David Evans, University of Manchester

Researching (with) Major Food Retailers: Leveling and Leveraging the Terms of Engagement

Abstract

This paper considers the relationship between social science and the food industry, and it suggests that collaboration can be intellectually productive and morally rewarding. It explores the middle ground that exists between paid consultancy models of collaboration on the one hand and a principled stance of non-engagement on the other. Drawing on my recent experiences of collaborating with a major food retailer in the UK, I discuss the ways in which collaborating with retailers can open up opportunities for accessing data that might not otherwise be available to social scientists. Additionally, I put forward the argument that researchers with an interest in the sustainability – ecological or otherwise – of food systems, especially those of a critical persuasion, ought to be empirically engaging with food businesses. I suggest that this is important in terms of generating better understandings of the objectionable arrangements that they seek to critique, and in terms of opening up conduits through which to affect positive changes. Cutting across these points is the claim that whilst resistance to commercial collaboration might be misguided, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the power-geometries of collaboration and to find ways of levelling and/or leveraging them. To conclude, I suggest that universities have an important institutional role to play in defining the terms of engagement as well as maintaining the boundaries between scholarship and consultancy – a line that can otherwise become quite fuzzy when the worlds of commerce and academic research collide.
Keywords  Food retail; transactional data; research ethics; stakeholder engagement; consumption

Introduction

This paper considers the relationship between social science and the food industry, and it suggests that collaboration can be intellectually productive and morally rewarding. My starting point is that a “paid consultancy” model of collaboration is unlikely to meet either of these criteria. It is uncontroversial to note that social researchers have skills (for example, the analysis and interpretation of large datasets), perspectives (for example, consumer insight), and sensibilities (for example, the “ethnographic imagination”) that are likely to be of interest and value to corporations. When academics engage with industry under the auspices of consultancy, it is likely that commercial rather than intellectual interests will drive the research agenda, and that the ensuing insights will be destined for consideration and use by the corporate organization that commissioned them (Cefkin 2009). This form of collaboration is not the object of my critique and it is not my intention to suggest that knowledge produced under these arrangements is automatically inferior to research that is driven mainly by intellectual curiosity and executed under conditions of relative autonomy. I do, however, wish to suggest that it is useful to maintain the distinction between scholarship and consultancy, and that collaboration with commercial partners does not necessitate the collapse of the former into the latter.

My reflections are an attempt to initiate dialogue with academic food researchers around the nature and possibility of commercial collaboration. I am speaking directly to those with an interest in the sustainability—ecological or otherwise—of food systems and making a plea for greater engagement with major retailers (such as Tesco in the UK, Walmart in the United States, and Carrefour in France). For many of these colleagues, the rationale for collaboration with major retailers is far from self-evident. Indeed,
supermarkets are often positioned as unambiguously bad—as feckless capitalists whose
disembedded profit-maximizing operations have consequences that are environmentally
damaging and socially unjust. In this view, it is perhaps not surprising that social scientists
of a critical persuasion or with a normative commitment to sustainability challenges do not
wish to engage, and instead satisfy themselves with theoretical critique or else define the
parameters of sustainable food scholarship in accordance with their own dispositions (for
example, Short Food Supply Chains). These tendencies are the object of my critique,
which is necessarily written as an abstract and general commentary. I am not able to
invoke specific instances of the tendencies against which I am arguing insofar as the debate
is yet to be formalized and encoded in the pages of an academic publication. Indeed, part
of the rationale for the current collection is to open up discussion around a topic that at
times seems like the elephant in the room.

