

From *River Cottage* to *Chicken Run*: Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and the class politics of ethical consumption

David Bell

School of Geography

University of Leeds

Leeds

LS2 9JT

d.j.bell@leeds.ac.uk

Joanne Hollows

Communication, Culture and Media

Nottingham Trent University

Clifton Lane

Nottingham

NG11 8NS

joanne.hollows@ntu.ac.uk

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Abstract

Lifestyle television provides a key site through which to explore the dilemmas of ethical consumption, as the genre shifts to consider the ethics of different consumption practices and taste cultures. UK television cook Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's TV programmes offer fertile ground not only for thinking about television personalities as lifestyle experts and moral entrepreneurs, but also for thinking about how the meanings and uses of their television image are inflected by genre. In this article we explore how the shift from the lifestyled downshifting narrative of the *River Cottage* series to the 'campaigning culinary documentary' *Hugh's Chicken Run* exposes issues of celebrity, class and ethics. While both series are concerned with ethical consumption, they work in different ways to reveal a distinction between 'ethical' and 'unethical' consumption practices and positions – positions that are inevitably classed.

Keywords: lifestyle television; *River Cottage*; celebrity, ethical consumption

Introduction

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall is one of the UK's leading television cooks. He is best known for a number of programmes which since 1999 have centred around *River Cottage*. This began as a smallholding, and subsequently grew into a business HQ, located in rural South West England. *River Cottage* operated as a site for Hugh's

initial experiments in downshifting as he left the ‘rat race’ and learned farming, foraging, gardening and craft skills, most of which resulted in produce that could be transformed through recipes into dishes he could eat, share, barter or sell. These recipes have also formed the basis for a series of cookbooks which extend the River Cottage brand and later spawned eateries, a shop, cookery courses and other products.¹

In this article, we want to use Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall to think about two key issues. First, we draw on work by James Bennett (2008) to think of the chef as a ‘lifestyle television personality’ whose image is based around ‘authenticity’ and ‘ordinariness’. We are interested in how these qualities are inflected as Fearnley-Whittingstall moves between genres, arguing that the ‘ordinariness’ that can be traded upon in lifestyle television is thrown into question when he moves into the different format of the ‘campaigning culinary documentary’ (Hollows and Jones 2010). Here we focus on a comparison of the River Cottage shows and *Hugh’s Chicken Run*, which saw the cook attempt to transform a town’s attitudes towards battery farming. If, as Bennett (2008, p. 36) argues, genre is important in differentiating between how different types of TV personality function, then here we seek to examine how the image of a particular TV personality may be inflected differently as that personality *moves between* genres.

Second, we use Fearnley-Whittingstall to think about the increasing role that celebrities are playing in political life (Powell and Prasad 2010; Drake and Higgins 2006). This involves moving beyond John Ellis’s (1982, p. 107) assertion that, unlike the more semiotically complex image of the film star, TV personalities are ‘agreeable

voids rather than sites of conflicting meaning'. Rather than simply being a void, Fearnley-Whittingstall's 'televisual image' raises a series of tensions about the ethical production and consumption of food (and television). Precisely because TV personalities are 'ordinary', their images can be read in terms of tensions about the meaning and conduct of everyday life and this, as Bennett (2008, p. 34) argues, is 'a site of their economic, ideological, textual and cultural importance' (see also Lewis 2010).

While Hugh's image could certainly be read to focus on a series of other concerns, such as nation or masculinity, we are preoccupied here with ethical consumption for a number of reasons. We seek to engage with the emerging debates about how to understand the meanings of ethical consumption by looking at how lifestyle experts mediate ideas about consuming ethically. Drawing on the notion of 'televisual skill', we want to explore how TV personalities use their celebrity status as a form of 'lifestyle performance' in order to make transformations appear 'ordinary' and 'doable'. In doing so, we examine lifestyle television as a key site for the mediation of ideas about and dispositions towards ethical consumption. We suggest that these programmes both popularise ethical consumption and produce new forms of distinction between 'ethical' and 'unethical' lifestyles. They also enable us to explore the limits of the celebrity's 'brand extension' and of the performance of televisual skill – a performance that ultimately needs to both trade on celebrity status and to mobilise ordinariness as a way of speaking to the 'ordinary viewer' (Lewis 2010).

Television personalities, celebrity and cookery TV

For Bennett (2008), TV personalities have a ‘televisual image’ produced through both their on-screen appearances and the wider texts through which their image circulates. For TV chefs, these texts will usually include cookbooks, DVDs, websites and recipe columns, but they may also include less ‘authorised’ media such as biographies, stories and feature articles and reviews in print media. These are all firmly in place with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, but while they certainly afford him a level of ‘fame’, this does not necessarily equate with ‘celebrity’. His fame is very much connected with his role as a television professional and, as such, while he promotes the importance of a particular lifestyle within his shows, he isn’t ‘famous for having a lifestyle’ in the way in which celebrities are (Geraghty cited in Bennett 2008, p. 35). There are, therefore, distinctions between TV chefs who are *TV personalities* and those who are *celebrities*. For example, Gordon Ramsay has been involved in a highly-publicised sex scandal, is featured with celebrity chums such as David Beckham in *OK!* magazine and gives an interview with his wife about their fertility problems to *Hello!* Likewise, Jamie Oliver has thrown celebrity parties, has also had highly publicised alleged marital problems, and was featured in both *OK!* and *Hello!* leaving hospital after the birth of his latest baby.

