ICTs and ethical consumption: the political and market futures of fair trade

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**ICTs and Ethical Consumption:
The Political and Market Futures of Fair Trade**
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Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and ethical consumption as part of a cause for the insurance of a sustainable future. It homes in on fair trade as an ethical market, politically progressive cause and, crucially, form of participation where citizens can engage in the formation of an alternative future and the broader issue of food security. An three-dimensional analysis of agencies and uses of digital structures and content is informed by a case study approach, as well as interviews with fair trade activists, and ethically consuming citizens in the British metropolis. Through this, the argument which primarily rises distinguishes between the dimensions of durability (in terms of time and duration) and sustainability (in terms of time, duration and environmental concerns) of engagement in fair trade as a form of participation. Ethical consumption, then, is part of a durable market which has developed despite general market fluctuation, but is still very much bound in traditional physical economic spaces; in other words, ethical consumption has been integrated in the business as usual paradigm. Additionally, ICTs have not challenged the way in which information about ethical consumption is communicated or the spaces in which it is conducted. ICTs have been employed by fair trade activists, but they have not contributed to the development of fair trade as a political or economic project. Over a period of over five decades since the inception of the cause, their use has not significantly altered the way in which citizens engage with fair trade in the alternative or mainstream marketplace.

Keywords

ICTs, fair trade, ethical consumption, durability, sustainability, alternative futures

1. Durability, Sustainability and Politically Progressive Causes

The beginning of the twenty-first century has witnessed the proliferation of politically progressive causes pertaining to the preservation and betterment of our social and environmental futures. These causes have been gradually embraced by public and private agents and successful examples have steadily been mainstreamed into public consciousness. A locus for a variance of engagement with such progressive causes has been generated within the sphere of consumption. Categorically, there has been a proliferation of green or ethical markets pertaining to an idea of sustainable futures (i.e. free-range poultry, sustainable fish, organic dairy, fair trade coffee). These are increasingly connected with the new politics of consumption (cf. Schor, 2000; Micheletti and Stolle, 2012) where rights to the standard of living, quality of life, equal participation and ecological sustainability form the basis for politically progressive causes such as fair trade. This paper explores the mediation of ethical consumption through the cause of fair trade. It interrogates the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the cause by questioning the agencies which employ them and the uses that they are exposed to, resonating with a political economy approach (cf. McChesney, 2013) concerning the swing of technologies into the direction of already powerful and established agents. By doing so, this paper dissects the potentialities for the ethical political and market futures in urban spaces such as the British metropolis. It ultimately argues that ICTs have played a small part in the growth of fair trade; on the one hand, the market side of fair trade has become normalised through its engulfment in the retail sector, while, on the other, its political side is not being promoted through digital media.

Significant social and political processes within and beyond nations underpin the space left for civic action within and beyond nations. This is by no means a new contention, but one which calls for attention towards the underlying political nature of politically progressive causes. This is part of a larger problematisation of the notions of durability and sustainability of political causes within the contemporary metropolis. The term sustainability is associated with the nexus of time and duration, while the literature on sustainable development also encloses the parameter of the environment. In their extensive study of the relationship between food, globalisation and sustainability, Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld broadly define the latter as "the overarching aim for organizing food provision" (2012: 250). Thus, one definition of strong sustainable development refers to changes in the types of production and consumption patterns aiming to environmental protection, social justice and economic viability for current and future generations (Baker *et al*, 1996). Sustainability is, thus, the highlighting parameter in the socially and environmentally respectful organisation of global systems of provision. Fair trade has been adhering to either of or both of the parameters of social and environmental respect. The term durability is a simpler approach to the time and duration nexus and is here used to describe the ability of a system of provision to endure. This is explicitly found in the marketplace where the growth rates of fair trade have been balanced.

Fair trade has dual nature as both a market and movement (Jaffee, 2007) and ICTs mediate both these aspects. Fair trade has a long-standing presence in the UK, historically involving a variety of initiatives, structures and strategies which underpin its current operations accordingly (Lekakis, 2013). This paper argues that technological developments do not have a deep-seated impact on the campaigning or consuming side of this cause. The role and use of ICTs in the mediation of ethical consumption relates to urban sustainable futures and is

unravelling from the points of view of both promoters and supporters of the cause. Specifically, the use of ICTs by activists and consumers involved and interested in the cause of fair trade is outlined. The argument which ultimately rises highlights the variable relationship between the notions of sustainability and durability in the case of fair trade. Rather, in politically progressive causes such as fair trade, durability and sustainability are characterised by a mutually dependent relationship where the durability of their presence -be that civic or commercial- influences their sustainability.

