

Peter Kastberg

MultiTrust : Animating Multicriteria Decision-making Processes in the Organic Value Chain

When thinking about animations, an intuitive reaction could be to dismiss them as mere children's pastime, but that is by no means the whole picture. Animated films featuring highly specialized knowledge from, say, the domains of science, technology and engineering are to be found all over the current media landscape. There is a tendency that they are predominantly used in one specific communicative constellation, i.e., when domain-specific knowledge is communicated from an expert or authority to a lay person. That, too, is the case when it comes to the animated film "MultiTrust" (to be found here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmoXYJAS8LY>). This animation stems from the research project "Multicriteria assessment and communication of effects of organic food systems" (<http://multitrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Description-of-MultiTrust-from-Status-report-2011-to-Organic-RDD.pdf>), which was conducted under the auspices of ICROFS (i.e., the International Centre for Research in Organic Food Systems, for more information please visit: <http://www.icrofs.org/index.html>). The color animation film was produced in 2013 by the award-winning Danish production company and animation studio Tumblehead Aps (for more information please visit: <http://www.tumblehead.com/>).

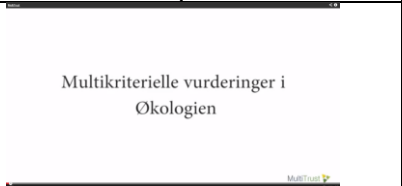




A primary intention of this multifaceted research project was to "make it easier for consumers [...] to observe and evaluate the different contributions that organic food systems offer", with a special emphasis "to promote communication, participation and learning" about organic foods. One tangible result of this endeavor was the animated film aiming at presenting a novel way of communicating about multicriteria buyer decision-making with regards to organic food purchases. Whereas the film as such does not present a tool ready to be employed in the service of consumer communication, it does present a prototype for how we might design future communications about organic food products in a novel way. A way which – ideally – constructs a meeting place between consumers, producers and sellers as well as allows each stakeholder in the organic value chain to build up ever more nuanced decision-making competences. In the following I will present the prototype from the point of view of the consumer's decision-making process.

Research into consumers' decision-making when it comes to buying organic food shows that one of the primary reasons why consumers do not buy more organic foods is not lack of information per se, but lack of information allowing for informed decision making. Due to the mundane yet highly consequential fact that, in the industrialized part of the world, producers and consumers no longer know each other food communication is, quite simply, inescapable. One of the ways in which authorities have sought to inform publics about the added-value of organic foods is via wide-spread labelling initiatives. On a national level examples could be the German "Bio-Siegel" or the "USDA Organic" label in the U.S.; on a supranational level a prominent example is the "EU Ecolabel for Consumers". Whereas labeling is certainly a cost-effective means of organic food communication, the problem is, naturally, that any labeling is rendered futile if the consumer does not understand it. And studies consistently show that consumers do not understand these labels. We are not, then, dealing with a lack of information in general (the information is 'out there'); we are in fact challenged with the task of communicating information about organic foods in such a way as to allow the consumer to create his or her own knowledge based on what s/he perceives, i.e., knowledge of the kind that allows for informed decision making with regards to organic foods.

The animated "MultiTrust" prototype rests on three assumptions: Firstly that the consumer does not make his or her purchase decision on merely one criterion, but that the purchase decision is indeed inherently a multicriterial one. For the consumer of meat, for instance, one criteria may be that the animal has been feeding on organic fodder but maybe an even more important criteria could be that of animal well-fare, i.e. that the animal has been treated better than stipulated by

current law etc. Secondly, that each stakeholder in the ‘from farm to fork’ value chain (in crude generalization: producer, seller, consumer) harbors different criteria for determining what good organic food is. What the consumer sees as good organic practice may to the farmer be a practice too expensive to adhere to, to the seller logistically too demanding etc. And last but certainly not least that the only place where all these stakeholders are in fact able meet is on the Internet. In order to overcome alienation and possible (mutual) misunderstandings all parties involved would need to resort to a common ground of sorts. And a joint website is the obvious choice for establishing a (virtual) common ground, i.e., not all consumers may know an organic farmer, but all consumers (mutatis mutandis) own a laptop with Internet access. No existing organic communication effort takes its point of departure in these assumptions.

The animated “MultiTrust” film, consequently, ventures to propose a new approach to communicating about organic foods in which the focus is on how to increase involvement and reduce uncertainty in relation to organic food consumption rather than merely stating facts or communication labels. In order to present how the prototype is a) envisioned and b) integrated into the above organic value chain, we will take a closer and somewhat analytical look at the animation itself. For presentational purposes the animation has been broken down into its core narrative elements below. The prototype itself is presented in the phases 9 through 12.