Frances Bonner (2003, p. 86) argues that ‘while the distinction between expert and celebrity may be very much a shifting area... celebrities need to be willing to... hold up aspects of their private life to the public gaze’. Unlike Oliver and Ramsay, Fearnley-Whittingstall is primarily represented in terms of his professional expert role as a cookery writer and TV personality; while his recipes and books are discussed in *Hello!*, his private life isn’t. And while his children and wife have flitted across his cookbooks and TV shows to locate Hugh within a family, they are not major players

in the public versions of the River Cottage narrative (and this is again distinct from the roles that the Ramsay and Oliver families have played in some of their shows). This has two key implications. First, it gives Hugh rather more control over his own image and the River Cottage brand. Second, unlike actors, television personalities are ‘performers who play themselves, making little distinction between onscreen and private personas’ (Bennett 2008, p. 35). Because there is little publicity about Hugh’s private life that disrupts his televisual image, this strengthens the ‘authenticity’ of his image, and his lack of celebrity lifestyle makes him appear more ‘ordinary’. This also works to strengthen the apparent ‘truthfulness’ of the depictions of Fearnley-Whittingstall’s life at River Cottage which are the focus of the eponymous series. Therefore, despite the fact that these television programmes are carefully constructed and edited ‘texts, informed by a particular televisual political economy and temporality’ (Parkins and Craig 2010, p. 191), there is little material beyond these texts to disturb the ‘authenticity’ of Hugh’s televisual image.

As a trained chef, Hugh’s professional expertise is the basis for his legitimacy as a lifestyle expert and a ‘vocationally skilled performer’ (Bennett 2008, p. 36). However, although these skills legitimate his presence on our screens, too much professionalism can threaten to undercut the ‘ordinariness’ of a television personality, widening the gulf between them and us. This potential difficulty is carefully managed in Hugh’s televisual image. He is famously an ex-employee of London’s much acclaimed The River Café, a restaurant that has proved to be a fertile breeding ground for TV chefs – Jamie Oliver was ‘discovered’ there during the filming of Channel 4’s *The Italian Kitchen*. However, the association with The River Café also affirmed Fearnley-Whittingstall’s culinary credentials: once seen as the ‘canteen’ of New Labour, The

River Café has maintained an association with rustic food prepared with exhaustively sourced ‘authentic’ ingredients. As we go on to discuss, an emphasis on the rustic and quality ingredients is central to the River Cottage series. However, unlike many of his fellow TV chefs, this expertise is downplayed through stories which claim that despite his ‘enthusiasm’ for cooking and ingredients and his ‘sense of fun’, Hugh was allegedly fired for ‘being messy and lacking discipline’ (Fearnley-Whittingstall 2006). This distances him from the pursuit of perfection and professionalism associated with celebrity chefs such as Gordon Ramsay and Heston Blumenthal, and positions him as a knowledgeable and enthusiastic domestic cook. His alleged ‘incompetence’ while employed at the River Café strengthens the performance of ordinariness (Bonner 2003).

Indeed, the importance of learning as well as teaching runs through Hugh’s television career (although, as we go on to discuss, his role becomes increasingly didactic over time). Also pursuing a career in food writing, Fearnley-Whittingstall started his Channel 4 career with *A Cook on the Wild Side* (1997), in which he sought to forage for food from the wild, learning from locals along the way. The same year also saw the first broadcast of *TV Dinners* (1997) in which the chef joined members of the public in their homes, acting as their assistant -- and their student -- as they prepared and consumed meaningful and memorable meals. If both shows demonstrated his rapport with ‘ordinary people’, his location in people’s homes in *TV Dinners* and the ease with which they related to him also demonstrated that he was ‘normal’ and ‘familiar’. As Bennett argues (2008, p. 41), ‘a feeling of familiarity between audience and television personality is... pivotal to the success of a television personality’s image. Their televisual image is not only authentic, it is also one of ordinariness –

able to be “just-as-they-are” with ordinary members of the public’. Hugh was thus established as a comforting, reassuring, ‘authentic’ and trustworthy presence on screen, and this sense of familiarity would be continually replayed not only in his encounters with ‘ordinary experts’ in the River Cottage series, but also in his mode of address.

However, Bonner (2003) argues that just as television personalities must disavow any extraordinary talent in order to appear ‘ordinary’, then they must also distance themselves from associations with elite status. This poses a potential problem for Fearnley-Whittingstall’s televisual image as it is widely reported that he was educated at the public school Eton and then at Oxford University. The association with Eton not only marks him out as having a privileged background – he is ‘posh’ – but also locates him as part of a powerful elite (including current UK Prime Minister, David Cameron) as an ex-pupil of what the *Daily Mail* recently dubbed ‘the School that runs Britain’ (Thomas 2009). Although television personalities are frequently characterised as ‘ordinary’ rather than members of an elite, there are a number of other cultural intermediaries in lifestyle programming who have also been classified as ‘posh’, with Nigella Lawson and Kirstie Allsopp being notable British examples. However, while an elite background can affirm the legitimacy of these tastemakers, it also has the potential to threaten their legitimacy to speak *for* ‘ordinary people’.⁵ Of course, this discussion rests on an assumed category of ‘ordinary people’ that is in itself complex and contested: the ‘ordinary viewer’ is an idealised figure imagined in the production process as the target audience for a programme or genre. Scholars of lifestyle television have explored how this viewer is imagined and addressed (Lewis 2008a; Palmer 2008), noting that the ordinary viewer is something of a shape-shifter, and this