2. Communicating Fair Trade: A Political Economy Approach of ICTs

The fair trade movement is directly concerned with ameliorating trade relations between the global South and the global North. This cause is primarily associated with the promotion of the motto and the practice of a 'fair day's pay for a fair day's work' and is both an organised movement as well as a market. The history of fair trade demonstrates a dense past where various factors have contributed in the growth of the market and movement (cf. Lekakis, 2013). The historical evolution of the movement denotes its endurance in time; its durability is evident in the fact that it grew from charity-based niche into market-based mainstream. In fair trade, durability is evident in the long standing history which has promoted the growth of the movement, whereas sustainability refers to the targets of the movement to do with safeguarding and ensuring livelihoods for commodity producers in the global South. Accordingly, if there is no durability of the market and movement, then there is no sustainability that the cause can uphold.

There has been an identifiable shift of consumer concerns from the reliability to the sustainability of consumer goods (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). For instance, consumer activism has targeted the social and environmental repercussions of manufacturing more than the durability of commodities themselves. The growth of consumer concerns about future sustainability has been met by the professionalisation of charity and campaign work in the United Kingdom. The degree to which politically progressive causes become the business of commercial actors can be described as their marketisation (cf. Nash, 2008; Richey and Ponte, 2011). Ethical consumption has been regarded as 'commodity activism' (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012) which is incessantly flirtatious towards markets and solidified corporate players to survive and sustain its campaigning work. In envisioning urban futures, the histories, trajectories and transformations of causes remain crucial in outlining common modes of life; these are the outcome of particular processes with fluctuating preferences to political but also promotional cultures. The sustainability of fair trade campaigning and ethical consumption needs to be teased out as part of the historical transformation of the cause and the examination of the structures and processes which mediate the cause.

The internet is contextually and physically disposed to social, cultural and economic frameworks, and as such ICTs are understood from a social constructivist stance, while reflecting upon a political economy framework in order to understand the embeddedness of the medium in neoliberal capitalism. A political economy approach of ICTs is vested in the exploration of the organisation and regeneration of power. The exploration of the agencies and processes of employment of digital technologies has illuminated the deep commercial nature of the internet where business is as usual (cf. Schiller, 1999; Mansell, 2004; McChesney, 2013). The types of agents engaged in fair trade activism and their communication strategies can, therefore, unveil

the role of ICTs in enhancing or hindering the market or political side of this cause. Alternative trade organisations (ATOs) initially promoted the visibility of fair trade, in the 1980s. The campaigning function of these charities underlines their communication strategies. At the same time, a growing allegiance between non-profits and corporations who have been involved to promote causes rose. These types of synergies are typical to the agenda of what is typically described as ethical, green, social, or cause-related marketing. The collaborative profit-making functions of for-profits and non-profits can be categorised as transaction-based promotions [1], joint issue promotions [2], and licensing [3] (Andreasen, 1996). Cause-related marketing is varied in the case of the fair trade movement since it has developed a brand, co-branded with corporations and supermarkets and lobbied the government for funding. This has been a crucial transformation in the historical formation of the movement, as it has fast-forwarded its mainstreaming and included the involvement of commercial agents, thus safeguarding the durability of fair trade.

Furthermore, the processes of employment of digital technologies can highlight the regeneration of power in the articulation of progressively political causes. This can be explored from both the perspectives of ethical consumers of fair trade products and activists engaged in the campaigning work of the cause. Fair trade is the success story of the ethical consumption genre. There is, concurrently, an entwined assumption that the fair trade cause is at the heart of a revitalisation of the politics of consumption, thus relating to our food futures but also to our political futures. Ways of connecting with the fair trade cause are thus inherently directed to both movement participation and (ethical) market practice. These types of participation in the cause offer different forms of engagement through ICTs. On the one hand, movement participation in fair trade can be paralleled to a form of political participation (Micheletti *et al.*, 2004; Barnett *et al.*, 2011), thereby constituting the exploration of political communication of fair trade essential. On the other hand, market participation in fair trade is analysed in terms of how ICTs impact on ethical consumption.