This of course leaves me open to the charge of setting up a straw man and perhaps,
to some extent, I am exaggerating and caricaturing in my construction of the debate. This
does not mean that the debate or the tendencies that I identify are pure conjecture. They are
a reflection of conversations that I have had with colleagues, friends, and students (food
scholars and nonfood scholars alike) as well as presentations and discussions that I have
witnessed or been privy to at numerous food conferences. Additionally, it can be inferred
from the implicit assumptions that underpin the decisions of sustainable food scholars to
study “alternative” food systems or to critique supermarkets in the absence of an empirical
encounter. I am refusing to give specific instances here because—in common with Daniel
Miller’s critique of moralism in consumption scholarship—“the people I most oppose are
probably amongst the people I most admire and respect. I vastly prefer the overt moralists I
critique here to the amoral or indeed immoral stances of those that they are critiquing”
(Miller 2001: 246). Further, it seems unreasonable to single anybody out for criticism on
the basis of tacit assumptions. My aim is for scholars of sustainable food to change direction, start questioning these tacit assumptions, and take seriously the possibility of meaningful engagement with retailers, even (or especially) if their natural inclination is to critique them.

In order to advance this position, I draw on my recent experiences of collaborating with a major food retailer (Tesco), and of leading a project funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of their Retail Sector Initiative.1 The very existence of this initiative reveals something about the institutional climate and context of social science research in the UK (see the introduction to this collection of papers) and so, at one level, there is a clear case for collaborating with retailers as a means of financing social science research intended for academic audiences. Already this signals that modes of collaboration are not limited to the paid consultancy model. Of course, this argument is unlikely to prove persuasive for food scholars who would rather not play the funding game, especially if the rules necessitate the kind of Faustian pact that potentially undermines the purity of their research. A variation on this theme is the expectation of social science research in the UK to have “impact” beyond the academy (again—see the introduction to this collection) and the observation that engagement with businesses is recognized as one, although by no means the only, way of doing so. I very much doubt that every critical food scholar would be willing to adapt their research agenda to fit the demands of the Research Excellence Framework—nor should they.

Bypassing, then, debate around any such cynical motivations, I suggest that there are many scholarly and legitimate reasons (for example, actually wanting one’s research to have societal impacts) for collaborating with major food retailers. Specifically, I discuss the opportunities that commercial collaboration offers in terms of accessing
large-scale datasets, the importance of engaging empirically with retailers, and the possibility of influencing the manner in which powerful actors respond to societal challenges. Common to all of these themes is the assertion that the manner and terms on which productive engagement with retailers can take place are not yet adequately defined. Following Jackson (this volume), I reiterate the importance of acknowledging the power-geometry (Massey 1993) of commercial collaboration as well as arguing that the possibility of critical engagement is dependent on the provision of institutional support and regulation.

**Transactional Data and Social Research**

My first point relates to the claim that social scientists no longer have a monopoly on the generation of social data. For example, Thrift’s (2005) analysis of “knowing capitalism” signals the vast data collection infrastructure that firms have at their disposal. More pointedly, Savage and Burrows (2007) have considered the challenges that social scientists confront as a result of large corporations producing vast amounts of data as a by-product of their ongoing operations. My own experiences point to some of the challenges—both practical and intellectual—of accessing and then doing meaningful social science analysis with the transactional and survey data that Tesco collects independently of our involvement. Conversely, I note that collaboration with Tesco has given my colleagues and me access to their data collection infrastructure and a unique opportunity to do our own research.

Tesco routinely collects information on the shopping habits of the 17 million customers who hold their Clubcard—a loyalty card that is scanned at the point of purchase. At first glance, access to this dataset seems like manna from heaven for
researchers interested in food consumption, and colleagues of mine in economics (Panzone et al. 2013) have already capitalized on the opportunity by exploring the ways in which variously sustainable patterns of food shopping vary throughout the year. This is an example par excellence of the type of social data that corporations collect, and while it is clearly very useful for commercial purposes or researchers in the discipline of economics, it is not particularly adept at answering the questions that other social scientists (sociologists, anthropologists, cultural geographers) might ask. Indeed, I am far less interested in what people buy than I am in understanding what people do with food after they have purchased it and the manner in which it is appropriated. Others may well want to know about the determinants and antecedents—whether structural or psychological—of why individuals and groups consume particular foodstuffs in the manner that they do. These data—related as they are to purchasing behavior—do not actually reveal much about sociological processes of food consumption. Similarly, even the most comprehensive account of the food that people purchase cannot, in isolation, say anything concrete about why they end up wasting it.

