11.

Configuring Relations of Care in an Online Consumer Protection Organization

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Introduction

In this chapter, we explore tensions between expertise, care, and social responsibility enacted through and within HowToBuyWiki, a Central European non-profit organization dedicated to the development of an emerging, open-source Internet platform which, as the members describe it, is designed to promote ‘product transparency’. We draw on interviews carried out with HowToBuyWiki’s six active members, as well as formal written records of their meetings and workshops, to examine the sometimes divergent ways in which care and authority take shape in the members’ discourses of HowToBuyWiki’s goals and methods, and their own positioning in the project. We pay particular attention to entanglements of responsibility, consumption and care and, in doing so, highlight the ambiguities that inhere in this initiative to cultivate knowledgeable, caring and careful consumer bodies. Specifically, we note the rhetorical and material roles of food in HowToBuyWiki’s configurations of care, using the organization’s discursive construction of chocolate on its wiki-platform as a case example.

From May to October 2013, we interviewed each of the six active committee members (hereafter ‘members’) of HowToBuyWiki (five in person, and one over Skype). The interviews were conducted with each member individually; while the interviews were semi-structured, and as such included overlapping questions, they also allowed each member to
direct the conversation toward the issues and ideas most salient to her or his experience of the project. As the interview process unfolded, we found that HowToBuyWiki’s story is one told through multiple, intersecting tensions. Through questions that called upon both actual and imagined experience, such as ‘How did HowToBuyWiki start for you?’, ‘What would happen if users provided conflicting information?’, and ‘Who do you think HowToBuyWiki’s users are?’, the interviews delved into the members’ dynamic framings of their project, which were entangled with negotiations of their own variable positioning as social entrepreneurs, leaders, knowledge brokers, and conscious consumers. In addition to the interviews, HowToBuyWiki provided us with access to website analytics, as well as to various documents, including the organization’s constitution, student essays written about the platform, and archived meeting minutes, through which we could trace the development of HowToBuyWiki from its inception. We draw on all of these materials in this chapter.

Enabling Cyber-Care

Existing research has drawn attention to a multiplicity of ways in which care can be understood and practised (e.g. Thomas 1993; Mol et al. 2010). Care practices, according to Jespersen et al., ‘involve both emotional and personal relationships as well as the ongoing inner workings of collectives’ (2014: 666); here, care invokes attentiveness to others, whether they are individuals or communities, and responsiveness to them. Caregivers in US medical practice, for example, work with patients to ‘decide how to balance the risks to the patient against the potential benefits to the same patient’ (London & Kadane 2003: 62). Care practices in interventions for obesity trialled in Denmark involve combined collective efforts to alter dietary and exercise habits in ambiguous and messy collaborations between care providers and patients (Jespersen et al. 2014). Changes are not necessarily prescriptive, but are instead constantly negotiated and adjusted in an effort to achieve, where possible, both clinical improvement and patient satisfaction. Such interpersonal caring contrasts with other
forms of care, such as governments’ caring for their citizens, which are associated with political, legal and moral responsibility and authority (Tronto 1993; Williams 1995), and where care is determined and prescribed according to culturally-embedded notions of the ‘right’ and the ‘good’ (Barnes 2012; Gilligan 1982).

Situated between interpersonal and authoritative care is the landscape of citizen-led care initiatives. Of particular salience to this chapter is community action for ‘political consumerism’ (Balsiger 2013), a form of informed consumption where citizens make ‘choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices’ (Micheletti 2003: 2). While most studies on political consumerism have focused on individual consumers, more recent work has begun to explore social movement organizations as pivotal agents, mobilizing consumers toward particular, politically-informed, modes of consumption (Forno and Graziano 2014: 140). Forno and Graziano suggest that Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (SCMOs) promoting political consumerism can be classified within a matrix, according to their ‘attitude towards consumption’ (alter- or anti-) and ‘predominant scale of action’ (local or global) (2014: 154, emphasis in original). The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a primary mode of social action, however, complicates the latter part of this proposed typology. As Parigi and Gong argue, ‘digital ties’ (2014: 250), operate identically to face-to-face ties, and hence strengthen participation and commitment to the movement’s cause, thus blurring the lines between local and global action. Likewise, Forno and Graziano argue that successful boycotts initiated via the Internet have resulted in ‘transnational awareness to step up pressure on corporations’ and ‘a broader sense of community’ (2014: 141). Essential to such awareness and sense of community is the active forging of bonds of mutual solidarity and cooperation facilitated through the immediacy of social networking on the Internet (Lacey 2005). Perhaps the most prominent examples are the 2011 Arab Spring and Occupy
protests: citizen-led political initiatives that amassed popular support through social media – and where, as Sutton et al (2013) note, outrage over food prices and commoditization, among other issues, played a catalyzing role.

While globalization and technical development may increase the global visibility of a cause, they may also influence how social movement organizations conceptualize and enact community-level and interpersonal care. *HowToBuyWiki* provides an example of a novel form of care that is facilitated by Internet-based technologies. Although *HowToBuyWiki*’s members do not explicitly define their organization’s practices as ‘care’, their emphasis on attending to ethical consumption issues, providing a responsive forum for consumer concerns, and promoting responsible (or ‘conscious’) consumption via a dedicated user community qualifies their practices as caring (as described by Jespersen et al. 2014; Thomas 1993) across the micro and the macro levels. Mediated through words on a screen, the relationships they (aim to) develop are overlaid with ambiguity: users are imagined and yet remain anonymous; they interact and yet never encounter each other; they are provided with a platform for negotiation and personalisation of data, yet must share knowledge in a rigid framework that limits their options and choices in order to (ostensibly) care for them.