The exploration which follows is part of a broader research project conducted between 2006-2010 (Lekakis, 2013). In order to understand the effectiveness of ICTs in engaging and mobilising citizens in the cause, the analysis is informed by the perspectives of ethically consuming citizens and fair trade activists. The results are produced by multi-method approach, as a result of a case study approach to three fair trade groups and organisations, and in-depth interviews with both ethically consuming citizens and activists. Case studies belong to a range of non-profit fair and solidarity trade groups in London and include: the Active Distribution Network (ADN), an anarchist group which features a digital catalogue sourcing fair trade or "rebel trade" coffee among other products, the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign (NSC), a registered limited company and charity, and the Fairtrade Foundation (FTF), a registered company and charity. NSC supplies fair trade products both online and offline and the Fairtrade Foundation licenses the use of the Fairtrade Mark, which is the official fair trade brand. The perspectives of the eight activists interviewed reflect on different organisational types ranging from small local to medium national and large national groups [4].

The method of semi-structured interviewing was employed in order to enable focused but flexible, conversational but informative, two-way communication between the researcher and the research subjects. Activist respondents range from key articulators and personnel involved in decision-making processes, production of online texts to part-time staff and volunteers in the different types of digital activism. Unlike structured interviews, where there is a pre-established schedule of questions (i.e. questionnaire), in semi-structured interviews with the use of an

interview guide with a set of topics/themes, the researcher and the interviewee can converse freely and elaborate on the intricacies of the issues discussed (Blee and Taylor, 2002: 92). These interviews allowed for the exploration of 'circumstantial evidence' (Deacon *et al*, 1999: 62) rather than explicit answers. The interviews are 'conversations with a purpose' (Lindlof, 1995) with the purpose of eliciting particular pieces of information (cf. Berg, 1998; Blee and Taylor, 2002) without directing the discussion. The particular information of my conversations with activists was their employment of internet spaces and tools, in order to discover how new technologies are brought to play in fair trade activism, how the history of use of technological means for political ends is shaped, and how the processes of information production occur for online contexts. The themes selected for the purpose of this piece included activists' perspectives on the relationship between ICTs and ethical consumption, as well as fair trade activism and ethical agendas of the activists.

Similarly, interviews with ethically consuming citizens were also semi-structured in order to address 'the complexity of action and talk' (Couldry, 2000: 62). 'Action' literally refers to the consumption patterns and their interpretations, while 'talk' refers to citizens' discourse about their consumption patterns and their reflection on their relationship with broader cultural constructions. By listening to personal narratives on concerns with socially and -to a lesser degree environmentally- sustainable futures, as well as digital and non-digital spaces and tools of information on and practice of ethical consumption, I was able to understand citizens' motivations, practices and general involvement in fair trade activism. Thirty interviews have been conducted with ethically consuming citizens. The focus is on the communicative agencies which safeguard the durability of the cause, as well as the use of information technologies by citizens for purposes of information or direct ethical consumption. In the urban setting of the British metropolis, political and commercial agencies are articulating different claims in the promotion of fair trade. Purposeful conversations with activists explored their involvement with the cause historically and presently, and unraveled their communication strategies.

3. Sustainability in the Supermarket: Market Durability as Usual Despite Digital Ethical Consumption

Evidence on the direct commercial relationship between ICTs and market participation in fair trade is scarce. Several studies have focused on the communicative power of new media in promoting causes pertaining to ethical consumption (cf. Scammell, 2000; Micheletti and Stolle, 2008; Banaji and Buckingham, 2009). Indeed, Michaelis (2000) notes that the medium has played a decisive role for ethical consumption, as it presents a substantial source of information around social and environmental impacts of consumption choices. She argues that online mediation can directly influence consumer behaviour by portraying social norms for ethical consumption. This resonates with the epistemological approach of the internet as embedded in particular social, political and economic contexts where the proliferation of information is influenced by specific contextual conditions. In a similar fashion, Graham and Haarstad (2011) discuss the potentialities for ethical consumer choice through the development of the internet of things - an infrastructure which can attach a wealth of digital information to material objects - which will expose bad corporate practice and enhance consumer awareness by presenting the real conditions of material production. The authors argue that "realization of the potential transparency depends not only on technological infrastructures, but on how they are utilized by

social practices seeking to invigorate a politics of consumption" (Graham and Haarstad, 2011: 14). There is, thus, a comparable problematisation of the impact of ICT infrastructure on the urban present and future of fair trade with respect to agencies and social practices.