One might expect that some of these limitations would have been overcome by having access to Tesco’s Shopper Thoughts Panel—a survey of 27,665 Clubcard holders who have expressed an interest and consented to participating in online surveys as a means of earning extra loyalty card points. As part of our food waste project, we were able to analyze responses to the “eating and food purchases” module that panel members who responded (N=16,433) completed between April 2011 and July 2012. This module included specific questions about food waste in the home, but the problem here is that we did not have control over the survey design, which means that these data are not based on the kinds of questions that we would ask, nor the manner in which we would ask them. For
example, the survey tended to ask two questions in one and often conflated questions about reported behavior with underlying motivations, attitudes, or justifications (e.g., “I often throw food away because I have bought products too close to their sell-by date” or “I often buy promotional items on impulse which end up going to waste”). Aside from violating commonly held principles of social scientific survey design, there are more specific methodological issues associated with asking people directly about the food that they waste such as underreporting, social desirability biases, and the fact that food waste is so embedded in household routines that it is not always easy to reflexively or accurately account for the reasons why it arises. Taking this alongside the limited applications of the Clubcard data to our project, I am less concerned than Savage and Burrows (2007) about the challenge that the proliferation of commercially held social data might pose to the craft of social research. To the contrary, I think that social scientists retain a distinct set of skills that enable them to claim distinctive expertise in gathering social data and interpreting it.

More positively, our collaboration with Tesco gave us the opportunity to design our own survey of eating habits in the UK and administer it to the Shopper Thoughts Panel (n=2,784).3 My colleague Dale Southerton led this work, and while it was not intended exclusively as a study of food waste, we included relevant questions in anticipation of using it to explore the relationships between eating occasions, leftovers, and waste generation.4 The survey broke down the practice of eating into its constituent activities, and so respondents were asked to record eating events as well as a range of contextual information (for example, when they ate, with whom, where, how the food was prepared, and so on). Taking inspiration from time diary studies, respondents were asked to describe the sequencing, duration, and coordination of eating events and their constituent activities. We found that “socially significant” eating events—such as meals that take a lot of time and effort to prepare, and are eaten slowly in the company of a variety of commensal
partners—are more likely to produce leftovers than, for example, somebody eating a ready meal alone. For the purposes of this essay, the specific empirical findings matter less than the observation that we could use the survey to advance perspectives that look beyond the “waste behaviors” of individuals to explore the broader context in which food waste arises. Existing approaches that locate waste in relation to the collective organization of food consumption and everyday life have tended to be based on qualitative and ethnographic studies (Watson and Meah 2013; Evans 2014). Developing these accounts through reference to the analysis of larger scale survey data is useful insofar as it strengthens the empirical basis for these claims. In addition to being intellectually useful, these foundations are likely to prove important for efforts to convince policy makers and practitioners of these ideas and their application.

Reflecting on the above, it is important to acknowledge the power-geometry of the collaboration. Leaving aside any further comment on the quality of the data available, the inherent risk is that major food retailers are much more powerful vis-à-vis the individual food researcher, leaving the latter open to compromises that might undermine the principles of academic integrity. For instance, the manner in which large corporations collect data means that collaboration provides a conduit for social scientists to do analysis that might not otherwise be possible (or at the least, would be very expensive). A researcher who is feeling grateful for access to large-scale consumer data that they can use for academic purposes may well, as a quid pro quo, offer analysis and insights that might be put in the service of a business agenda. Thankfully, our collaboration with Tesco took place against a backdrop in which my research center (and university) had already developed a relationship and negotiated the terms of engagement. Beyond simply facilitating access to Tesco’s data infrastructure (which I cannot imagine an individual researcher obtaining), the university provides the institutional context through which
collaboration can take place along the lines of relative equality while also subjecting specific research projects to robust ethical clearance procedures that enforce the principles of academic integrity. I cannot comment on the specificity or transferability of our experience; however, it suggests that academically robust research can be carried out in collaboration with commercial partners.

