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Celebrity chefs, consumption politics and food labelling: Exploring the contradictions

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Celebrity Chefs, Consumption Politics and Food Labelling: Exploring the Contradictions

Abstract

The mainstreaming of ethical consumption over the past two decades has attuned citizen-consumers to their power to shape food production practices through their consumption choices. To navigate the complexity inherent in contemporary food supply chains, ethical consumers often turn to certification and labelling schemes to identify which products to purchase. However, the existence of competing supply chain interests, coupled with the myriad different ways production factors and processes can be combined, has constructed certification and labelling as a highly contested space. Within this context, celebrity chefs have taken on a significant role in influencing food cultures, consumption practices and public policy. As a group of powerful cultural and political intermediaries, celebrity chefs have used their public profile to address causes related to food ethics and sustainability, and to shape consumer 'choice' by advocating for the consumption of labelled and certified food products. This paper analyses the media campaigns of British celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall to promote 'free range' chicken and eggs. It reveals how the celebrity chefs' interventions into consumption politics often occurs without sufficient sensitivity to the specificities of the particular labelling and certification systems they are promoting, with very different systems often presented as achieving identical ends. In presenting 'free range' as a single, idealised and uncontested standard, they (perhaps unwittingly) expose themselves to the range of contradictions involved in the need to present complex information on animal friendly and sustainably produced food in simple, unambiguous and entertaining formats.

Keywords

ethical consumption; celebrity chefs; certification; labelling; free range

Introduction

Over the past two decades, a large body of literature has emerged investigating the phenomena of ‘ethical consumption’, ‘radical consumption’, ‘political consumerism’ and ‘lifestyle politics’ linked to consumer behaviour, including ‘boycotts’, ‘buycotts’, ‘prosumerism’ and the like (Bennett 1998; Littler 2008; Princen et al. 2002; Micheletti 2003; Connolly and Prothero 2013). Much of this work has approached trends in ethical consumption as consumer-driven, and in particular, as a reflection of the increasing global influence of consumer-oriented modes of citizenship, through which ordinary people adopt lifestyle and consumer ‘choices’ as methods for articulating and investing in ethical, social, civic and political concerns (Littler 2008; Lewis and Potter 2011). While studies continue to point to its highly contested and contradictory nature, particularly in relation to the structural, social, cultural, economic and political factors that condition the daily practice of ethical consumption (Bossy 2014; Johnson et al. 2011; Copeland 2014), ethical consumption is nonetheless often understood as a pathway to political participation for ordinary people who may or may not invest time and energy in conventional politics (Barnett et al. 2005; Baumann et al. 2015).

However, the increased visibility and accessibility of ethical consumption has not simply been driven by consumers. Ethical consumption, as a set of discourses about ‘good’ consumer practices, has shaped and been shaped by a range of industry responses, with

supply chain actors possessing varying degrees of power to determine how ethical consumption is practiced and defined. Most notably, it has resulted in the proliferation of labelling schemes, including ‘Fair Trade’, ‘organic’, ‘free range’, and ‘sustainable’, which are each designed to certify the ethical credentials of various products and services. This has been especially the case in relation to food, which has emerged as a key concern in global debates about how to produce and consume more ethically and sustainably. Across the Anglophone West, celebrity chefs like Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall have become key players in these debates, signalling a shift in their role from lifestyle ‘experts’ educating viewers on particular tastes and lifestyle preferences to thoroughgoing political campaigners—what Powell and Prasad (2010) characterise as a shift from “cultural” to “political” intermediaries.

Research examining celebrity chefs’ ethical consumption politics has found that their media texts often seek to “responsibilise” consumers to solve various food system problems through changing their own consumer behaviour (Bell et al. 2017; see also Hollows and Jones 2010; Bell and Hollows 2011). Previous studies have also examined the celebrity endorsements associated with particular labelling and certification schemes, such as the promotion of Fair Trade by music and film stars (Goodman 2010). However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Lewis and Huber 2015; Hopkinson and Cronin 2015), there has been little work examining celebrity chefs’ advocacy for labelling and certification standards. It is important to look at this in more detail because, unlike entertainment celebrities, celebrity chefs are also food systems actors. This means that celebrity chefs’ interventions into debates about food production and consumption are not just discursive strategies through which to assert their status as food experts. Their status as cultural and political intermediaries through which discourses about ‘good’ food circulate also means that celebrity chefs become (wittingly or unwittingly)

enmeshed in a complex politics of food production and consumption that exposes them to its many complex and sometimes contradictory features. In these ways, celebrity chefs come to participate in the struggles over the meaning of essentially contested core concepts such as ‘organic’, ‘free range’ or ‘sustainable’ (Gallie 1956), which only become fully meaningful within the consumer market when embedded in specific certification standards and labelling schemes and when remediated via various media and communications strategies.