Interwoven with the configuration of *HowToBuyWiki*’s implicit objective of cyber-care is the negotiation of the authority to care. *HowToBuyWiki* offers more than an online platform to enact and reproduce already-extant relationships of care. Placing community participation and a re-structuring of knowledge at its core, *HowToBuyWiki* is situated to create new dynamics that blur the directionality of expertise and care. Like other wiki platforms, *HowToBuyWiki* adheres to a governance structure which relies on community-building, user expertise, and an ethic of altruism and mutual responsibility. Each user, then, is invested with the responsibility to provide and accept care in the form of community expertise. In practice, however, as this chapter will show, *HowToBuyWiki* negotiates the
multiple loci of expertise, and the multi-directionality of care they entail, through assuming primary responsibility for the enabling of cyber-care.

While *HowToBuyWiki* configures cyber-care as (enabling) the sharing of information on consumer products online, the organization’s own relations of care are centred on the in-person, material sharing of a particular consumer product: food. Members enact caring relations through the provision and sharing of time, space and (edible) substance. The development of the *HowToBuyWiki* platform depends on activities and decisions undertaken by the organization’s six active members, and the interpersonal networks between them. As we discuss in this chapter, the centrality of food in *HowToBuyWiki*’s meetings – as a sensorially-experienced material substance that is commensally incorporated into bodies – contrasts with, and accentuates, the non-sensorial, label-based format in which the organization frames food products on its wiki-platform. In this way, *HowToBuyWiki* is a case study that illuminates multiple forms of food-related care which are enacted every day and which intersect in the organization itself. In looking more closely at these forms of care, we ask: how does *HowToBuyWiki* construct the care relations that characterize its project? And how does it frame food products, and the roles thereof, in cultivating and maintaining care relations?

**Making Chocolate on a Wiki-Platform**

Central to *HowToBuyWiki*’s online platform are comparative tables, which juxtapose various brands and models of similar products (e.g. mobile telephones, e-bikes) according to a list of applicable product attributes (e.g. weight, speed). The only food product currently featured in the comparative tables is chocolate – and, more specifically, Fair Trade chocolate. A close reading of the table – in both design and discourse – reveals that, as constructed by *HowToBuyWiki*, chocolate is a product like any other. Structured like the tables for all other
products on the wiki-platform, the chocolate table presents users with factual, often quantifiable, information about the products it features – which, it should be noted, are commercial and mass-produced. In essence, the table provides a summary of the information already available on the products’ wrappers. First to be featured is the brand name; then, the table names the product’s flavour (milk, dark, or hazelnut), lists ingredients and allergens, and states the product’s weight, the number of chocolate pieces in each packet, the percentage of fat content, the product’s organic label (if known), the percentage of cocoa content, and the product’s country of origin. The table also includes an image for each of the products. Notably, just as the table restricts the ‘flavour’ attribute to the factual triad of milk, dark, or hazelnut, it limits the images of the products themselves to their wrappers alone. Thus, the table includes no sensory information on the chocolate products themselves – neither visual nor descriptive; seemingly biased, experience-based details about texture, aroma, and finer distinctions of flavour are omitted in favour of information that quantifies and labels the (essentially hidden) materiality of the chocolate products featured. Chocolate, then, becomes quite literally enveloped in its brand. In the rest of the chapter, as we explore the ways in which HowToBuyWiki’s members frame their project and the care relations it entails, we will return to the example of chocolate to examine how these discourses become embodied (or not) in the wiki-platform’s representation of this food product.

Organizing Around ‘Conscious Consumption’

HowToBuyWiki was founded in 2006 by a self-described ‘group of friends’ – a term that was repeated in each of the interviews. While membership has fluctuated somewhat over the years, the organization continues to be maintained by the three core founding members alongside three members who joined in 2007, 2008, and 2011, through friendship and familial networks. HowToBuyWiki, as a founding member explained, is based on a ‘civil
society’ concept, with emphasis on independence from other organizations and interests. The group has been managing its project as a registered charitable organization, a status which, as a founding member explained, protects the members from liability for the content users post on the platform.

At the heart of HowToBuyWiki is the establishment of an open-source Internet-based platform that promotes, in the members’ words, product transparency. Product transparency, as constructed on the HowToBuyWiki platform, involves providing evidence-based information on various (user-selected) attributes of products, and the placement of similar products in direct comparison, such that users can compare attributes within different groups of product, or ‘product categories’. HowToBuyWiki structures knowledge on products in table format: in each product category, various brands and models of similar products (e.g. mobile telephones, e-bikes) (rows) are tabulated against a list of applicable product attributes (e.g. weight, speed, ingredients, fuel efficiency) (columns). In principle, products and attributes are limited only by user preference; insofar as attributes are meant to reflect user priorities, product data must be entered by users – or, as the members call them, ‘editors’ - and comparisons can be tailored to user needs. The HowToBuyWiki website is open to everyone and currently has approximately 4,000 visits per month, on average; however, if a reader wishes to become an editor, s/he must learn how to contribute to the HowToBuyWiki database – a process which requires some time and effort. This investment of time and effort is, however, the only hurdle to becoming an editor; HowToBuyWiki’s members do not employ a vetting process, and some members said they expect that product manufacturers will also join the wiki-platform as editors.