is apparent from our analysis of Fearnley-Whittingstall's TV output in this article. The viewer is not, of course, the only 'ordinary person' that the programmes address; there are also representatives of this category on screen, as we shall see. Clearly, the issue of 'poshness' potentially troubles any assumed isomorphism or shared worldview and taste culture between the presenter and the viewer or ordinary person; in our discussion below, we highlight some of the ways in which some of the conventions of the *River Cottage* series as lifestyle programming work to minimise the association between 'poshness' and elitism, echoing Tania Lewis's (2010, p. 582) observation that, in lifestyle media, 'the expert and the celebrity are ... characterised by a ... tension between a claim to exceptional or elite status and a kind of public representativeness'. This tension plays out in diverse and interesting ways across Fearnley-Whittingstall's media output.

River Cottage and idyllised rural life

As we have already suggested, the *River Cottage* series drew on established aspects of Fearnley-Whittingstall's televisual image. Although there has been variation in the formats used within *River Cottage* branded programmes, most of them are more than just cookery shows, offering advice on sourcing and producing food and drink (alongside other rural produce such as wool) and with a strong emphasis on the value of the local and the seasonal (see Parkins and Craig 2010). As Lewis (2008a, p. 59) observes, as a TV chef Hugh isn't only concerned with 'pleasure and aesthetics but also with a personal ethics around food choice.' As such, he is often seen as a central figure in the development of what has been classified as green lifestyle programming.⁶

Hugh's televisual personality became synonymous with the River Cottage series through the deployment of his own 'downshifting narrative' to structure the show in which he traded locations for a change of lifestyle. The title sequence of the first series shows a cartoon Hugh driving from the congested capital and out into the bucolic tranquility of rural Dorset and River Cottage. Hugh explains in the introductory voiceover: 'Like many city dwellers, it's long been my dream to escape the urban sprawl, find a little place in the country and live off the fat of the land, thriving off whatever I can grow, gather or catch. It's a dream no longer, because I've found River Cottage'. By structuring the earlier series around this change in Hugh's biography, the shows worked to elide the distinction between the 'real person' and his televisual image.

Hugh's comments in the opening episode not only establish continuity with his earlier foraging in *Cook on the Wild Side* but they also clearly set the tone of the show in terms of its position on consumption. While the early series weren't anti-capitalist, they nonetheless offered guidance on 'consuming less through the capitalist marketplace', taking a position against 'unnecessary' consumerism rather than consumption in general (Binkley and Littler 2008).⁷ Indeed, with frequent attempts to deal with 'gluts' and cheery scenes of indulgence in rather too much home-made booze, the shows frequently privilege plenty rather than scarcity, indulgence rather than austerity. In this way, the series imagine the form of 'alternative hedonism' envisaged by Kate Soper (2008, p. 572), which rejects the asceticism frequently associated with ethical consumption in favour of the 'sensual pleasures of consuming differently'.

This sense of pleasure is accentuated by the rural idyll in which the shows are located. Here even hard work, such as digging over a flower bed to prepare it for sowing vegetables, is utterly rewarding and unalienated labour, and is soon repaid through harvesting the fruits of that labour (Thomas 2008). This is 'ludic farming', where every chore is turned into a playful pleasure, and hard work is rewarding and satisfying (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). *River Cottage* taps into a lengthy lineage of 'hobby farming' which is itself classed – the rural idyll always relies on a disavowal of the less idyllic aspects of rural life and labour (Short 2006). Here ludic farming is a way out of the (urban) 'rat race', and this means more time for leisure too. Repeated images of Hugh lying in a hammock, scoffing his latest produce and dozing off, reinforce an image of the restful rural idyll. In this way, the *River Cottage* programmes share with other green lifestyle programmes 'a softly softly approach to providing lessons in "good" modes of consumption ... [o]ffering viewers rather romanticised, escapist images of slow living' (Lewis 2008b, p. 233).

Continuity with both his 'failed' career as a professional chef and his persona in *TV Dinners* is also evident in the way in which, by taking on the role of the newcomer to country living, Hugh is represented as an enthusiastic amateur taking a learning approach to life. The emphasis on 'learning to labour' as a means of consuming differently is developed through a series of encounters between him and assorted 'locals' who teach him particular skills, from pig keeping to pike fishing (some, such as his butcher, becoming regular members of the cast). With the audience invited to learn skills along with Hugh, the show not only offers an education in downshifting but also draws on an earlier wave of lifestyle programming which focused on skills acquisition (Brunsdon 2004), even if frequently these skills are nowadays 'lifestyled'