This paper focuses on the contested nature of discourses surrounding one of these core concepts: ‘free range’ chickens and eggs. It seeks to reveal the complex and contradictory relationships between ‘free range’ certification schemes for chickens and eggs and the media strategies and narratives adopted by celebrity chefs to encourage consumers to choose these higher welfare products. It will focus on the media activities of British celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, the two food personalities best known internationally for their campaigns for ethical consumption values, and free range chickens and eggs in particular.

We have focused this paper on chickens and eggs because they are two of the most prominent ethical consumption issues over the past decade or so. In the UK, around 5% of meat chickens and 52% of eggs are free range (plus 1% and 2% organic respectively), with free range egg production growing at a rate of approximately 1.8% annually, rising from 32% of production in 2004 to 52% in 2014 (Egg Info 2016). Many major supermarkets are now phasing out intensively-reared chickens and eggs in favour of higher welfare alternatives in response to consumer demand. Such changes have been attributed, at least in part, to the activities of celebrity chefs in general, and Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall in particular. For example, their 2008 television exposés of the horrors of intensive chicken farms

prompted supermarket shortages of free range chickens and eggs, with sales of free range for the first time outstripping those of intensively-reared (Johnston 2008). In Australia, Oliver's partnership with Woolworths supermarkets was based in part on the retailer's agreement to transition to "RSPCA or equivalent approved standards" for all fresh chickens by 2014 and for own brand eggs by 2018 (Woolworths 2013).

Both celebrity chefs' prominence and impact means that they offer ideal case studies through which to better understand celebrity chef advocacy and engagement with the complex practices underpinning our food production systems—in this case, the commercial production of chicken eggs and meat. To explore how celebrity chefs' advocacy of ethical consumption enmeshes them in a complex food politics, this paper investigates the varied meanings of 'free range' chicken egg and meat production as they appear both in Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall's media work and in the various schemes that certify 'free range' chickens and eggs.

We employ a qualitative, single-case study methodology to conduct a comprehensive textual analysis of the media texts associated with the two celebrity chefs and their campaigns for free range chickens and eggs. Although this limits a researcher's capacity to generalise more widely, detailed analysis of a single case enables the production of a rich and detailed account of a specific phenomenon—in our case the communication strategies celebrity chefs use to promote 'free range' production--as well as facilitating the generation of propositions for further comparative analysis (Babbie 2008). Based on a review of the academic literature and popular media, we first identified the international celebrity chefs most active in promoting alternative food production systems. Jamie Oliver and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall were then selected for further analysis, as they were found to be the two celebrity chefs conducting

campaigns with the greatest international prominence and impact. Focusing on two British celebrity chefs also allowed us to control for cross-national variation in the interpretation of the contested concept of ‘free range’.

Using a combination of visual, content and discourse analyses (Deacon et al. 2007), we then performed close textual ‘readings’ (Phillipov 2013; Rojek 2007) of the entirety of Oliver’s and Fearnley-Whittingstall’s television cooking shows and documentaries, official websites and cookbooks related to ‘free range’ chicken and egg production, with a view to identifying the visual and discursive tropes associated with the campaigns for ‘free range’, and the various representational and political strategies ‘at work’ in each text. Using content analysis, we then compared each chef’s representations of, and claims about, free range with the animal welfare requirements listed in each of the major ‘free range’ schemes most likely to be encountered by audiences of these media texts. Results from a representative selection of texts across each media form are presented here.

As cases that show the complex ways that media shapes ethical consumption discourses, our analysis reveals a set of disjunctures between celebrity chefs’ criticisms of the animal welfare issues associated with intensively produced chickens and eggs and their proposed ‘solutions’ in the form of purchasing free range products. We show that while many of the ‘free range’ options most readily available to ordinary consumers may avoid some of the worst excesses of industrial animal agriculture, they do not necessarily address the identified problems to a level that popular media representations may prime consumers to expect.