Underlying HowToBuyWiki’s vision of product transparency is the members’ self-identification as ‘conscious consumers’. While the members’ individual understandings of
‘conscious consumption’ have not been incorporated definitively into HowToBuyWiki’s mission statement, they share an implicit commonality:

In the group… there is some kind of common sense about, about conscious consuming. (…) in the meetings, we haven’t had so much discussions actually about this, because it’s more like implicit that we, we have a similar vision (E)

However unarticulated, ‘conscious consumption’, as constructed on the HowToBuyWiki platform, is both informed and conscientious, and is the main focus of care. Premised on the assumption that lack of transparency – lack of comparative knowledge or information about products – is what impedes consumer action, HowToBuyWiki engages in a data-centric form of consciousness-raising as a means to careful consumption. Although HowToBuyWiki focuses on the structuring and sharing of product information, rather than on product rating or recommendations, the members envision the platform as facilitating particular types of consumer action. In particular, the site was established as a response to companies and producers, implicitly understood as entities which cannot be trusted to act in a caring way towards their employees, consumers or the environment. For instance, upon founding the platform, the group set out to create product categories to exemplify how HowToBuyWiki might be used. They chose to compare mobile telephones, where the main focus was radiation values and their health impacts, and cars, where the main focus was carbon emissions. As one member explained, the two foci were chosen as they related to ‘ecological impact’, and represented categories of information not easily searchable. Thus, while the members did not rate mobile telephones or cars by ‘ecological impact’, they placed the information they provided, without (explicit) judgment, as a key element of ‘conscious consumption’. Likewise, the wiki-platform’s chocolate category features attributes through
which the members implicitly frame ‘conscious consumption’. The chocolate products the table compares are all labelled ‘Fair Trade’ – indeed, the table is named ‘Fair Trade chocolate in comparison’ – and the absence of other chocolate products suggests an implicit linking of ‘conscious consumer’ identities and ‘Fair Trade’ labels (cf. Barnett et al. 2005). However, through including ‘organic labels’ and ‘country of origin’ among the attributes, the members highlight that, in addition to Fair Trade, conscious consumers should be aware of other product features that have ethical (and, in this case, ecological) bearing.

The form of care that HowToBuyWiki promotes, then, positions ‘conscious consumption’ at its core. As an organization, HowToBuyWiki members care for their (imagined) user public through facilitating heretofore difficult-to-realize ‘conscious consumption’, and thereby enabling users to become informed, and then (potentially) take action by changing their purchasing habits. At the same time, HowToBuyWiki constructs ‘conscious consumption’ as careful consumer action. That is, being careful in time and global space – to protect health, wellbeing and the environment in the present and for the future. In promoting transparency, the group also seeks to cultivate careful consumers, ones who make informed and conscientious decisions that consider the placement of each product, and purchasing decision thereof, within a network of environmental and other ethical relations. Fuelled by comparative information, consumer decisions, as facilitated through the HowToBuyWiki platform, are never neutral: they are always-already imbued with questions of care.

The group members’ discourses of ‘conscious consumption’ materialized in their choices of interview venues. When we contacted the members to arrange interviews, we suggested meeting in any space of their choice. Three of the members chose to meet in urban spaces that underlined a particular vision of ‘conscious consumption’. In the venue chosen by member F, progressive politics and ‘conscious consumption’ are explicitly linked. The venue
– a restaurant located in a multifunctional building that includes meeting rooms, offices, a public sauna, a pool, and a performance space – has a long history as a public meeting space, having been founded and used by the local workers’ movement, the women’s movement, and other social reformers. Today, the restaurant offers a variety of ‘traditional’ dishes prepared with locally-sourced, seasonably available ingredients. Another interview took place in a cafe/bar located in a converted office block in the industrial part of town which is now visibly gentrified. Similarly to the restaurant described above, this is a multifunctional space that houses a book/magazine shop and a performance stage. The third cafe we visited had a similar gentrified industrial look, with a menu focusing on fresh foods and a variety of coffee concoctions. A local contact described the interview venues as frequented by young professionals with an apparent artistic or intellectual bent, who ‘consciously consume’ foods and spaces.

**Caring about ‘The Good’**

*HowToBuyWiki* members endorse a number of values central to their vision of ‘conscious consumption’ – values that can be described under the headings of fairness and sustainability. When we asked *HowToBuyWiki*’s members which issues mattered most to them individually, responses gravitated to the same categories: Fair Trade, ethical labour practices, durability and reliability, and ecological impact. These issues, as one member explained, are all linked through the common thread of seeking the good:

> [What matters is] that these are the products which are produced in a good way. And ‘good’ means for me good for the nature, good for the people who make them.  (D)
Like ideas of ‘nature’ (Castree 1995), ideas of the good are neither self-evident nor universal. As Williams (1995) argues in his article on diverging discourses of the ‘public good’ in opposing social movements, while rhetorics of the good appeal to an imagined consensus, they actually speak to group identities and actions. In their interviews, HowToBuyWiki’s members did not discuss or debate what constitutes good products; their notions of goodness had already been established, and, as demonstrated in an earlier quote, made implicit, even tacit. And these notions of goodness were rooted in a mapping of careful global citizenship. A good product was one that was deemed to have positive impact within the broad ecology of production and consumption, with certain entities (labourers and the environment) being primary beneficiaries, and others (government, industry, retailers) placed lower on the hierarchy. To consume consciously, then, is to adhere to a vision of the good whereby the consumer, as a critical entity, cares for disadvantaged entities in the market economy. On the wiki-platform, this framing is apparent in HowToBuyWiki’s exclusion of all non-Fair Trade chocolate products from its comparative table, and in its emphasis on ‘organic labels’ and ‘country of origin’ – indicators of labour- and sustainability-related concerns.

