PAMLA Talk: Soylent and Juicero: Conspicuous and Invisible Consumption

This is a food panel, so let’s talk about not eating.

I'm Jeremy Tirrell from UNC Wilmington.

I'd like to talk to you briefly about two things today: the meal replacement beverage Soylent and the cold press juicer Juicero. I'll go briskly in the interest of time, but of course I'm happy to answer questions later.

Argument

Ultimately what I'd like to forward is that Soylent, in keeping with its name, presents a figuratively ghoulish consumption of inert matter through a reduction of bodies to algorithms.

Conversely, Juicero advances a metaphorical vampirism by promising continued health through the ingestion of fresh, living organisms—offering an atavistic return to a primal mode of life paradoxically achievable only through advanced technology.

These two objects function as different ends on a continuum and share assumptions based in digital startup culture that position nutrition as simultaneously performative and concealed.

Relevance

This matters because how we describe the body and sustenance has far reaching implications for personal and social conceptions of nutrition, wellness & illness, and public health, and **increasingly perspectives drawn from digital startup culture frame these conversations.**

Context

This work is situated in what Scott and Meloncon call the "Rhetoric of Health & Medicine (RHM)," examinations of the depictions of and discourses around biological issues taking place since the 1990s in journals—including *Technical Communication Quarterly*, the *Journal of Medical Humanities*, and *Communication Quarterly*—as well as monographs and collections—such as Hawhee's *Bodily Arts*, Fountain's *Rhetoric in the Flesh* and Scott and Meloncon's *Methodologies for the Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* (1).

Materialist rhetoric is an appropriate means to address bodily issues because it is more of an approach—an expansive collection of tools through which to examine symbolic discourse—than a discrete discipline centered upon particular methods and content. Scott and Meloncon argue that

rhetoric's utility in this area derives from its "capaciousness" and its facility as a "useful tool in both creating and critiquing discourse" (5).

Soylent

Do folks know what Soylent is?

Do folks know what Soylent Green is?

Soylent is a meal replacement beverage, akin to Ensure, Boost, SlimFast, or the many other fitness- and health-focused pre-made shakes and powders. It's mostly sold online but you can even get it from some 7-Elevens.

It sets itself apart through its startup-driven approach to nutrition, complete with a successful crowdfunding campaign and $20 million in series A investment. It's even sold in version numbers, complete with corresponding release notes like a software product.

The product is commonly sold through a subscription (of course) and was designed by the company's CEO Rob Rhinehart, **an electrical engineer—rather than a nutritionist, biologist, physician, or chemist**—who taught himself from online resources.

It also seeks to disrupt eating (let that sink in—rethink **eating**) through efficiency gains by removing the planning and preparation from nutrition. It aims to be a single-source food. Rhinehart claims to have lived on it for months, but the package labels hedge on this level of replacement. Most of its ilk explicitly do not recommend long-term total food replacement except in specific medical cases (such as cancer patients), and even then usually only under a doctor's supervision.

It's also aligned with humanitarian goals such as providing complete nutrition to low income people. Rhinehart stated in one interview: "As I walked around [Brooklyn], I noticed a lot of people had trouble with their health and eating well. I lived in one of the poorer areas and people were clearly much less healthy than the ones in the more affluent areas, and I thought maybe there was a way that we could get healthy food to people in a more efficient way."

The company also addresses environmental issues by asserting that Soylent uses less water, creates less food waste, and produces less CO2 (than livestock and refrigeration).

This is not an imposed reading; it is explicitly in the language and images of the company's website.

Engineering

- "Research & Engineering. It’s our favorite part of eating."
- "Breakfast engineered without a single tiny marshmallow."
- "We take engineering as seriously as most people take bacon."
    - Strange statement given the focus on the wastefulness and elitism of meat production
- "An empirical design process means only the best ingredients make the cut."

- "Optimized for nutrition."

Disruption

- "Let us take a few things off your plate."
- "Food reformatted."
- "Complete nutrition. Achievement unlocked."
- "Food is much easier when it's Drink."
- "We solved nutrition. It just needed shaking up."

Humanitarian

- "Helping by feeding"
    - donated over one million meals
- "Better for you and the planet"
- "Waste nothing."