**Empirically Engaging with Retailers**

My second point relates to the observation that large corporations are undeniably an important feature of contemporary economic and social life, and so, regardless of one’s normative orientations, they should be treated as a legitimate (and necessary) object of social scientific inquiry and cultural analysis. By extension, I take the view that large food retailers should be engaged with as part of any endeavor to analyze food systems, their sustainability, and opportunities for change. As noted, there is a tendency for food scholarship to approach sustainable food systems via a focus on “alternative” food systems and emergent market niches. While interesting in its own terms, such research provides little insight into the dynamics of unsustainable food systems or the processes through which large-scale change might happen. There is an implied power-geometry here and, put bluntly, a large retailer making positive changes is likely to have far greater impact than an organic vegetable box scheme finding success among some well-intentioned consumers.

With this in mind, we set out to talk to a number of major retailers about the ways in which they are framing, interpreting, and responding to the challenge of food waste reduction. It is not easy, however, for researchers to get access to retailers. In the absence of insider knowledge about organizational structures it is difficult to identify an appropriate person to approach, and even if you can, it can be hard to locate their contact details.
Assuming that you can eventually reach a potential respondent, they might not fully understand what you are asking for, might be suspicious of your motives, and ask the legitimate question of “what is in it for us?” Even if these fundamental hurdles can be overcome, there remains an element of luck in deciding whether or not the person you have identified and reached is going to have sufficient interest (whether on a personal level or in accordance with their current professional priorities), seniority, and autonomy to take your request forward. As it turned out, we were eventually able to carry out nine in-depth key informant interviews with food retailers, including the so-called “big four” supermarkets in the UK (Tesco, Asda, Morrisons, and Sainsbury’s), and so it is useful to reflect on how we secured access.

Unsurprisingly, we experienced few difficulties in accessing Tesco, but the ease of this process relates to the relationships that we had cultivated with them over time. In terms of accessing other retailers, we found it useful to provide potential respondents with an information sheet that clearly specified our purpose and intentions, the ways in which these data would be used, and the ethics framework that governs our research. More generally, we discovered that accessing retailers is a process that involves open communication, reassurances, and a lot of preliminary correspondence prior to the formal empirical encounter. It is instructive to note that the university’s ethical clearance procedures play a vital role in smoothing out the power-geometries that could place both the researcher and respondent at risk. In addition to clarifying expectations and safeguarding the principles of academic integrity (see above), they mitigate the risks of an encounter in which interviewees speak on behalf of the large corporations that employ them. The principles of informed consent, anonymity, not sharing responses with competitors, and giving participants the chance to approve their interview transcript are of particular importance. Thinking specifically about Tesco, it is instructive to note that in addition to following
ethical clearance procedures for any given study, the broader principles of collaboration
have been negotiated by the university and the research institute of which I am a member.
Of particular importance is the requirement that research findings will not be censored by
Tesco, indicating a commitment to—or at least the protection of—the principles of
academic integrity.

From a slightly different angle, intermediaries played an important role in the
process of facilitating access. Our relationship with WRAP (the UK’s Waste Resources
and Action Programme)—an “arm’s length” government body that has led policy and
research in waste reduction, and has developed strong links with food businesses—proved
invaluable. It should be noted that this relationship is something that has developed over
time and is premised on extensive dialogue and mutual respect. At one point during the
study, we wrote a newspaper article for a business audience (Evans and Welch 2014) that
had the effect—more by luck than judgment—of helping us gain access to retailers. The
content of the piece signaled that we might have some useful insight into consumer food
waste and that we were not necessarily hostile toward retailers. In turn, this gave us a hook
with which to open requests and legitimate our credentials when contacting potential
respondents. Allied to this, in response to the “what’s in it for us?” question, we invited all
respondents to attend a workshop that brought together businesses, policy makers, third-
sector organizations, and academics to take stock of food waste research and identify
innovative approaches to its reduction. The incentive proved effective, and the inclusion of
multiple retailers and non-commercial parties in the workshop itself guarded against
concerns about giving market advantage to any particular retailer.