Although HowToBuyWiki’s members all said they are committed to ‘conscious consumption’, they also explained that their personal convictions do not guide the construction of the wiki-platform. Rather than place issues of sustainability and justice as the core of their project, they said, the group situates public participation as its main value. This focus on public participation is closely linked to the very founding of HowToBuyWiki, a process that started beyond the market context; indeed, the ‘origin myth’ of HowToBuyWiki, as one of the founders related it, is located in a public library. It was there, during a city planning project, that the three founding members converged, witnessing first-hand the involvement of the public (in this case, city residents) in making a decision about a project that would affect them all:
[this city planning project] is surely something which brought us the idea how important – it has nothing to do with consumption, but – it was about participation and um, expressing an opinion, you know (...) we thought it would be also, if we offered the platform, there would be enough consumers who would be motivated enough to share their knowledge, motivated by the idea that they can help someone take a consumption decision which is well, um, argued. (C)

What initially inspired the founding members, then, was the idea of involving the public (implicitly positioned as having less power, awareness, and potential influence than the ‘conscious consumer’) in larger-scale decision-making. This idea has remained central to the way HowToBuyWiki views itself and the product – the platform – it provides to consumers. Moving away from (direct) focus on the causes nearest to the members, HowToBuyWiki is intended to elevate public participation above the top-down promotion of particular issues. This conceptualization of care notably differs from policy and NGO configurations: HowToBuyWiki ‘offer[s]’ a space where people can ‘share’, argue, offer advice, and make their voices heard (within a defined and administrated space) – as opposed to creating a site that provides users with ready-made recommendations to incorporate and enact. As described in the above quote, HowToBuyWiki’s construction of public participation is based on an assumption of altruism; just as the group ‘offer[s]’ the platform to the unseen public, the users, according to member C, are expected to feel ‘motivated’ to ‘help’ other, equally unseen, consumers. The group, then, entangles actions and assumptions of care as the basic foundation of its wiki-platform, with the project premised both on enactments of ‘conscious consumption’, and on the imagining of users as people who care.
**Framing Shared Values, Caring Leaders and (Imagined) Careful Users**

The members of *HowToBuyWiki*, while committed to constructing a participatory platform, continue to be committed to consumption decisions that foster *the good*. This dual commitment is not without conflict, and the relative salience of each value – public participation and *the good* – has shifted over time. In the words of one of the founders:

I think in the beginning it was more, there was a stronger normative touch to it. That we thought this should be a site – where we can see which products are good and we promote, you know, like, promoting a sustainable way of doing consumption, and I think we are moving slightly away from that. That I think we are still normative of course, but more on a second level. That we say we want transparency and not evaluation of products, you know? (A)

As this member implied, *HowToBuyWiki*’s evolution from the evaluation of products to (apparently) neutral transparency – now the core of the project – is aligned with the members’ original emphasis on public participation as the project’s leading value. Thus, rather than promoting ‘normative’ constructs of sustainability and justice, *HowToBuyWiki* now promotes an open platform which aims to foreground the users’ own preferences and voices, rather than those of the organization’s members.

Yet, while *HowToBuyWiki* members cite the platform’s openness as central to its ethos (and even its *raison d’être*), this openness also leads to difficulty in imagining how *HowToBuyWiki* might be administrated. In the interviews, we posed a hypothetical scenario to the members: What would happen if two users posted conflicting information about the same product? Would there be room for two narratives, for conflict? How would you decide
which information would appear on the site? Their answers highlighted the ambiguity inherent in this situation.

I can imagine that we can open a discussion forum in order to ask if the broader, the wider community, what their opinion is. Umm, I don’t know. (…) But what we don’t want is that we decide about what should stay on the platform. We don’t want it, we really want to, just to give it, this platform, to our, to our editors. (…) my ideal would be that they should decide. (C)

Do we, do we have the right to um, to edit some of the informations which are put up by other people? Because then it becomes crucial. But because in the beginning it was really thought of as a participatory project, and everybody has the right to upload anything according to their, to the guidelines of the project. (E)

This scenario, while hypothetical, revealed central definitional concerns for HowToBuyWiki’s members. In the interviews, each of the members engaged deeply with this question, speaking out an internal debate without attempting to polish uncertainties into clear-cut responses. Centering the debate in the question of editing, the members discursively negotiated their practical role as wiki-platform administrators with their vision of creating an open, community-led platform. Thus, although HowToBuyWiki’s members could conceivably judge between reliable and unreliable information, they expressed the concern that to endorse certain ‘truths’ on the platform would amount to backtracking on their ethos. As member E argued, HowToBuyWiki members did not ‘have the right’ to act as arbitrators of truth. Rather, the platform, suggested member C, belonged to HowToBuyWiki’s members only insofar as it was theirs to give away. In this instance, caring for users did not mean guaranteeing the
accuracy of information on the platform, but rather maintaining the integrity of the vision that underlay it.

While cast as central to HowToBuyWiki’s ethos, the openness of the platform also has the potential to jeopardize the ‘conscious consumption’ goals of HowToBuyWiki’s members – who, after all, aim to foster consumption decisions that facilitate the good. When structuring product categories, users might not share the priorities that HowToBuyWiki’s members endorse, and might privilege certain attributes (e.g. price) over others (e.g. carbon footprint) in ways that do not align with HowToBuyWiki’s aims. However, in practice, as the members explain, their open platform continues to facilitate ‘normative’ discourses – in ways that perhaps do not undermine the project’s ethos, but do make it more ambivalent:

[W]e tried to ask, if we realize the potential consumers - editors, sorry - the potential editors. They have other needs. Um, and important criteria to share their knowledge. Maybe we can - leave it open. We can leave it open. Um, but for us, these are still aspects we focus on, and when you go to the webpage this is something which you can actually... it becomes visible when you visit there that these are the issues which are important for us. (C)