It's also in social media ads like this one that appeared in my Facebook as I was doing research.

- "We've mapped the food genome." (ENGINEERING)
    - This is inaccurate and likely nonsensical.

And in packaging and promotional material.

- "Free your body" (DISRUPTION)
    - This was a crowdfunding slogan

Notice how statements such as "Achievement unlocked," "Optimized for nutrition," and "We solved nutrition" depict this as a performative lifestyle marker (as does clothing). This is for people who are too busy being productive to eat. It also suggests conspicuous accomplishment through redress of large-scale humanitarian issues.

Notice also the overt reiteration of **transparency** on the product pages, but as rhetorician Kenneth Burke reminds us, seeing something occurs through the exclusion of something else. The labels indicate what is and isn't in the formula, but they don't address issues such as sourcing.

This is relevant, because Soylent has made people periodically and mysteriously sick pretty much since its creation. The issue may have been traced to a component (algal powder), but **the point is that the claim of total transparency elides paradigmatic assumptions about what falls within the field of vision.** As David Sax states in his *New Yorker* piece "The Real Soylent Sickness": "The tech world approaches food from the perspective of engineering: a defined problem to be solved, with the right equations, formulas, compounds, and brainpower."

Moreover, the assumption here is to fail fast and often and then iterate to correct the issue; however, when we're dealing with food instead of software the adjustment lags, and there are health consequences.

You'd think nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea would derail a food substitute, but because the product is a lifestyle marker, adherents instead deflect the issue to other people's congenital intolerances for certain components—they blame the drinker not the meal. This kind of identity formation through exclusion based on an implicit purity test is similar to what Garrett McCord observes in his thesis *Examining the Exclusionary Rhetoric of the Slow Food Movement's Recipes And Literature*.

In sum, we can see that Soylent is a conspicuous performative lifestyle marker steeped in startup culture, correspondingly predicated on solving a perceived biological inefficiency—it is for people who are too busy being productive to eat. It foregrounds a nebulous amelioration of large-scale humanitarian issues and is enabled by a thorough abstraction of the body into an equation that can be balanced with decontextualized matter. **Remember their claim that they have "solved nutrition."**

This elides our lack of certainty about the elements and processes of nutrition and health, and, through an emphasis on transparency, conceals material aspects of its production.

Despite explicitly invoking a ghoulish metaphor that positions the body and sustenance as only inert stuff, the matter *matters*.

And this isn't solely an issue for insulated Silicon Valley society or a hypothetical class of monied elites. A similar (but not identical) line of thinking underpins events like the nasal forced feeding of Ensure to Gitmo detainees on hunger strikes and the punitive use of Nutraloaf. (You don't need utensils; that seems familiar—**waste nothing**.)

Juicero

So anyway, speaking of the undead: let's talk about vampires and an expensive juicer.

Juicero is akin to a Keurig for juice. This certainly was part of the pitch that garnered it more than $100 million in venture capital.

It tends to be known for a couple of things: first and foremost, it launched at $700, although the price was subsequently cut to $400; also a *Bloomberg* article demonstrated that squeezing the machine's required produce bags by hand "yields nearly the same amount of juice just as quickly—and in some cases, faster—than using the device," making it somewhat unnecessary.

Certainly these may be contributing factors in Juicero's ultimate shutdown, which occurred in Sept. 1 of 2017. But let's disinter that coffin, because behind the schadenfreude and casual dismissal of Silicon Valley run amuck, there are some issues that won't remain buried.

