hierarchical governance model in which one actor assumes a dominant role, and once the economic model moves towards a mainstream capitalist model in which expanding profits becomes an imperative.

Realizing the potentials of new mediated AFN models, and avoiding the pitfalls of the conventional systems they seek to replace (for the dissatisfaction of farmers with intermediary-led chains see Mount and Smither 2014), requires paying particularly close attention to the role, power, and governance of intermediaries. New intermediaries like *Futterkreis* and *YYC Growers* who are guided by social economy and co-operative values and principles based on participation and democracy, offer important inspirations. More broadly, we believe it is important to build economic arrangements where producers and consumers recognize their interdependence and pursue business that is mutually supportive instead of profit-maximizing.

Outlook

We close with a short reflection on further research needs. While mediated AFNs have existed for some time, we still need further qualitative and quantitative studies to better assess their unique potentials and weaknesses, their attractiveness for small-scale farmers and consumers, and the specific features that would make them feasible *and* fair in the long term. By refining the three-pillar-model, we offer a potential conceptual framework for assessing alterity in AFNs as a first step. Further research might entail a systematic evaluation of needs and capabilities from the viewpoints of different stakeholders (e.g., farmers, consumers, staff, volunteers), of matters of financial viability, and of marketing potential. There is also a broad spectrum of consumer roles to be explored, as they can be customers, members, participants, or 'prosumers' (simultaneously producers and consumers). Furthermore, the impact of one model on another needs to be studied in order to assess if they can co-exist (for example, by offering something different and additional or by catering to different consumer groups), or whether they will out-compete each other (see *AMAP* vs. *La ruche qui dit oui!* debate in France in our second case).

To prevent the transformation of AFNs into a lifestyle product by for-profit actors, questions of creation, appropriation, and distribution of value, of paid and unpaid labor (regarding both food production and provisioning/consumption, see Bruce and Som Castellano 2017; see also Suryanata et al. 2020 early view), and of governance remain at the core of critical inquiry in order to determine whether new models are fair arrangements, as ideal-type CSAs try to be, or whether benefits for certain actors are only achieved by disadvantaging or exploiting others (or oneself). It is not enough to support local, organic food and shorter food supply chains. We need to foster fairer, more equitable and democratic, and more sustainable agri-food systems in general; indeed agriculture and food systems based on solidarity, as the German term *Solidarische Landwirtschaft* (Boddenberg et al. 2017) or the Italian *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (Cembalo et al. 2011; Fonte 2013) emphasize much more than the North American term *Community Supported Agriculture.* In the wake of a global pandemic that exposes the weaknesses of our dominant industrial and globalized agri-food system (Clapp and Moseley 2020; Akram-Lodhi 2020 early view), which may result in increased relevance of SFSCs (Blay-Palmer et al. 2020; Moragues-Faus 2020), these insights are especially critical.

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