As member C pointed out, while HowToBuyWiki aims to provide an inclusive platform that would meet the diverse needs of users, the platform, in effect, directs users toward a particular form of engagement. Having created pages for product categories as examples of how the platform might be used, the members of HowToBuyWiki structured tables of product attributes that privilege the group’s own priorities. As such, they not only made their own priorities visible, but also created a template – however unintentionally – that could focus future users/editors on certain product attributes over others. As the example of
the chocolate table demonstrates, while the members avoid the inclusion of product attributes that might be biased by individual experience (e.g. texture, aroma), their choice to include ‘Fair Trade labels’, ‘organic labels’, and ‘country of origin’, and exclude price-related information, frames which attributes are the expected foci. Yet this latent ‘normativity’, as one founding member explained, is not necessarily opposed to the project’s ethos of openness:

But we want to make it easy so that they can also take into consideration this specific value which is very much being suppressed by the communication of the company. (A)

Although fostering an open platform may be HowToBuyWiki’s form of caring for the user public, this openness is meant, ultimately, to facilitate the project’s main aim – promoting product transparency. Users are expected to use the platform in particular ways: to employ its openness to demand hidden or difficult-to-obtain information, to imagine which heretofore ignored product attributes should be brought into the forefront, to contest information and demand evidence. As HowToBuyWiki’s members envision them, the users, then, are meant to use the platform’s openness with and for care, of themselves, others, the environment, and their health. The platform is not merely a tabula rasa the users are ‘given’ (to use member C’s earlier term); rather, being cared for through an open forum, they are expected to reciprocate with careful, altruistic, and goodness-driven action.

**Caring as/for Consumers**

In developing an open, community-based wiki-platform, HowToBuyWiki’s members both assume and relinquish leadership of their project: they are social entrepreneurs who aim to
‘give’ their project to users, who envision their project’s agenda being set by the public. At the same time, they do not imagine themselves as being clearly separate from the public to whom they reach out. As mentioned earlier, *HowToBuyWiki* endorses a ‘civil society’ concept, and members emphasize their organization’s independence from all other bodies – governmental, commercial, and even third-sector. As such, while at times drawing distinctions between ‘members’ and ‘users’ (as seen in the previous section), *HowToBuyWiki*’s members also discursively identify as consumers – and, specifically, as part of the platform’s user public. For example, when explaining why s/he found it valuable to be involved in *HowToBuyWiki*, member B said,

> *[HowToBuyWiki]* would definitely make also my life easier if it would exist and would function. Um, because I’m also consuming products every day. And I often find it difficult to find free and comparable information which is, um, useful to me. (B)

While, in this instance, member B clearly identified as a consumer who might benefit from *HowToBuyWiki*, aligning oneself with the user public was also achieved through less direct discourses. When we asked member D, ‘What do you know currently about the people who are contributing to the site?’, s/he replied:

> I know that there are not only consumers, but also producers who write on the site. (…) we thought that it’s not bad, because they are - we actually give them like the structure where they have to fill in the information. It means that even though it’s the producer’s side, but the consumer side gives… the contents which we want to
know. And most of that, these are not the contents that they always want to share with us. (D)

In this excerpt, member D seamlessly merged ‘we’ as HowToBuyWiki members and ‘we’ as consumers. This discursive merging was telling; while HowToBuyWiki aims to facilitate user-generated (as opposed to member-generated) priorities and structuring of knowledge, member D aligned HowToBuyWiki’s interests with those of the user public. The ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dynamic that appeared in member D’s response invoked members and users versus producers, firmly situating the project in consumer-based origins and agendas.

While HowToBuyWiki’s members discursively position themselves as consumers, they also distinguish themselves from the public(s) for whom they care – by virtue of responsibility, not expertise. As self-described ‘conscious consumers’, the members identify themselves as possessing awareness and conscientiousness that align them with a particular segment of the public. By itself, this identification does not set the members apart from (potential) users. When we asked the members to describe how they imagined the wiki-platform’s users, each member said that the users of the site are most likely to be people who care about making informed consumption decisions, have awareness of particular consumption issues, and are actively searching for information about consumer products. The members’ imaginings of these users’ needs are actualized, discursively, in the wiki-platform’s comparative tables. For example, the chocolate table features information on sustainability- and labour-related attributes, alongside information on allergens, underscoring that while the members conceptualize ‘conscious consumption’ as ethical consumption, they also imagine that some users are drawn to their site for other information needs. Indeed, the organization’s meeting notes specifically state that the project’s target population could be
consumers with diabetes, or consumers who follow a kosher diet (Minutes of meeting, 01/02/2008).

The imagined users largely resemble the members’ own ‘conscious consumer’ profiles. However, what sets HowToBuyWiki’s members apart from other ‘conscious consumers’ is the sense of bearing a special social responsibility. As seen in previous sections, members spoke of ‘offering’ the wiki-platform to the public, of ‘giving’ it away – altruistic acts of fostering the public good. Another recurrent discourse was that of being involved in HowToBuyWiki despite lacking resources and, especially, time. In the interviews, each participant mentioned that all members had full-time jobs and busy lives, and that HowToBuyWiki was a ‘spare-time’ project, even a ‘hobby’. This discourse was invoked, mostly, to explain the slow progress of the site; however, it was also used to underscore the importance that members ascribed to their project, and the pride with which they engaged in it.