rather than actively explained. Although Hugh brings to River Cottage considerable cookery skill, his on-screen persona downplays this, foregoing the more familiar performance of skill on TV: as Bennett (2008) explains, TV personalities tend to trade on either 'televisual skill' (the ability to present to camera, the display of a created persona, and so on) or on 'vocational skill' – skill that comes from one's profession, translated onto the screen. Lifestyle TV, Bennett argues, has increasingly favoured the latter, placing the 'vocational expert' centre-stage and negating the need for a conventional TV presenter to front the programme and translate the vocational skill into instruction for the audience. This change has also 'ordnari-ised' televisual skill, to some extent, since this mode of TV personality is formed around notions of ordinariness, authenticity and 'just-as-they-are-ness'. Hugh's TV career has cultivated an in-between position, as an enthusiastic amateur rather than a didactic expert; his role is to extract the expertise of others and to thereby show viewers that new skills and knowledges are easily acquirable. Writing about another UK lifestyle TV star, gardener Alan Titchmarsh, Bennett and Holmes (2010, p. 74) explain how his "cosy" mode of address and performance 'works towards diminishing any 'expert' status ... making his skills seem credible, 'ordinary', fun and worth doing'. In the case of Fearnley-Whittingstall, such strategies also work to disavow the sense of authority and entitlement associated with his class position.

Moreover, in keeping with the anti-modern conception of the rural idyll and its anti-consumerist ethics, the early shows represent Hugh's education and 'survival' as funded through a barter economy in which skills and knowledges are readily exchanged. While this premise becomes more difficult to sustain once River Cottage is established as both a business and a brand and Hugh accrues a level of celebrity, the

early shows are frequently structured around Hugh trading his (unskilled) labour in return for skills or produce. Labour, skill and produce are the core currencies in the River Cottage series. The unpleasant, unethical aspects of the cash economy – exploitative agribusiness, antagonism between bosses and workers, the financial hardship and social exclusion that face many rural communities -- are replaced by a (mostly unspoken) set of common agreements over price, value and equivalence, generosity and reciprocity.

Sometimes a more subtle trade of labour for skill also occurs. For example, after a trip in which Hugh's new friend John teaches him how to catch pike, Hugh prepares a meal of jellied pike for John and teaches him how to cook the fish, at the same time teaching the viewer. Expertise is passed back and forth between Hugh and John (and to the audience). To borrow a phrase from Maria Bakardjieva (2005), Hugh's tutors embody 'warm expertise': such expertise is not supplied by formally recognised 'experts', but by others who have learned by doing, such as friends or neighbours. Enthusiastic amateurs are frequently deployed as teachers in these earlier series, and in these exchanges unspoken equivalences of value are revealed, and a cash-free, 'ethical' exchange is performed. Along the way, Hugh increases his stock of skill, which he simultaneously shares with his audience. Learning-by-doing enables a performance of warm expertise which emphasises precisely the 'doability' of Hugh's ethical lifestyle. However, this is not without its contradictions, and we might question just how 'ethical' this exchange is: alongside skills and produce, Hugh also acquires the material for TV shows upon which he has built a business empire – an aspect of 'reality' that later series and spin-offs address in different ways, once the success of the River Cottage can no longer be hidden.

Nonetheless, by taking up the position of student alongside that of teacher, the extraordinariness of Fearnley-Whittingstall's class privilege, if not his class associations, is de-emphasised. This also defuses some of the potential for the guidance on ethical living to be read as smugness or preachiness. By partially (and *only* partially) having his own skills improved and made-over, which is usually the position of the 'ordinary' person in lifestyle programming, the show works to partially 'ordinari-ise' Hugh. Therefore, while his class position is part of his televisual image, such strategies work to disavow associations with elitism by demonstrating that, in *some* ways, Hugh is "'just like" the audience' (Bennett 2008, p. 37).

Mediating ethical consumption at River Cottage

However, while certain strategies work to make Fearnley-Whittingstall into a familiar figure who might be a little 'like us', his role in the *River Cottage* series is also as a cultural intermediary who works to legitimate particular dispositions towards ethical consumption centred around an image of rural life that emphasises community, caring and common goals. While the series may have the potential to promote collective and politically informed consumption practices rather than individualised consumerist solutions to how to act 'ethically' (Bonner 2010), the *River Cottage* programmes could also be seen to create a distinction between 'responsible' consumption practices and citizens and those who are 'irresponsible' and 'unethical' (Lewis 2008b). In the rest of the article, we want to explore who is included and excluded from the forms of ethical consumption championed by Hugh. But first we explore how his position is both reinforced and challenged in the rather different generic format of the campaigning culinary documentary.

Before progressing, it is worth thinking briefly about exactly what is being mediated in the River Cottage series: is it a fantasy of living ethically, or does Hugh's advice translate into practice? Some TV critics have suggested that the series do little more than offer people the opportunity to engage in a vicarious 'good life', a form of 'armchair ethics' that operates as a fantasy rather than a spur to action – or, indeed, even a substitute for action, as if watching 'eco-reality' programming was enough of an ethical investment (Thomas 2008). Yet thinking of River Cottage as fantasy does not necessarily rule out its potential: we need to be aware of the affectivity of these images and how these representations of ethical choices can change how people act. And there are clear examples of how the ideas mediated through the shows *do* translate into practice. For example, in more recent series Fearnley-Whittingstall explicitly connects ethical consumption and production through his Landshare scheme. In *River Cottage Spring* (2008), Hugh secured the rent on a patch of disused land from a local council and helped a group of 'locals' (represented as having no farming experience and little food knowledge) to develop a smallholding combining vegetable beds, an orchard and some livestock. This 'Bristol gang' were followed throughout the series as they (re)connected to the processes and practices of growing, preparing and cooking their own food, adding a new 'reality TV' segment to the franchise. Inspired by what he saw as the relative ease by which they mastered smallholding, Hugh decided that the only thing stopping the rest of us from doing likewise is lack of access to land. So he launched Landshare, a website that matches owners of underused land with would-be growers looking for land to cultivate. At the time of writing, over 57000 people have signed up for the scheme, showing some evidence that media discourses can have some impact on 'how consumers act (or least

