

COMMENTARY

Expo Milano 2015: The Overview, Issue, and Future for Agricultural Communicators

Abigail Borron and Jessica Holt

ABSTRACT

Expo Milano 2015 was an international agricultural event to promote and discuss the issue of food sustainability around the world. Two agricultural communication researchers attended the event in summer 2015 to better understand the world's perspective of the prominent issues facing the agricultural industry and how other countries were addressing the issues. The Expo took place in Milan, Italy, and featured 140 countries and their perception on agriculture and food in their respective country. While the event was impressive, the issues purported to be the focus of the event (agriculture sustainability and food insecurity) were rarely addressed in each country. Rather, the countries focused on culture and how food impacted their culture and customs. Events like these offer agricultural communicators the opportunity to join the discussion of how the issues of food sustainability and insecurity can be positively impacted by agriculture technology and research; however, it may be only through the formation of meaningful and collaborative relationships with groups and organizations outside of the traditional agricultural industry that agricultural communicators will be invited to join the conversation. These relationships may need to be cultivated to show respect and mutual benefit for both the organization and the agricultural industry for long-term impact for the expansion of opportunities for agricultural communicators.

KEY WORDS

Agriculture Sustainability, Expo Milano 2015, Worldwide Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Food is a cornerstone to daily living. We depend on it to sustain us. Therefore, it is a non-negotiable resource that, in turn, has elicited a rather complex relationship with us for centuries. Throughout history, food has defined families, communities, and countries throughout the world. Frankly, food is that unconventional media channel that communicates our identity and our heritage. Food and food practices have been and will continue to be the centerpiece of celebrating milestones, mourning the loss of loved ones, and building the bonds of our respective communities. As individuals, we continually utilize our relationship with food to link the present with the comfort of the known past, resulting in shared narratives that sustain food practices and embody our personal heritages.

Expo Milano 2015 encapsulated the rich heritage that is food. Taking place in Milan, Italy, from May 1 through October 31, 2015, the world exposition's platform was a conversation on a sustainable future by highlighting traditional cultural values and emerging technologies (Expo Milano 2015, 2015c). Through the elaborate design of 1.1 million square meters, showcasing more than 140 participating countries and their respective pavilions, the Expo stated that each country shared "its best technology that offers a concrete answer to the vital need: being able to guarantee healthy, safe and sufficient food for everyone, while respecting the Planet and its equilibrium" (Expo Milano 2015, 2015c, para. 1); and that it is "a place where cultures, traditions and flavors meet against a backdrop of outstanding architecture" (Expo Milano 2015, 2015b, para. 5).

Yes, needless to say, it was incredibly impressive. To walk into the Expo and attempt to take in its massive presence was overwhelming. It's grandeur and expanse resembled Disney's Epcot. Each country's pavilion showcased its rich culture through the architecture, the dress of the individuals working the pavilions, the music being played, and the food available. While the duration of the Expo was only a short six months, the design and construction of each pavilion did not elicit a temporary nature. And the diverse and creative technology used to convey a country's story and establish its presence within the Expo was incredibly inspiring to two communication professionals as we contemplated how to integrate some of the communication technologies and creativity into our work. However, it also left us perplexed and rather irritated. Before we address our resulting state of mind, let us first set the stage of what we saw at four very different pavilions.

Pavilions of Interest

Save the Children – This was one of the few pavilions that was not country-specific and addressed multiple variables at play in food insecurity throughout the world. Save the Children is an international organization that endeavors to improve the welfare of children around the globe in humanitarian crises, such as natural disaster, civil unrest, and food insecurity (Save the Children, 2015). To walk through and engage in the pavilion, visitors assume the identity of a small child who struggled with his/her family to make ends meet or get by on a daily basis. Each subsequent interactive element demonstrated more evidence of the variety of external factors (many outside of a family's control) that contributed to their daily struggles. If visitors stayed on the intended path throughout the entire pavilion, they would gain a deeper understanding of the portrayed needs in food insecurity, as well as personal calls to action. This pavilion was one of the few at the Expo that recognized a need in the face of adversity and, through building elements of interaction, worked to provide a solution to the issue. Of course, at the exit visitors could purchase novelty items associated with the organization. However, next to each item was a list of resources and services that a percentage of the purchase price would help support. For example, a \$20 T-shirt could provide nutritional supplement packets for 20 people.



The Save the Children Pavilion at the Expo

Slow Food – Founded in Paris, Slow Food International is a grassroots organization that focuses on preserving local food cultures and traditions (Slow Food, 2015). This pavilion demonstrated activist-style messages where small farms were clearly portrayed as better than large farms. Those touted as doing things right were small, European stakeholders who avoided monoculture crop and livestock systems and, instead, practiced small, diverse operations. The pavilion had workstations for visitors to engage with concepts regarding the "proper way" to grow food. One station had small, hinged doors with images of small, diversified farming practices with an explanation and location of the type of farming on one side while the opposing side depicted images displaying large, industrialized farming. The latter images were accompanied by text offering the location, generally in the U.S. and U.K. and why this type of farming was harmful to the environment, the animal, and the consumer.