[Everyone] very one of us is very, very busy and we do it just by, because, as I said, because we’re doing something which is good (laughs), which would have a good impact and which consumers can really work and benefit from. (C)

Involvement in the project, then, is not merely a pleasurable challenge, or an exercise in activism; it is imbued with a sense of social responsibility. Several members said they had no stake in the success of HowToBuyWiki as individuals, and that they would be glad if another organization developed a similar platform with greater success. Yet, they explained that they continued to be involved in the project given its (apparent) uniqueness in the consumer activist landscape. This uniqueness of the platform – its formulation as caring for consumers through openness, public participation, and transparency – was bound with a sense
that the members themselves bore special responsibility for the realization of the project. As one founding member said, albeit with a humourous tone, when talking about the beginnings of the organization: ‘And yeah… then we thought we (laughs) if not we, who else would do something about food transparency?’

‘Conscious consumption’ and social responsibility, however, did not translate into (claims of) expertise. Indeed, throughout the interviews, HowToBuyWiki’s members discursively set themselves apart from those they considered ‘professional’ experts in the consumer protection arena. Such discourses of ‘us’ (lay) and ‘them’ (experts) were most pronounced when the members discussed plans for installing an Advisory Board. The Advisory Board, which has since been convened, now includes advisors who represent academic, political, and social entrepreneurship angles on consumer protection. At the time of the interviews, when the Advisory Board was still being discussed, we asked the members about plans for convening the Board.

[We’d like to] install the Advisory Board, also to um, first of all, to get some feedback on the project and of people who deal with consumer protection and um, know, know what’s going on in that field, because that’s not our profession. We are doing this in our, as I said, in our spare time, as a kind of a hobby. (B)

[S]o we actually wanted to have this professional background on which we could um, we can um, lean on and on the other side it’s good for us, or for the project, it’s good to have the Advisory Board with names on it which are known (…) as professionals. Knowing that what they say that’s, that’s [authoritative] in some communities (…) especially in scientific communities. (D)
The line that member B drew between *HowToBuyWiki*’s members and the potential advisors was clear: the former are lay activists who, without the ‘professional’ expertise of the latter, have neither the time nor the experience to move the project forward. For member D, however, the boundary was less clearly defined. According to member D, while the Advisory Board would provide ‘professional’ expertise on which *HowToBuyWiki* can rely and build its future activities, the inclusion of known experts as advisors to the project would also be strategic, providing the project with recognition, legitimacy, and an authoritative tone it would not otherwise achieve. Member D’s account of the Advisory Board points to an underlying question of impact. Although the project places public participation, and the leveling of authority, as its defining characteristic – the uniqueness that justifies its existence – the reality of the project, in which members have struggled for years to recruit users/editors, suggests that the wiki-platform has yet to gain momentum, or even a stable user base. Turning to a more ‘traditional’ model of expertise, based in individuals of renown, rather than in a faceless user community, *HowToBuyWiki*’s members both concede the need for authoritative endorsement, and strategically solidify their self-identification as non-experts; it is their lay status, they suggest, not the actual merit of the project, which has impeded the platform’s success with potential users. With the convening of the Advisory Board, the division of labour becomes clearer: the Board members are there to provide legitimacy and expert support, but the organization’s members are those who provide care, and mobilize both experts and companies to care, too.

**Facilitating or Empowering Careful Action?**

In keeping with the participatory ethos of their project, *HowToBuyWiki*’s members cast themselves as responsible for the development and maintenance of an online platform –
not for the provision of information. Their role, they argue, is to enable users to ‘organiz[e] information’, structure knowledge, and provide product data meaningful to them:

[I]t’s critical. It is not us who can make it move forward, I mean publish the content. It’s not the idea that we do the content. We just want to, to offer the platform, but it is the editors and the consumers who should fill it with content. (C)

The information, we won’t provide it. It has to be either the producers or retailers or the consumers. But we want to put in place a structure which allows for a different way of organizing information. Making it accessible, distributing information. (A)

Although HowToBuyWiki’s members have provided content for certain product categories, to exemplify how the platform might be used, they view their stepping back from content-provision as crucial to the project’s aim and future. Elsewhere in member A’s interview, s/he explained that HowToBuyWiki members can contribute information, but only as individual consumers, not under the aegis of their organization. However, as evident in member C’s quote, while HowToBuyWiki’s members may still (strategically) identify as consumers, they simultaneously draw a line between themselves and their user public. Thus, when it comes to engaging with the wiki-platform, boundaries between members and users become more apparent, with members providing infrastructure, while users populate the site.

As described by members, then, HowToBuyWiki’s main role is facilitation, and the form of care that members provide to consumers is one of enabling the structuring and sharing of information as the latter see fit. Yet, as member A implied in the excerpt above,
the organization’s focus on facilitating user engagement is not entirely neutral. In member A’s construction of user engagement, the wiki-platform would provide space for dialogue – dialogue, which, notably, would occur not just between consumers, but also between consumers, retailers, and producers. Indeed, the wiki community member A envisions not only shares information, but also demands it:

[Producers] in *HowToBuyWiki* now have to enter a dialogue, and have to provide this and structure this information in dialogue with other producers and in dialogue with the consumers. Yeah I think this is a fundamental change, I think this is very, very, different from advertisement. (…) And the idea is to say… the consumers also have a certain power, by consuming or not consuming, but they need to organize their interests and discourses which are important to them in a certain way that maybe yeah, as I said, forces the producers to enter a dialogue with them. (A)