Our preliminary analysis reveals an interesting picture and suggests that retailers
cannot be reduced to the monolithic figure of the careless corporation. Indeed, many of our
respondents appeared motivated to do something about food waste (and other sustainability
challenges) in a personal capacity and several suggested that the commercial imperative was driven, at least in part, by the concerns of their colleagues. This is not to deny that businesses are simultaneously doing things that run counter to this objective—indeed, many reported the difficulties of balancing sustainability objectives with other commercial priorities. It is tempting to question the motives of retailers who are taking action on food waste reduction and to dismiss it as “greenwash” or as a cynical PR exercise. In response, our interviewees were actually rather candid and open about the business case for food waste reduction—ranging from efficiency arguments to reputational effects—and so one possible interpretation is that we are seeing the entwinning of normative concerns and the bottom line (Swaffield et al. 2014). From a slightly different angle, our research—which also involved key informant interviews with a range of stakeholders in the food waste debate—reveals a good deal of interaction across sectors and cooperation where we might expect antagonism. For example, the challenge of waste reduction in the UK is characterized by productive collaboration between retailers and activists. The establishment of this multi-stakeholder coalition reflects recognition that food waste is a systemic issue coupled with a growing sense of distributed responsibility (Welch et al. 2014). An optimistic reading of this hints at a shift in the dynamics of the relationship between businesses and civil society, at least in relation to the specific issue of food waste reduction.

Recent moves by all of the “big four” supermarkets in the UK, and a range of others, to actively and publicly take steps to reduce food waste underscores this optimism. While retailers are only directly responsible for 5 percent of total food waste (House of Lords 2014), they have long been criticized for their indirect upstream influence on food waste (by incentivizing overproduction with suppliers) and downstream (by encouraging overconsumption by households). In response to these pressures, a number of measures
have been taken. These include the commitment from the seven biggest supermarkets (making up 87 percent of the UK’s grocery market) to improve transparency by publishing figures on food waste throughout the whole supply chain. Numerous food businesses are signatories to the Courtauld Commitment, a voluntary agreement coordinated by WRAP, aimed at improving resource efficiency and reducing waste in the UK grocery sector. Specific actions taken by firms across the food retail sector to date include: guaranteeing minimum orders to suppliers; packaging innovations to extend the life of fresh produce; changes to promotional strategies (for example, eliminating Buy One Get One Free deals); communicating directly with consumers around the causes and consequences of food waste; and helping consumers to reduce their own food waste through the provision of recipes and meal planners. Our interviews with retailers suggest that in addition to the aforementioned personal and commercial imperatives to take action on food waste, there is a strong sense in which it is something that their stakeholders—taken variously to include customers, investors, NGOs, policy-makers, supranational organizations (such as the United Nations), and even university researchers—care about.

Conclusion

The preceding sections have explored the middle ground that exists between paid consultancy and an ethical or principled stance of non-engagement with retailers, and my suggestion is that resistance to commercial collaboration might be misguided. I have discussed the ways in which collaborating with retailers can open up opportunities for accessing data that might not otherwise be available to social scientists as well as highlighting the importance of empirically engaging with food businesses. With that in place, it is useful to reflect on the reticence of food researchers to work with retailers. This situation brings to mind Daniel Miller’s reflections (2001) on prevailing tendencies in
consumption scholarship at the turn of the recent century. Miller suggests that studies of consumption, and critical orientations toward it, are all too often reduced to an expression of the guilt and anxieties that people experience in relation to their own material abundance. He argues that in their abstraction from empirical encounters with consumption, these moralistic critiques fail to challenge the arrangements that they seek to critique. While in broad agreement, Richard Wilk (2001) tempers this position by reiterating that it is not always easy to separate the empirical study of consumption from one’s own moralism, especially when faced with some of its undeniably negative consequences (such as the environmental degradations wrought by “overconsumption”).

