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Campaigning culinary documentaries and the responsabilization of food crises

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the campaigning culinary documentary (CCD) as an emerging format within food television. CCDs bring together elements of the lifestyle genre with an explicit focus on a food ‘crisis’ – such as obesity or animal welfare – and explore how this crisis is to be resolved, usually through the intervention of a food celebrity. Focussing largely on shows made by the UK’s Channel 4 network, we explore the ways in which CCDs narrate issues of responsabilization, whether these target consumers/viewers, the food industry, or the state. Through a reading of selected CCDs from Channel 4’s roster, we consider how the shows attempt to fuse elements of lifestyle/reality TV with a social or political agenda, but one which deploys the governmental strategy of responsabilization and so could be read as an enactment of neoliberal logic. While there is some truth to this claim, our analysis and discussion seeks to complicate this reading, showing how CCDs open up other narrative and political possibilities while also consolidating the brand image of the cookery TV stars who front them.

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1. Introduction

The campaigning culinary documentary (CCD) offers a vehicle for television cookery stars to position themselves at the forefront of solving food ‘crises’, and to expand their brand (Bell and Hollows, 2011). As such, CCDs are an important contemporary resource for imagining the politics of food and the relationships between consumers, the food industry and the state. Locating our discussion within debates about neoliberalism drawn from both media studies and geography, we examine how CCDs responsabilize different actors. While we highlight a familiar motif in which consumers are responsabilized for solving social and economic problems by changing their own behavior, we also examine how some CCDs offer critiques of the food industry and question the role of government and the state in the management of food crises. These shows are thus an important space for airing views about food politics, and offer narratives of critique and of potential transformation. The object of this critique, the shape that transformation takes, and who is tasked with effecting it, are major concerns of our analysis.

Our discussion follows the story of selected CCDs first broadcast in the UK, tracking how the shows and their stars narrate crisis and

solution – highlighting where ‘blame’ is shown to lie, and the role of the TV chef-celebrity as the ‘hero’ who alone is able to bring about change. CCDs may frame a narrative of democratic food politics and ‘people power’, but we argue that the co-option of such politics in brand building (whether by celebrities, politicians or corporations) is also on the agenda. While CCDs can be read as suggesting possibilities for doing food politics differently, then, we argue the need to critically analyze the framing of both ‘crisis’ and ‘solution’ in these programmes and in the wider discourses of which they are a part.

The discussion begins by defining the CCD as a genre and charting its development on British screens, using *Jamie’s School Dinners* as an exemplar, as well as defining key terms. We then outline our research methods. Following this, the paper explores three different forms of responsabilization mobilized in CCDs, targeting in turn the consumer, the food industry and the government. In these sections, we combine textual analysis with critical engagement with existing academic debate about neoliberalism, the ‘Big Society’, and moral entrepreneurship, as well as critically connecting to previous studies that have similarly explored how lifestyle and reality TV utilize techniques of governmentality and responsabilization. We analyze a selection of shows from UK television network Channel 4, with much of our focus on the following: *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* (fronted by Jamie Oliver, first broadcast 2008), *Hugh’s Chicken Run* and its sequel, *Chickens... Hugh... and Tesco*,

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Too (both Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, aired 2008 and 2009), *Jimmy and the Giant Supermarket* (Jimmy Doherty, 2012) and *The People's Supermarket* (Arthur Potts Dawson, 2011). Taken together, our reading of these programmes highlights the particularities of the CCD as a key site in the construction and posited resolution of contemporary food crises.

2. The campaigning culinary documentary

The CCD has developed into a recognisable format on UK screens over the past decade. Although the shows are largely made by independent production companies, the CCD has offered a way of branding both a TV channel – the UK's Channel 4 (C4)¹ – and a series of food personalities closely identified with the channel. Below we identify some of the key narrative conventions of the CCD and explore the relationship between food personalities and 'ordinary people' depicted on screen (for more on the problematic category of 'ordinary people', see below). The CCD is a flexible format that has been adapted by other channels in the UK, taken up internationally (Gibson and Dempsey, 2013; Rousseau, 2012) and used as a framework for tackling a range of other social problems beyond food (Bonner, 2011; McMurria, 2008).

2.1. Saint Jamie

Jamie's Kitchen (2002) established the potential of problem-solving documentary formats for managing the brand identities of TV chefs and TV channels. The series focused on Jamie Oliver's attempt to transform a group of unemployed young people into chefs to work in his new, charitable-status restaurant, Fifteen. *Jamie's Kitchen* enabled Oliver to move away from the recipe-and-lifestyle format through which he had established his television career, toward a more explicit public service role (Lewis, 2008a). Broadcast soon after Oliver's move to C4, the series signalled how lifestyle experts had become increasingly central to the channel's brand identity (Barnes, this issue). By deploying Oliver beyond the lifestyle format, both chef and channel were associated with an emerging genre that combined 'foodtainment' (Finkelstein, 1999) with issues such as health, social exclusion and food ethics. This helped to establish Oliver as not just a lifestyle expert but also as a moral entrepreneur (Hollows and Jones, 2010) and proved a useful formula for a commercial TV channel with a public service remit (Hobson, 2008).