Fair trade has notably come into the market and the public mainstream. Sales of fair trade products - especially the 'basics' line such as coffee, tea and bananas - are now booming in the mainstream marketplace. The estimated annual retail sales of fair trade products in the United Kingdom has reached over a billion pounds (Fairtrade Foundation, 2013). The involvement of corporations and supermarkets has been crucial to the mainstreaming of the fair trade cause. Big retailers have come to promote their own labels of ethical products, as the concept of a green/ethical lifestyle has gained significant promotion and reach. The role of retailers has been crucial in the market survival and success of fair trade products. According to the latest Ethical Consumerism Report 2011, fair trade is among the top three types of ethical consumerism based on its market significance. The report, issued by the Co-operative bank, demonstrates that the annual growth rate of the fair trade market is higher than the rates of the top two popular types (organic, vegetarian). The report also illustrates that even during the economic crisis, fair trade sales did not wane as much as organic or vegetarian sales did. This has also been noted in the academic literature (cf. Bondy and Talwar, 2011) and observed in interviews with ethical consumers who expounded unceasing support for the ethics of fair trade activism. They were quick to stress how – given the choice between fair trade and organic products – if they could not have both in one product, they would choose fair trade:

I stopped buying organic vegetables, because they were too expensive, but I still buy fair trade, so it's more that ethical political kind of decision rather than organic [which] is more about you. And I know it's the environment as well, but, when eating organic, you're thinking more about what it does to your body. (Joanna)

I would go for the fair trade because to me that's more ethical. But there's ethical issues with organic and issues with the environment and things, so I just tend to think about buying fair trade which is going to be organic! (Susan)

These testimonies demonstrate personal concerns that go beyond the private interests (buying organic products which are generally accepted to be better for the consumer) to public interests (buying fair trade products to support a socially sustainable future). There is, thus, a collective sustained effort to support the fair trade market. In this manner, the recent instability of other ethical markets is recognised by the interviewees. The price difference of fair trade goods has not yet been considered as disruptive enough to the growth of their sales. Within the debates of ethical food futures, fair trade remains one of the promising avenues. Its consumption grows durably despite economic meltdown. The fair trade market thus demonstrates both durability and sustainability offline.

Conversely, a different story of fair trade consumption takes place online. Retailers dominate the landscape of fair trade sales. Although Ethical Consumerism reports have not accounted for online sales, an enthusiastic report from the biggest online outlet for ethical consumption in the United Kingdom, the EthicalSuperstore.com, claims that between 2009-2010 there was a 48 per cent increase in turnover to £4.3 million [5]. However, this does not calculate or include fair trade sales separately. The majority of interviewees (23 out of 30) declared little

or no interaction with the internet for ethical consumption, and, when they did, it was not for food:

I hardly ever buy anything online apart from plane tickets. I occasionally buy books at Amazon. I don't really buy much online at all actually; I think I'm quite old-fashioned in that respect, I prefer to look at the product. (Abigail)

When it comes to shopping I'd rather pick my own shopping than have someone deliver it for me. Even though I don't have a car I don't like the idea of a van trampling around to bring me my shopping. So I don't have much time, but I'd still rather go do my own shopping and walk back from the supermarket or get the bus back rather than have someone deliver it. ... But it's funny, because I'm happy for books and music to be delivered that way but then that comes through the post which is different. So, kind of Amazon things I buy online. It's just the fact [that I don't like] a Sainsbury's lorry coming to my door when I live ten minutes or I've got the local stores just down the road. (Anna)

There is a foretelling of selective industry growth on the internet. According to ACNielsen (2005), the two most prominent online markets in the early 2000s were entertainment (cultural goods and clothing) and travel (airfares and hotels), with books being the most popular item sold on the internet. An updated version of this inquiry (Nielsen, 2010) produced the same conclusions, with books being the primary choice for future purchase of respondents and groceries ranking tenth in the list of products or services that respondents intended to purchase online in the upcoming six months. Interestingly, in the same report, groceries ranked eleventh in global average in products that consumers would not purchase without consulting online reviews. These reports correspond with ethical consumers' hesitation towards online consumption.

Yet, the growth of fair trade online sales is more readily identifiable through retailers who source them. Sainsbury's reported 20 per cent growth of online fair trade sales and 11 per cent growth of overall fair trade products during Fairtrade Fortnight 2012; the chief executive also added that Sainsbury's "expects sales of Fairtrade products will hit £1bn by 2020" (Shearman, 2012). Though not explicitly, these sales are referring to offline retail avenues for ethical purchase are offering convenience and readiness. The mainstreaming of fair trade through the placements of such products in supermarket shelves has facilitated convenience for ethical consumers. Their preferences are increasingly been demonstrated in the space of the supermarket:

I hate to say it, but mainly [I consume ethically in] the supermarket. We try to do as much shopping we can do locally, but we still haven't got to the stage, my partner and I, where we do everything locally. That's what we're aiming for. So, it's the supermarket and to be honest we shop in Sainsbury's and they do have quite a good range of fair trade products. So, we always go towards the fair trade products when we shop there. The other thing is, you know, there were some eco-shops scattered around London as well. There's one near where I live and I like to go there. (Anna)

Identifiable trends of mainstreaming the fair trade cause include the spatial expansion of the movement as both a practical and personal matter. Awareness raising and negotiations with key distributors and outlets has resulted in the wider supply and demand of fair trade products. The involvement of large economic actors has irreversibly signified the passage of fair trade at the storefront of social consciousness. Yet, as niche of online consumption, fair trade falls short, especially since "the internet has not revolutionized shopping" (Curran, 2012: 6) in the broader sense.

