

Communication and power: A review of *Organizing Eating*

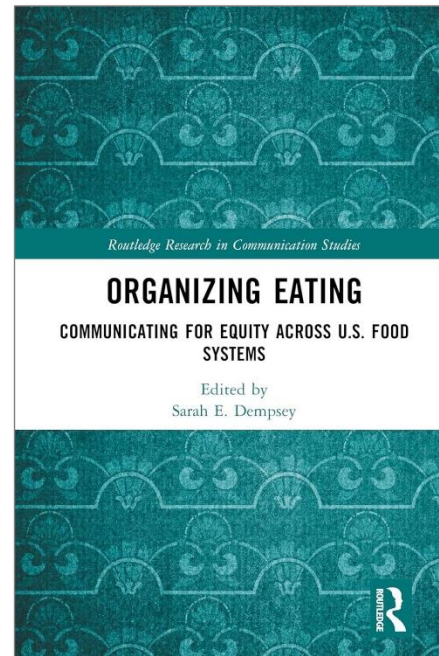
Book review by
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Review of *Organizing Eating: Communicating for Equity Across U.S. Food Systems*, by Sarah E. Dempsey. (2023). Published by Routledge. Available as hardcover, paperback, and eBook; 266 pages.

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Organizing Eating: Communicating for Equity Across U.S. Food Systems draws together recent research from scholars on organization and communication exploring how to move toward food justice, as edited by Sarah E. Dempsey. It is not coincidental that this book was published in 2023, just a few years after the COVID-19 pandemic. As Dempsey explains in the opening chapter, COVID-19 epitomizes the ways intersectional systematic forms of oppression threaten people's ability to access food, a basic human right. How-

ever, exerting power through food did not just start during COVID-19: from post-Emancipation to New Deal legislation, the American legal system uses food both as a mechanism and outcome of power. The authors in this collection illustrate that U.S. society, as a whole, needs to bring equity to the conversation around food, organization, and power to dynamically reorganize our food system.

Dempsey includes a roadmap in the introduction outlining the collection's path. The volume begins with research illustrating the role of state power and policy in shaping the organization of U.S. food systems. After establishing this foundation, the authors dive into research on communication infrastructure and the ways it interacts with organization in food systems. Communication infrastructure is made up of the mechanisms that

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shape who is heard and whose voices are excluded. Food and communication infrastructure are deeply connected, particularly looking at the ways those who experience hunger and poverty are often intentionally omitted from the common discourse. In response to the current inequities within organization and communication in food systems, the final chapters survey alternative structures. The research in this collection spans Detroit to Denver; community supported agriculture operations (CSAs) to cooperatives; corporate regimes to community storytelling; and more. Each article powerfully builds on the last, demonstrating the multifaceted approach needed to achieve food justice in the U.S.

The collection starts by revealing how U.S. policy racializes and individualizes hunger. In early chapters, Adam Pine, Rebecca de Souza, and Kathleen Hunt's research successfully reveals that the "invisible hand of white supremacy" (pp. 58–59) has manipulated U.S. food policy. For instance, the authors explain that mainstream mechanisms to access food, like SNAP or grocery stores, actively reinforce a system that allocates resources through racist means. Food deserts, as an example, are a product of policy and planning. This enables white people to control BIPOC communities' experience with food. After establishing this historical framing of the state's role in exerting dominance over food, the subsequent chapters explore the importance of communication infrastructure.

Organization and communication infrastructure are interrelated and have historically worked to further marginalize vulnerable communities; however, as these authors argue, it does not have to be that way. Currently, the U.S. food system is organized by policy and planning efforts which silo communication infrastructure to predominantly give voices to those with power. Nevertheless, communication infrastructure can be reformed to promote food justice. These mechanisms include forms of collaborative, critical community engagement. Chapter authors Rahul Mitra, Nadia Gaber, Roslyn Bouier, Shea Howell, and Constance Gordon, among others, research what this looks like. For instance, Gordon emphasizes how the current communication infrastructure—particularly the ways policy is discussed and created—does not

engage the community. Thus, polysemic meaning tends to fall in line with the discourse controlled by those in power. *Sustainable, inclusive, equitable, accessible*—these words hold multiple meanings. If policymakers aim to create "equitable" reforms, Gordon argues that the community needs to be a part of the conversation understanding what equity means. How does this happen? Infrastructure like translation services, childcare, listening circles, and holding additional meeting times to discuss policy efforts are all examples of critical mechanisms to help make communication more accessible. These authors argue that increased equity within communication streams is a pivotal step toward food justice. Following this discussion, the research shifts to ways marginalized communities have responded to current inequities.

The authors effectively incorporate numerous research methods to explore these alternative structures that respond to current inequities. Through ethnographies, case studies, extended literature reviews, collaborative writing, and interviews, these chapters demonstrate that to study organization in food systems, there is no "one" research methodology to answer every question. Similarly, there is no "one" solution for alternative mechanisms to lead us toward equitable food systems. From coalitional organizing to unionization to cooperatives to regionally attentive organization and beyond, the chapters reveal a multidirectional systems approach. This heterogeneity of structures shows that diverse approaches are essential to dismantling inequitable organization and communication systems. While each chapter focuses on specific aspects of the food system or individual responses to historical challenges, the strength of this book comes from the compilation of the chapters. Each chapter contributes to the last—and as a reader, I can see the power of a diverse approach to reforming communication infrastructure (and therefore policy).

Ultimately, *Organizing Eating* proves that food systems are dynamic and therefore need active, collaborative forms of communication to inform organization. U.S. society as a whole needs to constantly re-examine the current organization, how communication either maintains or challenges power, and what alternative structures arise as a

result of injustices. Organizing can and should be “undone, reconfigured, and remade” (p. 11) as priorities evolve. While this book successfully reaches that conclusion, Dempsey aptly notes a major limitation: the conversation solely examines the United States. This type of critical communication should

be explored in all countries and from all different vantage points. Nonetheless, this book successfully takes on a major task to understand the relationship between various structures reinforcing power, alternative responses, and approaches to communication.