U.S. Pavilion – This pavilion was a massive 42,000 square foot space with multiple levels and a number of interactive elements throughout. It also claimed to have the world's largest vertical farm with panels of crops that rotated throughout the day, depending upon the location of the sun (Expo Milano 2015, 2015a). A variety of multimedia elements incorporated a number of talking heads, including Barack Obama and well-known food activists and chefs, such as Alice Waters and Michael Pollan. The videos highlighted the types of foods and meals that could be created with the foods grown on small, local farms, and highlighted select and emerging



The U.S. Pavilion at the Expo

technologies that suggest the future of U.S. food production. A significant emphasis was placed on the end product and the enjoyment of healthy fresh food.

Future Food District – Functioning as a complete grocery store, the technology integrated throughout the food displays and shelves was impressive. By way of a three-dimensional scanning system, visitors could hold their hand over a food item and a digital display immediately showed a full breakdown of the item. Information included the food's origins, the breakdown of its nutrients, and the carbon footprint that resulted from the production of that particular food item. Ingenious? Of course. The technology could clearly attribute to local food movements, trace food contamination events, and bolster farm-to-plate awareness.

The Issue

So, after two days of wandering in and around all parts of the Expo, why did we leave feeling perplexed and downright irritated? While the Expo did highlight and pay respect to the culture of each country, little if no discussion was offered to the future of food with consideration to major issues facing the world. The issues of sustainability, insecurity, obesity, hunger, environmental impacts, and GMOs were very rarely discussed within the countries' pavilions. If GMOs, or other controversial issues were mentioned, they were criticized and dismissed as viable options for the wellbeing of the country and its people. Save the Children was the only one we saw that acknowledged a humanitarian problem while simultaneously identifying potential solutions and calls to action.

The Slow Food pavilion demonstrated a one-sided conversation. And, while neither of us denied the attractiveness and beauty of the slow food movement, it left us feeling quite defensive and struggling to maintain an open mind throughout the interactive displays. To negatively portray industrialized farming while simultaneously advocating a preservation of food cultures and traditions ultimately created a disjointed juxtaposition in the argument. When faced with a growing world population, one cannot argue for one without the acknowledgement that the other is essential as well.



An interactive display about the legislative process in the U.S. pavilion at the Expo.

In the U.S. pavilion, while the interactive elements were impressive, there were significant elements lacking. Neither animal/crop specialists nor agricultural-based researchers were included in the conversation of food for the future. While the end product and associated experiences were artfully depicted, no elements of the pavilion ever showed the entire process of growing food. No attention was given to the farmer, the researchers, or the process for providing enough food to feed the population. The pavilion touted sophisticated farming practices, but failed to address the reality and complexity of feeding the nine billion. We left the pavilion with an engrained sense of the types of food we could and do eat from the U.S. but with little information about the start-to-finish impact of those foods used to make the end product enjoyed by consumers.

The Future Food District was fascinating; and the demonstration of a three-dimensional scanning system for the purposes of placing a plethora of product information literally at your fingertips was quite impressive. However, the implementation and maintenance of such an endeavor left us with many questions. Is it unrealistic with respect to financial and technological reasons? Would the store

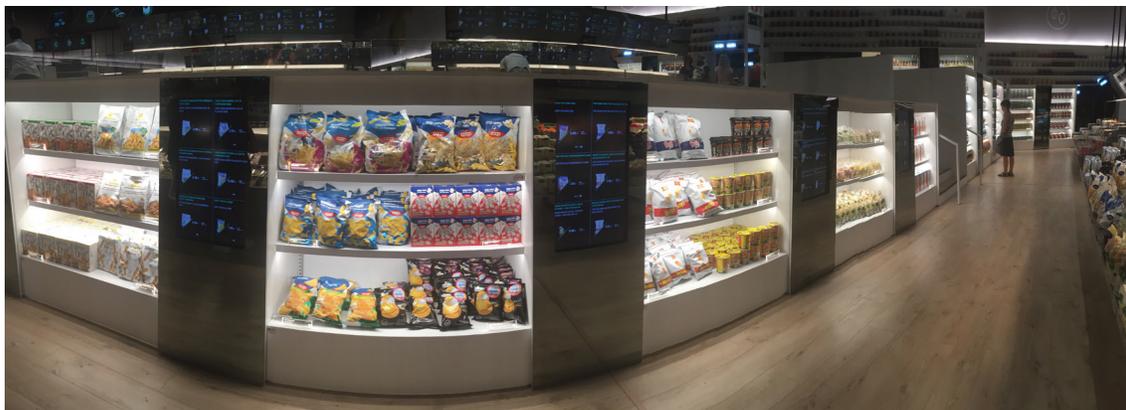
design ultimately wield a greater disparity between the haves and the have-nots? Would customers be required to pay a premium price for such a shopping experience? Is it possible that such store innovation would perpetuate and enhance the existence of food deserts and the accessibility of fresh food? And, when it comes to those who are food insecure, is such information a greater priority than the food itself?