As a sustainable consumer practice, fair trade has been communicated but not practiced online. Online ethical consumption is not a common consumer custom. The accessibility to an online marketplace where competition for attention is unwritten law for a variety of new online ventures has not been characteristic of the ethical consumption genre. Additionally, activists who are attempting to create an online avenue to trade fair trade products profess that:

Sometimes, the people who are buying by filling in a form, they're more solid. They'll buy again and again, we recognise the names, whereas the online ones, they buy and for a couple of years I've tried to get their email addresses and then send them promotions by email and I find they don't really go for it. So, they don't seem as concerned as the people who are bothered to sit down at the table and write a check and fill in a catalogue. (Linda, NSC)

This behaviour is typical of the attention economy that rules online. The lack of sustainable consumer behaviour online is aligned to the notion of the attention economy and fragmentation of information (and commodity) consumption.

There is also reluctance from the point of view of activists beyond this network towards the employment of the commercial side of the internet, whose concerns include customer loyalty, online security and skewed or confusing political information. The latter is considered the most important drawback of ethical consumption. In combination with the potential for political action and more substantial novel types of participation, such as political consumerism, relevant, substantial and well-researched information appears to be of key significance. Issues allowing for scepticism which have arisen in some of the interviews involve activist concerns for user access, accessibility and online fraud. ADN, for instance, was not so focused on simplifying the process of buying through the online catalogue. Although payment is expected through the online payment service Paypal, there is no shopping basket. This, according to Rob (ADN founder), is because he wants users to "use their brain a little bit" when buying online, and underlines that he does not want the website to reach "that level of store convenience". Online security and the danger of fraud were also emphasised during the interviews, in the spirit of scepticism towards the growth of online ethical consumption. Issues of user sophistication with regards to information provision and assessment were also raised.

The future of ICTs for the practice of general consumption primarily, and ethical consumption secondarily, depends on a series of practicalities related to the exercise of the trade cycle as usual. This is in line with the selective industry increase (entertainment, travel) which lies in practicalities such as costs of warehousing and distribution (Curran, 2012). While most major supermarkets in the UK have slammed their online doors open and never put up the closing sign, this has not resulted in the transformation of consumer habits and preferences. As a form of ethical consumption, the fair trade market has comparably and unequivocally thrived within a global city such as London. With all its success, this type of ethical consumption excels

fundamentally offline. The durability of the cause is evident in the traditional free marketplace. Market agents, predominantly those from the retail sector, have transformed the market side of the fair trade cause by enhancing it through dominating it. The processes which move the political side of the cause are discussed below.

4. New Mediations of an Old Cause: ICTs and Political Futures of Fair Trade

There is a miscellany of views on the growth, diversification and integration of ICTs in economic, political and social patterns of life. The potential of digital technologies for progressive politics has been widely underscored (cf. McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; van de Donk *et al*, 2004; Chadwick and Howard, 2009). Yet, a brooding anatomy of the fruits of the digital era exposes issues of inequality in access in infrastructure and language, power imbalances, conflicts of interests and values, the rooted existence of national and localist cultures, national control, and distinctive variation in uses within publics (cf. Curran, 2012). The degree in which digital technologies feature into progressive political causes varies heavily according to digital literacy, resources and targets of the activists. For instance, the digital activist platform Avaaz.org mobilises approximately twenty million people world-wide to take action for progressive political causes. This mobilises the most effective of elements of digital technologies (ubiquity and instantaneity) into pressure towards political agendas. Another example is to be found in causes featuring non-digital histories and which are vested in agencies with diverse membership bodies and various speeds of digital adaptation. The historical existence of such causes before and beyond the permeation of digital technologies calls for situated analyses of the potentialities of digital technologies for politics both within their overarching contexts and also everyday uses; in simpler words, the internet is connected to its contexts and amenable to its uses (cf. Norris, 2001; Chadwick, 2006; Papacharissi, 2009; Coleman and Blumler, 2009). The relationship between fair trade and ethical consumption belongs in this latter pool of cases.

