# Digital Food Sharing Practices and Controversies

**Monika Rut**

Trinity College Dublin, the University
of Dublin, Ireland

rutm@tcd.ie


**Markéta Dolejšová**

National University of Singapore

marketa@u.nus.edu

## Abstract

Digital food sharing has grown internationally into an
urban food movement. While the scale of food sharing
initiatives differs regarding the scope of activities,
geographical reach, and organizational structure, the
collective vision for these initiatives is often driven by
sustainable development goals. These include support
of sustainable food consumption and production
patterns, climate change resilience, as well as
promotion of health and wellbeing in communities.
However, due to the perishable nature of food itself,
food sharing practices are also the subject of
controversies such as food safety regulations, food
redistribution ethics, and community relations including
trust. Drawing on an exploratory food sharing and
mapping workshop *UnChope Makan* organized in
Hackerspace Singapore, we discuss practical as well as
ethical considerations for future digital food sharing
systems.

## Author Keywords

Food sharing; ICT; mapping

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g.,
HCI): Miscellaneous

## Introduction

The sharing of food is a longstanding feature of human
civilisation, both as a mechanism through which
sustenance is secured and as a means to cement social
relations (Belk, 2010). Behavioural anthropologists

have concluded that while food sharing is integral to many animals, 'the patterning and complexity of food sharing among humans is truly unique' (Kaplan and Gurven, 2005: 1). The primal forms of food sharing can be dated back to hunter gather societies, where sharing of food that included foraging, gathering and distributing food allowed hunter gathers to survive (Binford, 1980). With the invention of cooking, food sharing became recognized as an opportunity for sociality (Jones, 2007). In contemporary scholarship, food sharing remains underdetermined and is more likely to be considered by different disciplines under distinctive case studies. For example, different aspects of food sharing, from growing, consumption and distribution can be found in the discussions on community gardens, urban agriculture, food waste activism, food banks and community kitchens; food sharing avenues have been seen as spaces for civic negotiations (Staeheli, 2008; Gerodetti and Foster, 2015); community growth (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2015); austere consumption (Hall, 2015); creative utilisation of underused resources (Eizenberg, 2011; Fridman and Lenters, 2013) and scaffolding of alternative welfare forms (Cloke et al. 2016).

With the advent of the sharing economy, and increased role of ICT tools in mediating sharing of stuff, skills and services, urban food sharing is experiencing a surge of new practices as technologies, polices, relationships and economies converge with sustainable food futures scenarios. Davies et al. (2016a; 2017b) provide a comprehensive overview of over 4000 ICT mediated food sharing initiatives in 100 cities, with their respective modes of exchange, ways of sharing and use of technologies. The SHARECITY database (Davies et al. 2016a; 2017b) has implications for additional questions in relation to role of cultural, social, political and technological context in which food sharing manifests.

**UnChope Makan Workshop**

The UnChope Makan workshop is part of the SHARECITY ethnographic research on ICT mediated food sharing practices based in Singapore. This one day mapping workshop with local food sharing practitioners took place in the Singapore's Hackerspace (Figure 1.). Our aim was to create a crowdsourced mapping platform to document local food sharing venues, communities, events, and other points of food interactions. The food sharing map which we named UnChope Makan ("chope" in local dialect refers to reserving a table in food court just for yourself, by placing a tissue pack on it) is generative and open to various types of input. Users can add a pin marking their food sharing spots, specify the type of food or activities they have to share, and search for places and activities listed by others. The workshop participants (n=18) mapped over 60 food sharing places including public gardens, communal kitchens, food knowledge hubs, composting sites, but also private spaces where locals offer various free food items such as fermentation starters, food ingredients, or skills. These resources documented on the map provide a visual representation of Singapore's present food sharing landscape and growing interests among Singaporeans to share food related stuff and skills with others.

Throughout the workshop, participants highlighted a number of concerns that in many ways mirrored issues discussed within the larger digital food sharing realm. *Will I feel comfortable going to someone's home to share food? How do I know if shared food is safe for consumption? Who should be responsible and legally accountable for potential problems in the informal food sharing transactions? Can I keep track of sharing over time?* These were important questions reflecting on the diverse limitations of digital food sharing in terms of health safety, user's data security and privacy, legal accountability of informal food sharing networks. Although only anecdotal, our observations from the workshop thus offer a starting point for further research into digital food sharing opportunities and challenges.
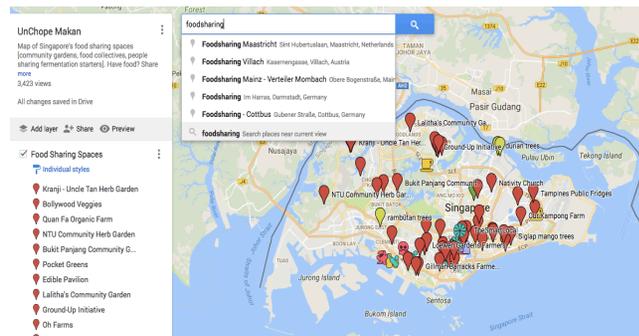
**Figure 1.** *UnChope Makan* food sharing map of Singapore

## Future Work

UnChope Makan map will be used to open a broader discussion on contemporary ICT mediated food sharing practices, controversies and technologies. Although developed primarily as a scholarly research project, there has been an interest among Singapore locals in using the map for food sharing activities. Furthermore, we can imagine a similar mapping system being implemented also in other geographical contexts (some examples thereof already exist, often constrained by similar limitations – see e.g. foodsharig.de, mundraub.org). Considering the above limitations, it is thus crucial to carefully plan the future design of the system and possibly re-think design decisions that navigated the development of the first prototype. As there is a need for food-tech design to stay culturally and socially robust and reflect on the complexities of local food systems, we wish to attend to the existing critiques of techno-solutionism in digital food cultures (Caldwell, 2017; Miles and Smith, 2015). For the workshop, we aim to raise the following provocation: Is it necessary to design with technology to support local sustainable food systems? Could technology solutions be replaced by an equally viable low-tech or non-tech approach? Along with these proposals, our aim is to

explore the opportunities for building future food sharing prototypes, and to contribute towards contemporary food sharing discourses.

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