think) as citizens' (Friedberg 2004, p. 520). Through this scheme, the fantasy of 'consuming differently' is explicitly translated into active involvement in food production. *River Cottage Summer's Here* (2009) reported back on some of the early successes, which include institutional as well as individual change, with bodies such as the Church of England and the National Trust pledging to 'donate' land for sharing. Thus, despite the fantasy elements of the shows, there is also 'a more overtly educational as well as arguably more realist approach to lifestyle change, once concerned with emphasising responsible modes of consumption and citizenship and with focusing on the pain and effort involved in transforming oneself into an ethical consumer' (Lewis 2008b, p. 233). In highlighting these successes, Hugh is reconstructed as a 'people's champion', using his celebrity status to galvanise ordinary people and to affect institutional change. His expertise here is both in passing on his smallholding skills, and in exploiting his celebrity image to produce change in others. Therefore, like Jamie Oliver, Fearnley-Whittingstall is not only a lifestyle expert but 'a moral entrepreneur who trades on the celebrity initially produced by his investment in lifestyle in order to recast it as a more serious, a more "national" and, therefore, a more symbolically rich asset' (Hollows and Jones 2010).

Yet, despite these successes, we also need to think about what kinds of dispositions towards ethical consumption (and production) might be fostered through the River Cottage programmes, and how these might be built on forms of exclusion. We have already noted how the representation of ethical consumption at River Cottage fits with Soper's (2008, p. 572) call for ethical consumption to be reimagined as a form of 'alternative hedonism'. The problem with such ideas is that they can rest on the idea of an 'ethical avant-garde' (Soper, 2008, p. 578) who choose to exempt themselves

from consumer culture. Soper's conceptualisation of 'alternative hedonists' is problematic not least because it rests on an opposition between ethical consumers and the 'mainstream', making it difficult to mainstream ethical consumption (Barnett et al 2005). Furthermore, her description of the dispositions of these alternative hedonists sounds remarkably similar to Bourdieu's (1984, p. 366-7) conception of the new petite bourgeoisie, a group who attempt to earn distinction by investing in the art of living, acting as a 'new ethical avant-garde' which urges 'a morality of pleasure as a duty'.

Initially, it may appear strange to argue that the *River Cottage* programmes promote new petit bourgeois tastes and dispositions, given the class identity of Hugh as 'posh' and given the show's location in a rural 'community' which appears to be made up of eccentric 'characters' rather than beset by class differences and antagonisms. In order to clarify this position, it is necessary to return to questions of genre and to locate these shows within wider debates about lifestyle programming in general.

Commentators have argued that lifestyle programmes are not only centred around the figure of an expert who offers advice on how to consume 'properly', but also that these experts act as cultural intermediaries who deal in questions of how to distinguish oneself through the 'art of living', offering guidance on how and who to be, on how to 'makeover' the self (see, for example, de Sollier 2005; Hollows 2003; Lewis 2008a; Taylor 2002). Such an approach to the self has not only become normalised within lifestyle television but is also closely allied with the tastes and dispositions associated with Bourdieu's conception of the 'new petite bourgeoisie', who seek to distinguish themselves through their consumption practices. While this frequently positions this class fraction as one largely defined by 'consuming more'

because consumption is so central to their identity, Bourdieu is equally interested in how the new petite bourgeoisie are concerned with demonstrating their moral and ethical character through their consumption practices (Bonner 2010). Therefore, while some figures who populate lifestyle programmes may appear to be ‘posh’, lifestyle programming itself largely operates around a series of dispositions associated with the new middle classes but which are naturalised as ‘universal’ and ‘appropriate’.

Therefore, while we share Bonner’s (2010) views that figures such as Fearnely-Whittingstall have used lifestyle television to promote a wider engagement with questions about ethical consumption which might form the basis for forms of collective action, we would also suggest that the emphasis on ‘the sensual pleasures of consuming differently’ is resistant to becoming mainstream precisely because it is based on the tastes and dispositions of the new petite bourgeoisie. Our argument is less concerned with exploring how lifestyle TV experts act as cultural intermediaries who legitimate petit-bourgeois tastes, but rather to question the impact this has on the representation of ethical consumption in *River Cottage*. This question is significant for three reasons. First, ethical value can be read as a form of cultural value, as ‘green’ producers well know. An ‘ethical premium’ can be charged for ‘ethical goods’, not only earning their manufacturers and retailers a significant profit from targeting this lucrative niche market (Littler 2009), but also enabling those with both the economic and cultural resources to purchase these products to feel distinguished from the ‘unethical’. Second, while it might be difficult to question Hugh’s sincerity, it is also difficult to ignore the fact that he has used his investment in ethical dispositions to establish a highly successful brand and to make considerable economic profit from his books and DVDs, and various other River Cottage spin-offs.⁸ As

Hollows and Jones (2010) point out, moral entrepreneurship can be used to generate significant economic as well as symbolic profits. Third, Bourdieu (1984) argues that all classed taste formations are based on the refusal of other taste formations. This suggests that if ethical consumption is mediated in terms of the tastes and dispositions of the new middle classes, then it is also likely to be refused by classes who do not share these tastes and dispositions. We explore this issue further in the next section through a focus on another of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's TV ventures.