Digital media have been embryonic and unsound with respect to the mediation of fair trade and the enhancement of the political future of fair trade. In the mediation of a cause such as fair trade with a historical background which precedes its digital translation, ICTs do not appear to dramatically enhance the profile of the cause. Fair trade activism features a long history and a diverse range of commercial and campaigning actors with steady membership bases and different speeds of technology appropriation. This explains the slow appropriation of ICTs by already interested citizens, but also serves to outline the restrictions inherent in digital technologies and environments. Restrictions to the revolutionary impact of the internet have been noted with respect to the parameter of attention (cf. Dean, 2009) when the ecology of information online presents less of a garden and more of a jungle of misinformation, spam and cacophony (Terranova, 2004). Also, digital cultures foster individualisation as the fundamental *modus vivendi* (cf. Turkle, 2011). While the quantity of online information is rapidly growing due to immediate and cost-effective transmission and reception, the fragmentation of audiences is at work. As a result, the ephemeral character of online environments and the jagged pools of information do not appear to favour venues not ascribed to dominant and seamless environments. In other words, there is a tendency for internet users to resort to familiar avenues where information is readily available, rather than to get lost in the jungle of uncategorised information. Consequently, citizens who are not already aware of a specific portal where they can actively

seek information on the fair trade cause are more likely to be presented with strong digital presences.

The bearing of ICTs on the mediation of the fair trade cause can be mined through an analysis of their employment by citizens for the purposes of information and mobilisation. While interviewees celebrated the internet as the first space they turn to in order to become informed, this type of online participation was fragmented and reduced to fleeting interaction with familiar websites such as the Fairtrade Foundation's website and Google. Over one third of interviewees suggested that the website of the Fairtrade Foundation is a usual suspect in their search for information, as the most legitimate source. Melissa pronounces that the website is "really good for a source of information. I think it's excellent". Also, the dominance of Google among the search engine landscape has been noted (cf. Shaker, 2006; Vaidhyanathan, 2011). Approximately one in four interviewees explicitly referred to the search engine as the primary port of call for any type of information imaginable. Karen, for instance, suggested that "Google is the best invention since sliced bread". The perceived ingenuity and seamlessness of the search engine is at the expense of selective gardening of the information jungle. Google is successful, because it delivers information at the fastest rate available online. It is able to do so, because its search software (crawling 'spider') fleetingly trails through the most recent outcomes of previous searches and recreates them at a fraction of a second. Google recreates dominant results. Hence, it is more likely to reproduce a lifestyle-oriented form of market participation rather than a justice-oriented form of movement participation (Lekakis, 2014).

But while interviewees exclaimed enthusiasm about access to digital information, their actual practices vary. Despite the availability of information, its consumption is fragmented. The relationship between the internet, the internet user and information available on the internet does not follow a logical pattern of production, user and consumption. Computer-mediated communication is not exhausted in the user seeking out information, but also in information seeking out the user. As Edward, points out, the case is simply that "once you've signed up for that you just get lots of emails". Half of the interviewees stated that they were subscribed in at least one fair trade mailing list. Yet, subscription to a mailing list does not guarantee consumption of its daily, weekly, or monthly material. In fact, over half of those who were subscribed to a mailing list declared that they were actually disconnected from the material which they received:

It's funny, because I'm signed, for example, to the newsletter the Fairtrade Towns and I never read it and that comes into my inbox. ... I keep thinking that I should and I never do. (Melissa)

I haven't unsubscribed myself from any of those mailing lists, because I still want... I mean I wish I had the time to read them, but at the moment I don't. (Maya)

These testimonies express an imbalance between supply and demand of information pertaining to fair trade, as it reaches the users. There are also cases where a couple of interviewees were confused as to whether they actually receive a mailing list or as to how they got subscribed the first place. Some level of discomfort linked to the overflow of information through mailing lists among a couple of interviewees was identified; Patricia pronounced that "your email box is flooded sometimes!" Similarly, there is a burden accompanying the weightless bulk of online information.

I always prefer to seek stuff out myself, that's my personal preference. I don't like being on lots of mailing lists. Especially [be]cause for my work I'm on loads of mailing lists, and you can just get swamped and you start to just pile... You're reading this week's newsletter or whatever, but you don't take it in, so I prefer to seek out information. If I really wanted to, then I could set up some feeds and it would be very easy to get that information delivered. I just haven't done it for whatever reason. The thought of a hundred emails and newsletters coming into my mailbox does not really fill me with joy! (Anna)

Hence, the online polyphony of information towards users is constant and prolific, but, the intended reception is not guaranteed. This is an under-researched question which deserves further exploration. The scarcity of time resources necessary to connect to the amounts of information piling up on inboxes obstructs the consumption of mailing list content. Mailing lists are features indicative of the 'cyberbalkanization' of online communities (cf. Buchstein, 1997; Sunstein, 2002; Kahn and Kellner, 2005). While interviewees can be regarded as belonging in the same cyberbalkan peninsula, the homogenous consumption of information cannot be assumed.