“MultiTrust” animation film		
Phases	Animation of phases	Description of phases
Phase 1		The film introduces the research project from which the animation stems.
Phase 2		The film begins by depicting a consumer, who is puzzled by the many quality criteria she is faced with when wishing to purchase organic food products.
Phase 3		The film jumps to a farmer, who is, too, overwhelmed by the number and diversity of criteria of organic food production.
Phase 4		The film now introduces the Danish eco label, and explains how the authorities, recognizing this confusion, seek to remedy it by way of placing a national eco label on all organic products.
Phase 5		The problem is, however, that the national Danish eco label cannot help out either since it, too, covers a variety of different criteria – and products.




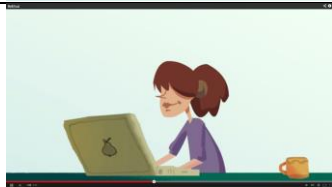
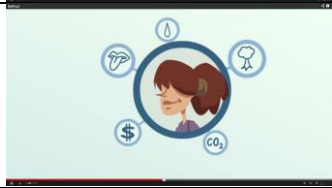
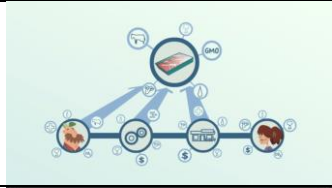



Phase 6		Returning to the organic farmer, he, too, is puzzled by the eco label, and left to his own device may opt – out of his own accord – to focus on some criteria while neglecting others.
Phase 7		But farmer and consumer are not the only stakeholders directly involved with organic food products; the production plants as well as the point of sale of organic foods are equally involved – and may, in turn, focus on entirely different assessment criteria.
Phase 8		A fact which leaves both farmer and consumer even more confused as to how to assess the quality of organic foods.
Phase 9		The film now changes from describing the problems to hinting at a solution. It does so by posing a question: So, what if there was an ICT platform where the consumer could find all the information she needs?
Phase 10		A platform where the consumer could type in her preferences when it comes to assessment criteria.
Phase 11		The film expands on this idea and poses yet another question: What if the ICT platform was not only a platform for the consumer but a platform for all stakeholders involved (farmers, producers, sellers and consumers alike)?
Phase 12		On such a platform the consumer's criteria could be reciprocated by, say, the farmer's documentation.
Phase 13		In this way the consumer would have access to multiple criteria for organic foods; this would allow her to conduct a multicriteria assessment of the quality of organic food products.
Phase 14		The film ends by listing the sponsors as well as the creators of the animation are listed.

Figure 1: Visual rendering of phases at the level of presentation.

As may be inferred we are dealing with a three-phased narrative structure in which the starting point is a state of deficiency which, in the course of the narration, is remedied through a procedure of improvement; the result of which is a satisfactory state. Given that the animation is directed at consumers, and given that the driving force of any narrative is conflict, it is no surprise that the animation features a conflict involving and evolving around the character of the consumer. The conflict is depicted in phase 8, in which both the consumer and farmer are portrayed as being at a total loss. The denouement or resolution to the conflict sets in in phase 9 where the consumer is placed in front of a lap top computer where she is searching for an ICT platform to help her out. In the phases 10 to 12 the attributes of the (would be) platform or prototype are sketched out, and in phase 13 the consumer – thanks to the prototype – is now able to conduct a multicriteria assessment of the quality of organic food products prior to purchase.

The animation is an indication that promoting “communication, participation and learning” about organic foods is by no means as straightforward as merely adding stick-on labels to organic foods. If we take seriously that the consumer not only needs to be exposed to, say, the EU Ecolabel but that s/he needs to be allowed to make multi-criteria assessments of his / her own, then we also need to take seriously that gauging the deposit of whatever communicative endeavor we may perform, is critical to our success. For whereas all sorts of content may be relatively easily transmittable, say, at the click of a mouse button, reception, understanding and any ensuing operationalizing based on this understanding is not.

All said, in appreciating that any model of communication is also a model *for* communication it is maintained that communication seen and performed as participative holds promising qualities with regards to helping the lay person to understand, to assess and to make informed, multicriteria decisions. Taking a step back we may say that the prototype does not only envision a novel way of designing organic communication it does also help emancipate, if you will, the organic consumer. An emancipation that is in tune with the Zeitgeist of late or postmodern societies inclined to favor deliberative and participatory public engagement.