Member A, then, cast *HowToBuyWiki* as poised to create a new power dynamic. According to member A, through providing consumers with an open, participatory wiki-platform, *HowToBuyWiki* would foreground consumers’ voices and needs, and thereby highlight the power that consumers hold. The dialogue s/he imagined – a dialogue based on the categorizing and structuring of product information – would therefore overturn the extant vectors of the market. In alluding to advertising, member A underscored the (perceived) unidirectionality of communication between producers and consumers, and the suggested subversiveness of the wiki-platform, where consumers, no longer mere recipients of (potentially manipulative) messaging, would talk back. *HowToBuyWiki*, then, could empower consumers: to acknowledge and affirm their economic importance, make demands of
producers, and take informed – ‘conscious’ – action. In this conceptualization of *HowToBuyWiki*, the organization would be a driving force for consumer empowerment through shifting dynamics of agency and power. Such an overtly politicized stance, and the neoliberal visions of responsibilized consumers to which it alludes, might seem to be at odds with the form of care espoused by *HowToBuyWiki*’s members, one which emphasizes community and facilitation. Yet, as member A argued explicitly, and as other members suggested more implicitly, *HowToBuyWiki* members view ‘conscious consumption’ as one which, of necessity, would alter the landscape of the market. Careful consumers, they posit, will establish not only the value of disadvantaged entities (labourers, the environment), but also their own position at the crux of the market economy.

**Forming a Nexus of Care Relations**

The forms of care that *HowToBuyWiki*’s members described – the careful actions enacted through the wiki-platform – are not the only careful actions that underlie *HowToBuyWiki*. Practices such as sharing time, food, and social activities have been central to the making and sustaining of *HowToBuyWiki* from its inception, and members all describe their involvement in the project and the attendant meetings as a way of strengthening their friendships. As other researchers have emphasized, friendship ties are important in maintaining SCMOs (Forno and Graziano, 2014; Grasseni, 2013; Parigi and Gong, 2014). However, in the case of *HowToBuyWiki*, the organization itself can be seen as a platform for cultivating attentiveness to, and care relations with, one’s friends.

When asked about how they keep in contact, members explained that day-to-day contact was maintained through email, telephone, and Skype, but that face-to-face meetings were much more important. Records of care practices feature centrally in the organization’s otherwise brief agendas and meeting minutes. The first board meeting was accompanied by ‘a
glass of champagne and bacon pancakes’ (Founding meeting agenda, 08/02/2006). While matters of taste and preference are omitted in the group’s online characterization of chocolate, the members attend to personal tastes and preferences in their meeting minutes. To-do lists for each member prior to a weekend workshop included specific project-related tasks, as well as the light-hearted reminder to ‘[r]eport any special requests for pizza toppings and breakfast supplies to [member A]’ (Workshop schedule, 10/08/2013).

The project is also an initiative through which members’ friends and families can practise caring relations. These relations are expressed through the provision of money, encouragement and in-kind support. Initial plans for HowToBuyWiki were validated by experts as well as friends and family: ‘University friends - find the idea very good’ (Minutes of meeting, 04/04/2008); this support from friends is noted in the minutes in a list which also includes records of positive responses from academic experts and other supporting information. Meetings are held at the homes of members or their families. At an early stage of the project, the father of one of the members wanted to donate money to support the project (Minutes of meeting, 04/03/2008). This suggestion is echoed in later records; a means for formally accepting donations was devised by the group and several ‘generous donations’ were received, the most recent in 2013 (Minutes of AGM, 10/08/2013). Members also care for each other through support and encouragement, and by celebrating small successes: ‘This report was greeted with raging applause’, read AGM minutes, ‘the continuation of the project was unanimously supported’ (Minutes of AGM, 19/02/2011). In this way, HowToBuyWiki is not simply an Internet platform, but an entity which catalyzes and facilitates a network of care between and around its members.
Discussion: Matters of Care

In the scheme of caring relations constructed by HowToBuyWiki’s members, the members themselves care for consumers (through developing and maintaining the wiki-platform), while the (cared-for) consumers, in turn, are expected to care for other consumers (through sharing knowledge), as well as for labourers, the environment, and their own wellbeing (through making ‘conscious consumption’ decisions). Yet, although this directionality of care may seem to be clear-cut, the nature of HowToBuyWiki’s caring action, as conceptualized by the organization’s members, is imbued with ambiguities. Throughout the interviews, the members spoke alternately of enabling and empowering users, informing and educating the public, and locating expertise in individuals and in communities. While these pairings do not constitute polar contradictions, they do highlight the multiform nature of care in which HowToBuyWiki’s members engage. Caring for consumers, as the members spoke of it, could equally be enacted through providing users with a platform that promotes certain ‘conscious consumption’ values, and through offering users an open platform, free of judgment and evaluation. Although HowToBuyWiki has shifted toward the latter form of care, in their accounts of their own identities, roles, and goals vis-à-vis the project, the members indicated that the realities of the organization’s acts of caring borrow from both forms, and are situated (albeit sometimes tensely) in a terrain of fruitful ambiguity.

Central to HowToBuyWiki’s project is the act of mobilizing for care. In the interviews, the members mapped a network of care, one in which their organization holds a critical position. Comprised of key entities placed along a hierarchy of authority to care, this network relies on the different actions that, according to HowToBuyWiki’s members, each entity is expected to take. The chain of caring action, as conceptualized by the members, is set in motion by HowToBuyWiki, which mobilizes expert support (the Advisory Board) and facilitates ‘conscious consumers’’ caring actions. In the reaction (anticipated) to follow,
‘conscious consumers’ (editors and users) mobilize the general public (who then join the ranks of ‘conscious consumption’), and put pressure on producers (for product transparency); experts (the Advisory Board) inform and legitimize HowToBuyWiki, thus further strengthening the organization’s empowerment of ‘conscious consumers’; and producers respond to consumer pressure by contributing information to HowToBuyWiki. However, absent from HowToBuyWiki’s network are all governmental institutions. While some members mentioned certain policy-makers in their interviews, they did so in the context of discussions about the Advisory Board, discussions which, notably, evoked political figures as opinion-leaders, rather than as policy-makers. HowToBuyWiki’s network of care, then, is market-driven, with consumption as the currency of influence. In this network, consumers are politically empowered through realizing, and acting on, their purchasing power: a neoliberal vision that casts individual users as rational decision-makers, responsible for their own choices, atomized though (paradoxically) linked as an online community. HowToBuyWiki’s members thus configure caring for consumers as, essentially, enabling them to practise informed self-care.