The blend of lifestyle and reality television with more 'legitimate' documentary formats was refined in the later four-part series *Jamie's School Dinners* (2005), which offered a blueprint for the key characteristics of the CCD. First, *Jamie's School Dinners* was set up in response to a perceived 'crisis' (substandard school meals) and centred around a crusading campaign to address this crisis (by seeking to transform practices in school kitchens and government policy on funding school lunches). Second, the crisis and the campaign provide a framework for a problem-solving narrative in which the food personality intervenes to overcome a series of obstacles and change food practices for the better. Third, *Jamie's School Dinners* presents positive change as the result of a special and inspirational figure: Jamie is presented as the only person capable of effecting change, a viewpoint repeated in much approving commentary on the series (Hollows and Jones, 2010). This makes

¹ Channel 4 is a UK broadcaster which began transmission in 1982. Although it is a commercially-funded network, it has a public service remit requiring it to demonstrate innovation and creativity, to include 'programmes of an educational nature' and to provide programming for minority groups (Communications Act, 2003). The network's association with food-lifestyle programming can most clearly be seen from 1999 onwards, with the broadcasting in that year of *Escape to River Cottage* and *Nigella Bites*.

the CCD an exceptional vehicle for a branding exercise, but also works to individualize the political imaginary surrounding social change, in terms of both celebrity interventions and more broadly by transferring responsibility to the individual and away from state initiatives – key tactics of responsabilization.

Fourth, these interventions frequently rely on makeovers of characters depicted as 'ordinary people', as well as makeovers of institutions or industries. The attempt to makeover 'ordinary people' provides much of the dramatic conflict – and arguably the entertainment – within the shows. The drama frequently centres on a male chef's attempt to transform the practices of a working-class woman (see Hollows, 2012): while *Jamie's School Dinners* relies on the attempted conversion of an adversary into an ally in the figure of Nora the school dinner lady (Fox and Smith, 2011), other characters who refuse to change can act as dramatic foils throughout the series. Lastly, *Jamie's School Dinners*, like the CCDs that followed, shifted food programming and television food personalities away from their associations with lifestyle, presenting them as a vehicle for addressing wider social problems. Nonetheless, the chef's professional expertise and role as cultural intermediary remain central to the format.

Jamie's forays into the CCD enabled him to trade on the celebrity produced by his investment in lifestyle. His image was recast as a more serious, a more 'national' and therefore, a more symbolically rich asset (Barnes, this issue; Hollows and Jones, 2010). It also enabled C4, who had invested heavily in lifestyle programming (Brunsdon, 2003), to gain some of those same rewards in terms of channel branding. This became evident in 'The Big Food Fight', an annual season of shows from 2008 to 2011, built around C4's roster of star chefs and using the CCD to anchor the season. As C4 acquired new food personalities, the CCD proved to be an adaptable formula, able to help articulate both the stars' and channel's identities. This was the case with Jimmy Doherty's² *Jimmy and the Giant Supermarket*, discussed below, and other variants on the CCD. Channel 4 would also adapt the format to take on other non-culinary campaigns built around their lifestyle stars (such as *Jamie's Dream School* and retail-guru fronted *Mary's Bottom Line*), and the CCD has also been adopted by other broadcasters. Moreover, the format has also been used successfully in international contexts, not least in adaptations of series involving the same chefs (e.g. *Jamie's Kitchen Australia* which, like its UK predecessor, tackled youth unemployment via culinary training, and *Jamie's Food Revolution* which addressed school meals and obesity in the US).

2.2. Responsibilization, governmentality, neoliberalism

If CCDs identify a 'food crisis' that needs addressing, their narratives centre on the issue of *who* should take responsibility for solving the problem. While food personalities are shown to have the vision to identify the problem and the passion to address it, solutions ultimately rest on their ability to inspire and educate others to take responsibility for the problem. This is a central aspect of the process of responsabilization, which here we define as practices that work to encourage or coerce 'ordinary people' into taking responsibility for their own welfare and life chances. It also involves making people *feel* responsible for themselves, their families, and sometimes for socio-economic or ethical issues at other spatial scales. In short, we see responsabilization as a form of

² While some of the celebrity chefs and lifestyle intermediaries in this article have an international profile, others may be unfamiliar to readers outside the UK. Jimmy Doherty, for example, is a Suffolk farmer who, like many of the celebrities mentioned here, achieved his television breakthrough on the BBC (in the series *Jimmy's Farm*, 2002). He is also a good friend of Jamie Oliver; the two have appeared together in programmes for both BBC and Channel 4.

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