***Hugh's Chicken Run* and the 'unethical' consumer**

The three-part series *Hugh's Chicken Run* aired in the UK in 2008 as part of Channel 4's two-week season of food programming, *The Big Food Fight*. While Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has made other series attempting to make over people's eating habits – most notably *River Cottage Treatment* (2006) which aimed to transform a series of convenience food 'addicts' by teaching them about the production and preparation of food – *Hugh's Chicken Run* fitted the template of the Channel 4 campaigning culinary documentary which had precedent in *Jamie's School Dinners* (2005). These shows are structured around a problem-solving format and mark a shift in lifestyle programmes wherein celebrities seek to utilise their status to affect change, rather than hiding it in an effort to convince viewers of their ordinariness. In so doing, however, they risk straying into the territory where their 'celebritisation' of ethical issues brings to the surface some uncomfortable contradictions which are easier to gloss over in lifestyle formats (Boykoff and Goodman 2009; Lewis 2010).

Hugh's poultry campaign sought to promote the ethical production and consumption of chicken by highlighting the plight of intensively reared birds. The series

documented his attempt to change the practices of the big supermarkets and the residents of the market town of Axminster, Devon. The show also followed an experiment with a group of Axminster residents on the working-class council estate Millway, who were encouraged to raise their own chickens on a local allotment so as to increase their understanding of chicken production and to offer the audience 'ordinary people' as a point of identification in contrast to Hugh's now unhideable celebrity status. Like the 'Bristol gang' learning to produce their own food, the Millway residents were there, in part, to 'ordinari-ise' chicken farming -- a new cast is now needed to perform ordinariness, to make that expertise seem learnable and doable.

In the process, the wider aim of the show was to raise the viewers' awareness of how 'two for a fiver' cheap chickens in British supermarkets depend on a system of deeply unethical production in which the birds are raised in cramped, unhealthy and 'unhappy' conditions. Like *Jamie's School Dinners*, it also had its sights on wider changes by targeting the control that supermarkets have over production and by campaigning for political change through parliament. The series climaxes in a 'free range week' in which Axminster's residents are asked to buy only free range birds. This proves to be a relative success. By emphasizing the consumer's capacity to make a change through their purchasing power, the show demonstrates how consumption can be a form of citizenship (Littler 2009). Furthermore, throughout the series Hugh battles to get meetings with supermarkets to ask them to change the way in which their chicken is produced and to offer more free range chickens. In this way, the show does not simply target individuals to take 'responsibility' for the problem through their own moral choices, but also emphasises how large supermarket chains exercise

control over and are responsible for food production, at the same time revealing Hugh's 'responsible' approach to celebrity (Lewis 2008a, p. 61).

However, the show also demonstrates the limits of the capacity of cultural intermediaries on lifestyle television to promote ethical consumption. As Lewis argues, much green lifestyle TV focuses on

teaching its audiences to adopt implicitly middle-class modes of 'good' consumption and self-surveillance Regulating one's consumption and embracing the necessary inconveniences of green modes of living are offered up as middle-class virtues to which we should all aspire. Linked to this aspirational focus, ethical modes of distinction are increasingly associated with social distinction. (Lewis 2008b, p. 238)

Whereas the lifestyle TV programme is able to simply legitimate the lifestyle expert's dispositions, the need for narrative conflict within the campaigning culinary documentary brings in other voices that question their authority. In the case of *Jamie's School Dinners* and his later show *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (2008), these conflicts are at least partially resolved by the end of the programme as the 'ordinary people' involved increasingly accept the lifestyle expert's point of view, transforming themselves in the process (see Hollows and Jones 2010). That these working-class 'ordinary people' are usually female is also significant: as Skeggs (2005, p. 968) observes, 'women are often assigned symbolically crucial roles as markers of the nation's moral values'.

Hugh's Chicken Run clearly adopts this format as Hugh conducts his 'experiment' about how to raise awareness of the relationship between chicken production and consumption with the residents of Millway. In contrast to the rural idyll of River Cottage, for this experiment Hugh heads to what he calls 'the tough end of town', given visual reinforcement with repeated shots of graffiti-covered signage. 'This is life, this is real life', Hugh tells us, where people are 'struggling with their food budget' and 'either didn't know or didn't want to know about the grim life of cheap chickens'. Hugh's experiment starts off well – the residents work with him to clear a local allotment where they plant vegetables, raise their own chickens and establish a sense of community. It quickly becomes clear that one 'local', Hayley, is the key 'ordinary woman' of the series: a single mum who adopts a 'mother hen' role in organizing her neighbours on the allotment, Hayley is adamant that she cannot afford free range chicken. The series is set up on the promise of her transformation into a 'good', moral and ethical consumer.