This is a useful stance from which to approach the task of studying retailers: it is important to move beyond theoretical critique and blanket moral condemnation in order to engage empirically with them. In addition to being a fundamental precursor to meaningful social scientific and cultural analysis, this kind of encounter is likely to generate better understandings of the objectionable arrangements that supermarkets are complicit in perpetuating. It strikes me that if one’s objective is to critique the role of major retailers in propagating environmentally unsustainable and socially unjust food systems, it is better to start from an empirical understanding than from a position of theoretical or moral abstraction. A corollary of this is that engaging with retailers opens up the possibility of having constructive input and a positive impact on the things that they do. Our experience of working with Tesco suggests that they have an appetite for applying insights from contemporary social science research. Of course there are different types of impact, and Pettigrew (2011: 350) usefully distinguishes between instrumental impacts where tangible products and services are taken up by companies and conceptual impacts that generate new understandings and raise awareness of research findings. I suspect that the impact of social science research on food retailers is likely to be closer to the latter—while it might
facilitate shifts in thinking, the perspectives and insights put forward by researchers may not be adopted wholesale.

Cutting across all of these themes is a reassertion of Jackson’s point (this volume) that food researchers ought to engage with food retailers, but in doing so, they need to acknowledge the power-geometry of collaboration and find ways of leveling it and/or leveraging it. Universities have an important role to play in defining the terms of engagement as well as providing institutional support and regulation for the individual academics who embark on the task of commercial collaboration. Crucially, universities can help define the boundaries between scholarship and consultancy—a line that can otherwise become quite fuzzy when the worlds of commerce and academic research collide. For what it is worth, I see no problem with individual academics acting as paid consultants in a private capacity. The flipside of this is that when academics engage with commercial partners in their capacity as academic researchers, they should not be put in a position where their academic agenda is subsumed by commercial interests (including their own), nor should they be coerced into using public knowledge for private gain; rather, the possibility of research findings having positive societal impacts by affecting changes in globally powerful actors should remain open.

REFERENCES


Presented at *Food Justice: Knowing Food/Securing the Future*, University of Reading, July 17, 2014.


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NOTES

1 Households, Retailers and Food Waste Transitions” (ES/L00514X/1).

2 Our access to all Tesco data, including the Clubcard data, was mediated by Dunnhumby. Dunnhumby is a “customer science company” and a subsidiary of Tesco. The data employed in this research was either prepared (in the case of secondary data) or collected (in the case of primary data) under a contractual agreement between the University of Manchester and Dunnhumby.

3 The number of respondents is clearly smaller than the sample size with which Tesco and Dunnhumby typically work. Our commercial collaborators did not limit the sample that they would facilitate access to; rather the disparity in size is a reflection of our (the academic research team’s) specifications and requirements. These were
governed principally by our judgment regarding what constitutes sound social science research and the financial context of an academic study (it is obviously more expensive to collect primary data than to reanalyze data that has already been collected).

4 See Yates and Warde (2015) for a discussion of meal content in the UK.

5 The analysis was led by my colleague Dr. Jennifer Whillans.

6 A similar observation is made by Hallsworth (2013), who notes that the attention paid to retailers by food researchers is low compared to their financial turnover and number of employees.

7 Email addresses are rarely publicly available.

8 The team also included my colleagues Drs. Joanne Swaffield and Daniel Welch.

9 See www.brc.org.uk/brc_news_detail.asp?id=2751.

10 See www.wrap.org.uk/category/initiatives/courtauld-commitment.