Also, an issue that continually emerged between us was the hypocrisy, or the decision for a country's allocation of resources to design and build such an elaborate temporary pavilion. Some struggling countries spent millions of dollars to have a pavilion on display at the Expo, highlighting the culture of their country, while a large portion of their people

are facing hunger or nutritional deprivation issues. For instance, Bangladesh had a pavilion at the Expo, but 41% (about 7 million) of the children in that country are chronically undernourished (World Food Programme, 2015). We did not see any mention of how these types of countries were working to address the deprivation or imbalances they were facing. Instead, the countries focused on the cultural impacts food has had on their country and its people.

We continually wrestled with what we saw, without fully pinpointing exactly why. And, finally, we found ourselves contemplating the power of food. Regardless of the time period, food has been and is still used to display wealth and wield power and control. Think back to WWII, when Germany shut down supply chains to Leningrad for 872 days, leading to 1.5 million Russians dying of famine (Jones, 2008). More recently, in Sudan, the civil war has resulted in more than two million people dying, mostly of hunger (Roston, 2012). The militant Islamist group, Al-Shabab, has wielded power and control by prohibiting food aid to the Somalians they want to suppress. The result is starving young men who join Al-Shabab, which happens to control the food (Roston, 2012).

And, while Expo Milano 2015 did not wield such destructive power, it did demonstrate the power structures at play as country after country, movement after movement, touted their best while overshadowing their least. Therefore, during the six-month exposition with the tagline "Feeding the Planet—Energy for Life," it became clear that food clearly has the ability to differentiate socioeconomic levels. Access to premiere food sources is relegated to the select few, where food becomes art and experience. This is a common thread among all cultures and was the perpetual theme throughout the Expo.



The shopping aisles in the Future Food District with interactive displays at th Expo.

The Future and Our Role

Don't get us wrong. We enjoyed our tour of the globe, eating culturally specific foods from a variety of countries; and we enjoyed the Epcot-like experience of the off-the-hook pavilions. But, we also looked at the Expo through the critical lens of the agricultural communicator. Events such as Expo Milano 2015 have the opportunity to be a wonderful outlet to inform and educate the world and its consumers about the truthful issues we are facing in the future. These types of platforms provide a stage to bring together the greatest minds to propose ideas for helping to solve our greatest problems related to food. Also, this begins the conversation for young minds to understand their role in helping to ensure there will be sustainable food for all in the future. But, we struggled to see that. The impression was a beautiful, yet surface-level, depiction of idealistic rather than realistic.

The overarching point of this article: Well, we turned the critical lens back on ourselves as well, asking, "What is our role in these types of venues and discussions like this?" And, the answer was obvious. We must be at the proverbial table, talking with the likes of pavilion designers and activists... not to win the argument but to enhance and begin the holistic discussion. We are food activists, too. And, until we lay claim to that often perceived unsavory title, we will continue to walk away from these events feeling perplexed and irritated.

REFERENCES

- Expo Milano 2015 (2015a). *American Food 2.0 – USA Pavilion*. Retrieved from <https://www.usapavilion2015.net/pavilion>
- Expo Milano 2015 (2015b). *Feeding the plant, energy for life*. Retrieved from <http://www.expo2015.org/en/learn-more/the-theme>
- Expo Milano 2015 (2015c). *Learn more about Expo Milano 2015*. Retrieved from <http://www.expo2015.org/en/learn-more>
- Jones, M. (2008). *Leningrad: State of siege*. [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Roston, T. (2012, January 11). A brief history of food & war. *Food Republic*. Retrieved from <http://www.foodrepublic.com/2012/01/11/a-brief-history-of-food-war/>
- Save the Children (2015). *About us*. Retrieved from <https://www.savethechildren.net/about-us>
- Slow Food (2015). *About us*. Retrieved from <http://www.slowfood.com/about-us/>
- World Food Programme (2015). Countries—Bangladesh. Retrieved from <https://www.wfp.org/countries/bangladesh/overview>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Abigail Borron, Ph.D. is assistant professor of Agricultural Communication – Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication at the University of Georgia. Borron's professional background is in disaster and risk communication within the Cooperative Extension System. As a researcher, her work focuses on culture-centered communication with emphases in marginalized audiences and university engagement.

Jessica Holt, Ph.D. is assistant professor of Agricultural Communication – Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communication at the University of Georgia. Holt focuses her research in interactive communication strategies to engage and connect consumers with the food systems vital for everyday life and to promote locally grown food. Her professional background is in marketing and communication of the agricultural industry.