Except the narrative begins to fall apart. While all the other Millway residents increasingly accept Hugh's point of view, Hayley works tirelessly on the project but refuses to change her mind or her shopping practices. When Hugh takes the residents to view the 'reality' of cheap chicken production in an intensively reared chicken shed, most cry and accept the legitimacy of his point of view. However, Hayley refuses to be shocked by what she has witnessed and refuses to be positioned as ignorant of food production – it is, she informs Hugh, what she expected. Soon afterwards, we witness Hugh weeping over the battery chickens, demonstrating his empathy with their situation and his willingness to care about animal welfare and take responsibility for changing it. But Hayley reiterates throughout the series that she is a

‘single mum’ whose primary responsibility is to care for her family through budgeting wisely. Here the ‘ethics’ of ethical consumption come into conflict with other everyday ethics governing consumption oriented around thrift (Miller 1998).

This makes for uncomfortable viewing, which is very much at odds with the fantasy world of *River Cottage*. Skeggs (2005, p. 974) argues that in lifestyle TV ‘the focus on choice, ethics and self-responsibility... collectively creates the conditions whereby the associations between social groups and moral value are being realigned’. Hayley’s refusal to make the ethical choice marks her out as self-centred and lacking moral worth. This also works to devalue the reasons why she privileges budget chicken over chicken welfare. She continually states that cheap chicken enables her to feed her family, to perform the caring work then enables her to be recognised as a good mother despite her ‘single parent’ status (see DeVault 1991). But the programme refuses to accept these traditionally feminine forms of caring, privileging instead a less gendered form of caring as civic and environmental responsibility.

By the final episode, Hayley has largely disappeared from the narrative, but a host of other voices begin to challenge Hugh’s point of view as a classed point of view as he takes his campaign to the streets of Axminster as part of ‘Chicken Out Week’. An encounter with one woman in the street sees Hugh become increasingly angry as he is accused of being ‘elitist’ and of ‘guilt-tripping people’ -- a film about chicken production, shown in the working-class space of a local pub, meets a chorus of disapproval. The campaign nevertheless builds to a moderate success and Hugh is cheered by the fact that when faced with the ‘reality’ of intensive chicken production, ‘the effect on many was instant conversion’ to free range. But he was also ‘beginning

to realise that there were some people who would never change'. In the world of lifestyle programming such a refusal to change is of course to refuse the very grounds of the discourse of lifestyle which demands work upon the self and whose ultimate goal is change. This refusal also highlights the limits of Hugh's celebrity as a tradable asset. Where the River Cottage series showed viewers that it is easy being green, *Hugh's Chicken Run* traced the limits of Hugh's lifestyled approach to ethical production and consumption.

Hugh's Chicken Run undoubtedly opens up a space for promoting the importance of models of ethical consumption as a form of citizenship. But it rests on a discourse of choice in which a refusal to make the right choice and a refusal of change are taken of signs of moral failure, a failure that in the show is largely identified with the working class. Yet near the end of the final episode we encounter Hayley for a final time, buying cheap chickens during Hugh's 'free range week'. Hayley recognises her positioning by both Hugh and the camera, saying 'Don't look at me like that', to which Hugh responds 'I am going to look at you like that. *Of course* I'm going to look at you like that after everything we've been through'. In this final encounter, Hayley accepts the legitimacy of Hugh's middle-class gaze, saying 'Yes and I agree with it but this is all I can afford at the moment'. And for a second, speaking to camera, Hugh realises the limits of ethical consumption: 'Back to reality. Mums like Hayley, tough budgets, kids to feed, two for a fiver, what are you going to do?' In showing a degree of empathy with Hayley, Hugh demonstrates an understanding of the 'ordinary' while at the same time marking his distance from it. Although this 'reality' is quickly forgotten within the show, it nonetheless gives space for a perspective that is lacking in both conventional green lifestyle programmes and some

recent critical work on ethical consumption: that class matters. As such it challenges claims that lifestyle experts simply 'disavow' the extent to which social inequalities limit our abilities to makeover the self (Powell and Prasad 2010, p. 122).

In the River Cottage series we can discern a tension between 'idyllisation' and 'reality', between the 'good life' and agribusiness, between 'happy chickens' and class inequalities. However, it would be unwise to ignore the potential of the fantasy world represented in River Cottage. As *Hugh's Chicken Run* demonstrates, assuming that people will become more ethical consumers if only they were better informed about the 'realities' of unethical production rests on a model of the rational consumer that fails to acknowledge the deeply meaningful everyday ethics and habits that shape consumption practices (Barnett et al 2005). Instead, while most of the River Cottage series might seek to educate the audience about food production and skills, we would suggest that part of the effectiveness of the shows in promoting ethical consumption is through the construction of a highly pleasurable fantasy of an ethical utopia: although not explicitly campaigning, the River Cottage shows implicitly point out the failings of consumer culture.