Another dimension of digital interaction with causes is through social media. A mode of engaging citizens online has been the Facebook group/ page of the Fairtrade Foundation. One can become a fan of the Foundation, as well as post pictures and comments with respect to fair trade. Social media have undoubtedly impacted the digital ecology of politically progressive causes. In particular, there have been identifiable changes in the rise of social media trends in the fair trade cause. The Fairtrade Foundation's Facebook group had 1,751 followers in May 2008. Two interviewees belonged in the group at its initial formation as such and found it useful in terms of information as awareness and mobilisation:

On Facebook ... there's a fair trade social networking group, so I kind of have been on that and they have different articles on that sometimes or discuss the issues. That's when I found out about how you can get your organisation involved properly and there is some information on that. (Susan)

This resonates with the potential of 'digital prefigurative participation' (Mercea, 2012) where the engagement with offline action is preceded by the digital engagement with information or people involved in the same cause. In February 2010 engagement with fair trade through social media had tripled (3,123 followers), as more interactivity was introduced in the website of the Fairtrade Foundation, evident in 'The Big Swap 2010 campaign [6]' and the top trending of #Fairtrade Fortnight in Twitter for two days during the Fairtrade Fortnight. A significant rise of 'likes' was noted by January 2012 (87,857 likes), although the number of active discussants in the page was significantly less (443 talking about this). In March 2013, the 'Join the March' [7] campaign took place, causing a significant increase of involvement through social media (97,842 likes and 12,832 talking about this). There is a noticeable increase in social media use.

Yet, fragmentation also reverberates across social media. According to an interviewee, the use of social media platforms for engagement with a politically progressive cause can be superficial:

I don't think I've joined any relevant Facebook groups, because I'm a bit cynical about some Facebook sort of campaigning groups. Because ok, if you joined something that actively promotes a message, fine. But all these online petitions it trivialises things, because people think 'oh yeah, I'm making a difference [be]cause I've joined a Facebook group'. They don't actually understand how the process of say democracy works. People think 'oh, yes, I'm championing a cause, I've joined a Facebook group'. (Wendy)

This highlights some of the critical views voiced about the potential of social media (cf. Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Patelis and Hatzopoulos, 2013). Two issues arise from this quote: on the one hand, there is an underlying assumption that engaging with social media can be equated to action in itself, thus negating the necessity for further (whether online or offline) action, while, on the other hand, there is a belief in the political processes vested in social media, thus promoting a sense of accomplishment in terms of social change. Consequently, while social media might be appealing to a number of citizens using digital spaces for fair trade activism, these are not necessarily key spaces for information gathering or involvement, as mailing lists can be. Therefore, ICT involvement in the participatory and communicative formats of the cause does not yet appear to be durable. For the majority of interviewees who were already involved in the cause before its digitisation, the social media landscape did not incur any significant changes in the ways in which they sought or received relevant information. There is little evidence to suggest that the instantaneous nature of information distribution online impacts directly on political participation, whether that be online or offline. According to report about the future of internet economy, "a world that is alive with information will also mean more personalization" (Atkinson *et al*, 2010: 62). Digital spaces undoubtedly provide a plethora of information, but a subsequent and crucial question concerns the impact of this information.

This impact can be identified in the relational aspect between information and mobilisation. While the movement is durable and awareness appears to be raising, this awareness does not equate online sustainability and capture of the civic imagination. While the online efforts for mobilisation have not been prominent, offline mobilisation is more purposeful. Social spaces, spaces of worship and spaces of education are more likely to mobilise and to further engage citizens in what I elsewhere term coffee activism (Lekakis, 2013). The relationship between faith groups and the fair trade movement has been particularly significant, as it attaches its strong moral position to the ethics of consumption which complies with the dominant fair trade narrative. The grassroots mobilisation of the fair trade movement has also crucially impacted on its mainstreaming, although this has been a long-standing process despite the digital communicative developments of the cause. The way in which technological developments will impact on the mediation of an alternative future where trade will depend on the broader transformations of the public's digital education and the operationalisation of grassroots formats for broader political change.