1. That $700 cost may have been a bargain. Tech writer Ben Einstein writes in *Bolt Blog* about his thorough teardown of the machine, stating: "Of the hundreds of consumer products I've taken apart over the years, this is easily among the top 5% on the complexity scale," and

later: "it has become clear that Juicero spends a LOT of money on machined parts. I would venture to say a majority of the bill of materials is devoted to machined parts, which is highly unusual for a mass-market consumer product." All of this is to create a product that exerts a force that is, in the words of company founder Doug Evans, "enough to lift two Teslas." **If that isn't a conspicuous lifestyle marker I don't know what is.**

2. Much of the product's development hinged on creating a supply chain for its packages of fresh produce. According to Bryan Menegus's company profile in *Gizmodo*, Juicero initially focused on working with small local farms and "ugly" produce unsuitable for sale in grocery stores, but it ultimately ended up partnering with conglomerates including Dole in order to establish an appropriate infrastructure. **What's interesting here is the visible borrowing of an almost homeopathic aura—the position that small, local produce is in some unquantifiable way different and better than its mass-market brethren, even while partnering with the world's largest fruit and vegetable producer.** This tension between specialized product and generalized supply chain actually is identified in the company's posted statement as the principal reason for its dissolution.
3. We also see gestures to environmental goals including recycling and elimination of waste; however, this leads us into some strange alleys. The company website formerly stated: "Once pressed, the pulp inside can be eaten (our preference) or composted." This raises the question: **if you're supposed to eat the pulp, why bother juicing in the first place? Just cut out the middle step and eat the produce directly.** Of course, the reason is that juicing is a performative marker; it is a conspicuous ritual. (Hence the company's touting of its connections with lifestyle brands such as GOOP.)
4. Ultimately, Juicero seeks to enable a primal mode of life by drinking vital liquid, which is paradoxically only possible with advanced technology.

You can see this in their language and imagery (I like to pretend they're talking about people in this copy.)

- "The Earth's best. Delivered Fresh."
- "Drink 4.5 billion Years of Perfection"
- "Source: We follow Earth's original recipe"
- "Prep: Washed. Chopped. Ready" (again, people)
- "Pack + Ship: Perfectly fresh from dirt to door"

And this tacit connection to vampirism isn't far-fetched; those who watch HBO's *Silicon Valley* may remember a plot point that involved a valley titan's "blood boy," as well as the real valley startup Ambrosia's actual focus on blood transfusions and parabiosis.

As with Soylent, we see an emphasis on **transparency** on behalf of freshness, quality, and safety: "And you can see the exact farms that grew everything inside." This has some interesting consequences. For example, you can't use your own produce. If you want to use your $700 juicer on items from your local farmer's market or the harvest of your own garden you are out of luck. So again, transparency is inherently conditional about what it reveals.

So we can see connections with Soylent (both are nutrition-focused startups that move away from food and have associated interests in humanitarian causes and investments in particular forms of transparency), but there are significant differences.

For Soylent it's all just matter, but for Juicero there's something magical about specific, special matter. Soylent seeks to balance an equation, so all numbers are uniform. Juicero suggests that this kind of mass-produced model obviates terroir, even as it partially adopts it.

I'm having some fun, but my point isn't to ridicule these particular products. I don't think their assumptions are inherently bad or good, **but they are increasingly pervasive, and becoming paradigmatic**, and we should engage that.

That's why **it's irrelevant that Juicero has a stake through its heart, because it lives on** in the Bodega vending machine (which has the explicitly stated goal to bankrupt corner stores), the Bonaverde coffee roaster and brewer (with its focus on supply chain), the Teforia tea brewer, and so on.

Heck, Juicero's former CEO Doug Evans has moved on to become a proponent for "raw" or "live" water—untreated water from natural springs. Adherents claim that ingesting the living microorganisms contained therein promotes optimal health. The founder of the Live Water company Mukhande Singh (né Christopher Sanborn) indeed disparages tap water as "dead" because it doesn't expire—an insult that wouldn't stick to Soylent.

So in a final word, artifacts such as the the *Scientific American* piece "The Maths of Life and Death: Our Secret Weapon in the Fight against Disease" and IBM and Nestle's partnership to to trace food contamination with blockchain technology suggest, the quantification of our material bodies is becoming pervasive. With that comes a corresponding resistance, asserting that some things can't be tabulated; **Our sustenance is better than your sustenance, even if the nutritional value is the same. It has something unseen and mystical but real.**

Just as the body became a machine in the Industrial Age (measured by the clock, valued for the units of labor it produces), the body in the Information Age organizes around these aligned digital trends. Here the maths and magic arrive together. They establish different poles, but they rest on assumptions about biology driven by digital startup culture that are becoming naturalized and invisible.