However, we have also argued that the River Cottage series, like much other lifestyle programming, legitimates the tastes and dispositions associated with the new petite bourgeoisie which, implicitly or explicitly, works to render other lifestyle choices as less legitimate and less 'ethical'. While still arguably a makeover show, *Hugh's Chicken Run* also needs to negotiate the potential for conflict between ordinary people and expert that is central to the campaigning culinary documentary. In our analysis of the show we identify how the 'choice' to consume 'ethically' not only relies on a

level of financial resources but also how it might come into conflict with other kinds of ethical dispositions of everyday consumption practices. One of the problems with discourses of ethical consumption is that they may render certain kinds of 'ethics' as 'more ethical' than others. Because some forms of ethical commitment are less easy to capitalise on than others (for example, the caring work which has been naturalised as feminine), the forms of ethical consumption championed by Fearnley-Whittingstall run the risk of creating distinctions between consumers we recognise as 'ethical' and those whose ethics either remain invisible or are rendered 'unethical'. As such, lifestyle programming provides a key site through which to explore the dilemmas of ethical consumption.

Conclusion

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's television programmes offer fertile ground not only for thinking about television personalities as campaigning moral entrepreneurs but also for thinking about how the meanings and uses of their televisual image are inflected by genre. There is no denying that Hugh has built up a recognisable TV persona and a strong brand. In the earlier *River Cottage* series, he is evidently building both of these up, bartering his labour for skills acquisition that gradually positions him as a vocational expert, but whose expertise is learnt-by-doing, emphasizing that the audience can do likewise. The *River Cottage* series manage to negotiate the issue of Hugh's class position by accentuating his 'ordinariness' -- demonstrating that he needs to learn, just as 'we' the audience need to learn. If he is distinguished from 'us' by the relative expertise that partially justifies his presence on our screens, the generic conventions of lifestyle programming (which present new petit-bourgeois investments

in the ‘art of living’ as universal dispositions) also work to make Hugh seem closer to his audience (Lewis 2010).

In later series, however, as his ‘smallholding experiment’ turns into a business empire, he is repositioned as the person imparting vocational skill to a retinue of ‘ordinary people’ he meets, such as the smallholding Bristol gang. Thus far, his status is intact and he is shown to have simply adopted the same ‘warm expertise’ that he encountered in his meetings with various skilled ‘locals’, moving from learning-by-doing to teaching-by-doing. However, the changing focus and format of *Hugh’s Chicken Run* takes him into a different ‘reality’, one where his celebrity status becomes problematic. Hayley brings the conflict narrative of the campaigning culinary documentary into Hugh’s cosy world, exposing the places where his celebrity takes on a different meaning, for example as ‘elitist’. Just as Jamie Oliver found it easier to convert the government than (working-class) dinner ladies and parents in *Jamie’s School Dinners*, here Hugh encounters a context where ‘celebrity’ and ‘lifestyle’ are met with suspicion, even disdain. While in the lifestyle genre, as Bennett (2008) writes, the presence of ‘ordinary people’ allows the television personality to appear similarly ordinary, shows like *Hugh’s Chicken Run* uncomfortably reinstate an ordinariness that is beyond the celebrity’s understanding, even if the narrative ultimately makes it seem extraordinary that anyone could resist Hugh’s lifestyled ethics. Indeed, the campaigning culinary documentary rests on the television personality’s *difference* from us, for it is this difference that legitimates their ‘right’ to lead us in their campaigns. In this regard, the TV career and output of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall helps us to think about broader issues of the meanings

and value of 'celebrity', as well as exploring how a particular figure has attempted to capitalise on both ordinariness and celebrity, across different TV genres.

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¹ There have been numerous series set here, including *Return to River Cottage* (2000), *River Cottage Forever* (2002), *Beyond River Cottage* (2004), *The River Cottage Treatment* (2006), *River Cottage Gone Fishing* (2007), *River Cottage Spring* and *River Cottage Autumn* (2008), and *River Cottage: Winter's On the Way* (2009). Fearnley-Whittingstall's cookbooks are also linked to the River Cottage brand. These include *The River Cottage Cookbook* (2001), *The River Cottage Year* (2003), *The River Cottage Meat Book* (2004), *The River Cottage Family Cookbook* (with Fizz Carr, 2005), *The River Cottage Fish Book* (with Nick Fisher, 2007) and *River Cottage Everyday* (2009). There are also *River Cottage Handbooks* on specialist areas such as bread, mushrooms and the hedgerow.

⁵ Nonetheless, there is a case to be made for the construction of 'poshness' as 'ordinary' in the UK (and England in particular) in recent years. The current Conservative government has made strenuous attempts to downplay its association with poshness and elite institutions, with politicians such as Cameron keen to show how they are 'just like us'.

⁶ The extent to which green lifestyle programming constitutes a coherent genre is debatable but this term has acquired some currency as a means of describing a sub-genre of lifestyle programming which incorporates ethical issues (Lewis 2008b; Bonner 2010; Parkins and Craig 2010).

⁷ This position has shifted and, in more recent series, while Hugh still advocates the pleasures of producing your own food, there has been an increasing emphasis on consuming responsibly. This became particularly clear in the *Chicken Out* campaign.

⁸ The smallholding that formed that original River Cottage has now grown into a significant business enterprise that sits alongside Fearnley-Whittingstall's writing and television activities. This includes an extensive range of cookery courses and a canteen in Bath and a canteen and deli in Axminster which form part of the wider 'more than profit' organisation, a phrase which neatly combines the deployment of cultural and economic capital in moral entrepreneurship.

(<http://www.rivercottage.net/about/>)