Welcome to the BHC's first Twitter interview #newbook #bizhis

This thread compiles a series of Q&A posts with Dr. Xaq Frohlich about his book 👇

Any questions, comments, 👍 or shares are welcome!

Check of the BHC book series program here https://thebhc.org/book-series-bhc-authors
@ComedoErgoSum @ShamitoShane @cruzmosu @ucpress Q1 —> What inspired you to write this?

“Do you have a personal connection to the topic of your book, and how has this influenced your perspective?”

A1/1

Xaq Frohlich
@ComedoErgoSum - Follow

Replying to @TheBHCNews

Good questions! A European friend visited me in U.S. ~2005, was looking at food packages, saw the Nutrition Facts panel and said, “That’s so American!” I knew she meant several things: typical of our diet fad culture, scientism, and also our legalism, warning labels everywhere...

3:33 PM · Feb 19, 2024

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A1/2

Xaq Frohlich
@ComedoErgoSum - Follow

Replying to @ComedoErgoSum and @TheBHCNews

... got curious and wrote a grad paper on the post-1990 NLEA history leading to the FDA "Nutrition Facts" label, but discovered there were two longer back stories: one, the shift in diet science in the 1960s (“negative nutrition”, became my dissertation...

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...the other was the FDA's century long battle over what I came to call the "food-drug line", how to distinguish "drug" products, with strict market regulations, from standard "food" products, which were not supposed to make extreme health claims. This is the focus of the book.

... @ShamiltoShane

**Q2** --- How has your training in STS (Science and Technology Studies) shaped the research in this book?
A big one is the book’s focus on experts, how they produce knowledge that circulates in everyday life. The clearest example are “nutrition facts”: 80 years ago almost nobody was talking about “cholesterol” or “saturated fats”, today these are commonplace words to use with food…

However, STS scholars often think they’re the only ones looking at experts, scientists. My book studies two other groups of experts: market experts (advertisers, marketers, consumer experts) and legal experts (lawyers, courts). Each have their different angle on the food label…
I'm also interested in how things play a role in shaping people's experiences, a big STS framework. How does the design of the food label shape (configure) users' experiences with food? The food label is also an interesting junction between material concerns and symbolic ones.

What I've seen elsewhere called: “object-driven history”
#museumstudies #materialcultures

Speaking of objects ...

Q3 --> Could you highlight some key archival sources that were instrumental in shaping your manuscript?
Also @NixonLibrary for the 1969 WH Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health, @CSPI archives for 80s - 90s advocacy, @TheHagleyCenter was amazing for retailing history and consumer experts like Dichter; and nutrition scientists' papers at @HMSCountway @RadInstitute @VandyLibraries

(reply from the audience)

Corregulation sounds like symbiotic.

... one of the conclusions of the book is that industry designs “functional” foods with regulation in mind (in particular the “food-drug line”). Labeling regulation drives innovation. There is not a “law lag”, as is commonly thought...
…Instead I argue the interesting questions are, who should do the work of regulation, and how should it be done? Should regulating risks be done by the FDA? By industry actors concerned with brand management? By expert gatekeepers (such as doctors)? Or by consumers themselves?

3:46 PM · Feb 19, 2024

It can be. This is kind of what Daniel Carpenter argues in his book Reputation and Power: big industry and the FDA depend on each other for reputation management. But it can also be antagonistic. It depends on the issue and the politics at the time.

4:00 PM · Feb 19, 2024

Q5 ---> For a broader audience, what key insights or takeaways would you say they can gain from your book?

A5/1

First, that labels are way more complicated than they appear. I want consumers who are curious about their foods and labels to read my book and discover a whole world behind them. There are a lot of experts working on those labels! I also want to bridge diff scholarly fields…

3:49 PM · Feb 19, 2024
For food law & policy scholars: my book shows how non-law institutions (changing public understanding of science) shape their practice. For STS scholars: how knowledge claims and contests of authority look different outside labs, in the worlds of advertising & regulatory science.

And for a broader audience unfamiliar with business history, I think this book adds to a growing literature showing how business was one of several key 20th century institutions (along with science and law) to dramatically reshape modern living and pop ideas about food and health.
Proponents of “informational regulation” (coined by @CassSunstein in 1993) believed gov info disclosures like FDA Nutrition Facts were more effective/efficient tools for consumer protection than command-and-control gov agencies directly regulating products like food standards...
Today there is a lot more info about food available to consumers than in the 1970s, more food labels (in Chapter 6 I describe an explosion of “lifestyle labels” for many ethical concerns) and more info online, a problem of information overload and real doubts about reliability…
My book critiques Stigler’s information asymmetry idea as limited by rational choice models of consumers. A consumer’s relationship to food is emotional. The late @burkeybelser who designed FDA Nutrition Facts panel called it a “government brand”: it’s about trust, not just info.

Wrapping up the conversation with

@ComedoErgoSum

--- >> Would you like to highlight someone from your acknowledgments, and could you share a bit about their contribution to your work? #bizhis #scholars

🙏🙏
Yes! JoAnne Yates, Deborah Fitzgerald, and Sheila Jasanoff were important for reading critically a 1st draft of the book in 2020. Roger Horowitz, fellow BHC and food historian, has been a huge support over the years, and Bruce Hunt a lifelong mentor...

4:06 PM · Feb 19, 2024

... @heather_paxson @rachellaudan both read chapters. Colleagues @Auburn_History and @utaustinhs did also. Julie Guthman and the STSFAN (stsfanetwork.wixsite.com/stsfan) gave feedback on Chapter 6. @ColdWarScience was an amazing development editor and @ucpress great for the book endgame.

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I've never met or talked with them but @wcronon 's book, Nature's Metropolis (esp. the "A sack's journey" in the Grain chapter), and @mschudson2 's book, The Rise of the Right to Know, were big inspirations for my ideas on the history of food labeling and packaging...

4:07 PM · Feb 19, 2024
... other kindred spirits who work on food and STS, or FDA and regulation history: @brcohen95 @kirchhelle @dearclare @jays_tone @awmerck @LucRichert @AlHisano @aezeide @thebirdisgone @christyspackman @b_kagliwal @LisaHaushofer @singsingsolo @BartElmore @STS_News and plenty others

Of course, above all the book is dedicated to my wife because she did so much “invisible work” these past years (i.e. COVID-times with baby = “emotional labor” “care work” “mental load”), and because I’ve learned so much from her (@Magali_ZV “There are no labels for you”).