While HowToBuyWiki was established for the purposes of caring for and about others – consumers, exploited workers, or future populations who may face problems resulting from environmental change – and while members construct a complex network of care, in which their organization is centrally positioned, a different form of caring is identifiable in the day-to-day practices of the group. The members who launched the project were friends who shared common but unstated values. They began to discuss how they might be able to have an impact on the world with respect to these values, and HowToBuyWiki grew out of these discussions. While HowToBuyWiki has not managed to develop a stable community of users and editors, it has achieved its implicit project – that of members caring for their friendship group. The sort of everyday, interpersonal care described by Jespersen et al. (2014) is evident
in the way that group members collaborate. The group functions well because members listen to each other and respond to one another’s needs; emotional and personal relationships are entangled amongst group members, and the project serves as a way for them to see each other regularly. The importance of interpersonal care for the success of HowToBuyWiki, and vice-versa, is evident from the meeting minutes and workshop programmes in which food, social dinners, drinks and dancing are frequently planned alongside workshopping the web interface and writing funding proposals.

Where is food in the forms of care relations discussed here? On the one hand, on the HowToBuyWiki platform, food is just one product among many others: its ingredients and modes of production are, at least structurally, of equal weight to those of, for example, a deodorant. On the other hand, in HowToBuyWiki’s meetings, food is a substance whose production and consumption are shared and carefully noted in meeting minutes. Here, food is central not only to interpersonal care relations, but also to the building and maintenance of the organization. While the platform is populated by images of packaging, lists of ingredients, and eco-labels, the organization’s meeting minutes are populated with foods which, for HowToBuyWiki members, are fresh, seasonal, local, pleasurable, and not necessarily imbued with variable attributes. Focusing on care therefore points to one significant difference between food as experienced and food as commoditized (or between ‘food’ and ‘food products’), and raises questions about the extent to which processes of globalization and technological development might reconfigure caring through food.

Although the project’s success may be secondary to the group’s interpersonal acts of care, the project itself continues to be essential to their maintenance: through the process of establishing, maintaining, and editing the HowToBuyWiki platform, the members’ acts of caring for one another (and for the wider public) are now bound with the object of care – the platform itself. ‘[T]ransforming things into matters of care’, argues Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘is a
way of relating to them, of inevitably becoming affected by them, and of modifying their
potential to affect others’ (2011: 99). For HowToBuyWiki’s members, the platform becomes
imbued not only with the values of ‘conscious consumption’ that underpin the project, but
also with the affective social relationships this project has helped develop and maintain over
time. A non-human object of care, then, can define its human carer; or, as Heuts and Mol
argue in their study of ‘good tomatoes’ and the experts who care for and about them: ‘the
values targeted, the objects being valued and valuing subjects come to gradually co-constitute
each other’ (2013: 141).

The example of HowToBuyWiki illustrates the complexity and multidirectionality of
care. The initiative permeates the virtual and the non-virtual, and collapses the boundary
between ‘caring’ and ‘cared-for’. HowToBuyWiki’s project is premised on a chain of care
relations which, though not always directly reciprocal, implicate members and users in giving
and receiving care: members care for users through providing the wiki-platform, while users
care for HowToBuyWiki by accepting this action of care and contributing to the platform,
thereby also caring for one another through sharing information. In the organization itself, the
members cultivate their care relations through regular meetings in which they attend to one
another, organizing weekends away, engaging in small collaborations in pairs, sharing food,
encouraging each other’s efforts, and celebrating small successes. With no clear-cut
dichotomy between giver and recipient, HowToBuyWiki exemplifies how care is not only an
outcome-oriented process of improvement (cf. Heuts and Mol 2013), but is also a practice of
sharing time and attention, which is essential for creating and maintaining a community.
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1 HowToBuyWiki is a pseudonym. Throughout this paper, we use ‘group’ or ‘organization’ to describe the HowToBuyWiki organizing committee, and ‘member’ to refer to each individually. People who consult the HowToBuyWiki website for information are referred to
as ‘users’ or ‘consumers’, while those who add information are ‘editors’. Users are generally not known to *HowToBuyWiki* members other than in the form of site-usage statistics and imagined identities; editors are recognized only by a self-selected pseudonym. ‘Company’ refers to an organization which produces and/or markets products; company representatives may also act as editors if they wish, and this is the case for several products listed on the wiki-platform.

2 As a result of the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), there has been a continued rise in the number of wiki-style websites: platforms which permit users to share information collaboratively and dynamically, rather than passively view content. In 2009, one of the most famous of these, *Wikipedia*, was used as an information source by over 50% of internet users (Reavley et al 2013).

3 The first author interviewed all six participants; the third author joined as co-interviewer in two of the six interviews; the second author transcribed all interviews verbatim.

4 We examine *HowToBuyWiki*’s discursive construction of chocolate as an example of how the organization frames food products and ‘conscious consumption’ more generally; however, it is important to note that *HowToBuyWiki*’s focus on Fair Trade chocolate products is not coincidental. Fair Trade articulates concerns with labour- and sustainability-related issues, such as those connected with cocoa farming, that are central to *HowToBuyWiki*’s vision of the good. And, having integrated successfully into mainstream market practices, Fair Trade labels also index everyday ethical consumption (cf. Low and Davenport, 2005).