5. The Future of Urban Ethical Food (Inter)Action

Fair trade is an established part of civic and consumer imaginaries in urban settings across the global North and one of the prominent causes for the safeguarding of sustainable futures. Its historical rooting and successful campaigning and promotion models have placed it at the forefront of global issues, connected to the idea of 'sustainable citizenship' which

incorporates production and consumption as key tenants of political life (Micheletti and Stolle, 2012). Sustainable citizenship is connected with a 'politics of personalization' (Bennett, 2012) which is the aftermath of contemporary civic contentions taking place beyond the nation and through digital media. Understanding the future of an ethical movement and market such as fair trade sheds light on a crossroads of political and market agencies and practices through and beyond information and communication technologies. The development of ICTs ranging from electronic mail, electronic mailing lists, websites, electronic forums and podcasts, to remote servers, social networking sites, RFID technologies and numerous others has bred awareness and interest in politically progressive causes. The infiltration of some of these technologies has been examined here with respect to an interrogation of the structures and processes delineating fair trade in the United Kingdom. However, the concurrent theoretical developments of political and technological life are not always seamless.

The fair trade cause exposes many different speeds in acceleration into a digital future, as well as remains closely knit with corporate interests which encompass its distribution and promotion. It is characterised by market durability and political non-sustainability. Durability here has thus been discussed in terms of persistence and endurance, but not necessarily growth and alteration. Sustainability, on the other hand, adheres more to an understanding of structural changes in the levels of production and consumption fostering causes which are in themselves sustainable in the sense that they are involved in social and environmental justice. Although the fair trade portion of the market has been rising, it is far from being the dominant market model; therefore, it exists as a sustainable niche reflecting changes in both production and consumption, but it is not likely to overturn the dominant market model of free trade.

Market durability is evident in the unmatched persistence of fair trade consumption during the economic downturn. Yet, this has not precipitated through the development of ICTs, but through the gradual incorporation of the cause through the sophistication of marketing practices that have been at place since the 1980s. There is no evidence to suggest that online sales appreciably advance fair trade consumption. Digital consumption of fair trade goods has not and does not rise in popularity because of user concerns on security, the convenience of the supermarket and the ritual of consumption. Based on evidence reported by fair-trade friendly supermarkets, the futures that might arise from the growth of the relationship between ICTs and the cause would be entirely streamlined with their interests. Both the digital consumption of both information and commodities are susceptible to the dynamics of a private sphere which favours fully-fledged financial players and where "the triumph of the small business in the internet era never happened because competition remained unequal. Corporate Goliaths continued to squash commercial Davids armed only with a virtual sling and pebble" (Curran, 2012: 7). The growth of ethical food futures will depend to a large extent on the broad shifts of corporate power within the internet economy.

Digital media have indeed spread the fair trade word. Still, digital political engagement with ethical consumption is not mobilising, interactive, or sustained. There is limited, tightly selective and personalised consumption of digital information in the sense that even if the initial drive is there, further engagement is fragmented. The majority of interviewees openly celebrated their use of the internet in terms of fair trade activism and the ease and accessibility of communication technologies. Yet, there is a lack of well-received connection with the innumerate information on the internet. Also, social media does not significantly enrich participation in the cause, but rather further personalised participation. There is evidently considerable fragmentation in the way that interviewees engage with ICTs in relation to the fair

trade cause. Beyond these reasons, the UK is a context which demonstrates a strong market-driven tradition of liberalisation, marketisation and privatisation. This has led to the establishment of a fair trade market within the free market and a widespread awareness that does not necessarily translate to discursive engagement with the cause.

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- [1] This first type of cause-related marketing alliance (transaction based promotions) is one where a corporation donates a specific proportional amount of resources to the non-profit(s) with which it is connected.
- [2] This second type is one where collaboration among variant entities consists of the production and distribution of promotional material and advertising with or without the possibility of financial interference in this relationship.
- [3] This third type includes the licensing of the non-profits' names and logos to corporations in return for financial sustenance.
- [4] Activists were interviewed from the Active Distribution Network (3), Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign (4), and Fairtrade Foundation (1).
- [5] <http://www.ethicalsuperstore.com/ethical-news/ethicalsuperstore-continues-growth-with-impressive-year-end-results/> [1 March 2013].

[6] The Big Swap 2010 was an interactive website that reached a million hits of people pledging to swap staples for their fair trade equivalents.

[7] 'Join the March' was a Fairtrade Foundation initiative for Fairtrade Fortnight 2013 where citizens could create a mini cardboard version of themselves online, have it 'protest' in Parliament Square and, in this way, sign a petition calling on the British Prime Minister to take action on better trade negotiations for smallholder farmers at the G8 meeting.

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