While the interventions of celebrity chefs into the ethical consumption space should be seen as a positive development, our analysis suggests that some of the textual strategies associated

with these interventions risk conflating distinct issues and practices, thereby obscuring many of the complexities of contemporary ‘ethical’ and ‘alternative’ food production systems. This is significant for the way it reveals both the contested nature of ethical consumption discourses and the challenges of conveying ethical consumption messages in ‘mainstream’ media forms. In short, we argue, celebrity chefs’ support for ethical consumption practices has done a great deal to put issues of food ethics and politics onto the popular agenda, making them more accessible and available to more people; however, in failing to address the complex realities of ethical food production, they may also unintentionally mislead consumers into thinking that there are simple, unambiguous solutions to realising ethical consumption values.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we provide an overview of the literature on ethical consumption and the rise of food media and celebrity chefs, with a focus on Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall. We then examine how the two celebrity chefs have engaged in the debate over free range chicken meat and eggs, highlighting the range of animal welfare practices involved and the degree to which these are addressed in their advocacy work, with a focus on both chefs’ websites and cookbooks. The following section focuses on the “campaigning culinary documentaries” (Hollows and Jones 2010) *Jamie’s Fowl Dinners* and *Hugh’s Chicken Run* to show how the bucolic ‘free range’ images that animate these television texts do not always reflect the commercial realities of chicken and egg production, including within certified ‘free range’ schemes. In the conclusion, we offer some reflections on how a celebrity-driven mainstreaming of ethical consumption can pose some unexpected challenges to consumers’ understanding of the real conditions of chicken and egg production.

The rise of ethical consumption and food media

Over the past two decades, celebrity chefs' interventions in ethical consumption politics have occurred against a backdrop of a rise in both popular engagement with ethical consumption and analysis of its emergence and practice. Early theorists such as Bennett (1998), Norris (2002) and Micheletti (2003) identified the phenomena of 'lifestyle politics', 'civic activism' and 'political consumption', while more empirically minded analysts have subsequently investigated ethical consumption in relation to citizenship norms (Dalton 2008), social movement organising (Bossy 2014), 'boycotting' and 'buycotting' behaviour (Copeland 2014), media representations (Bell and Hollows 2011; Lewis 2008), and processes of 'responsibilisation' (Connelly and Prothero 2008; Bell et al. 2017), among other practices.

There has been ongoing debate in the literature about the efficacy of ethical consumption as a political practice. Viewed as part of a cultural shift away from conventional forms of collective political participation (Lewis and Potter 2011), some worry that ethical consumption is contributing to further decline in social capital and the rise of individualised forms of political action (Putnam 1995). Others express concern that in adopting individualised, consumer-oriented modes of political expression, such well-meaning "citizen-consumers" risk reproducing the very neoliberal regimes they are otherwise seeking to critique (Konefal 2012). But while the large and growing number of ethical consumption scholars working in philosophical, cultural, economic and political disciplines acknowledge ethical consumption's inherent tensions and contradictions—particularly its classed nature (e.g. Bell and Hollows 2011; Johnston et al. 2011)—they also tend to view consumption practices as expressions of new forms of citizenship and political agency (e.g. Soper 2004).

A key focus of empirical studies has been on the behaviour of ethical consumers (e.g. Connolly and Prothero 2008; Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2013), but it is also recognised that such behaviour is necessarily facilitated or hindered by the structure and operation of supply chains linking primary and intermediate producers to retailers and consumers (Stringer 2006; Gale and Haward 2011). It is through these processes that many of the contested aspects of ethical consumption become apparent. Put simply, where supply chains are short and products simple, consumers can become ‘prosumers’ who produce what they consume and/or ‘locavores’ who are able to directly assess the degree to which products meets their ethical requirements (by getting to know the farmer, for example). However, with more complex products and longer supply chains, it is not possible for individual consumers to make such determinations; much ethical consumption is thus necessarily tied to government, industry and civil society certification and labelling schemes (Ponte 2004). Such schemes establish the standards and specify the certification and labelling requirements that then enable consumers to make ‘sustainable’, ‘free range’, ‘animal friendly’, ‘fair trade’ or ‘organic’ purchases (Tollefson et al. 2008). At the same time, they also bring together a complex network of stakeholders—individual producers, producers’ and consumers’ associations, proponents of different certification schemes, plus a range of other business, governmental and civil society actors—each with significantly different values, agendas and priorities.

As a result of the range of stakeholders involved, ethical consumption inevitably represents a contested space occupied by institutionalised networks of actors, practices and discourses, many of them mobilising similar narratives and discourses, albeit with quite different goals in mind. In a New Zealand study, Morris (2009) identified two actor coalitions contesting animal welfare legislation: a high welfare group including the Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RNZSPCA) and a status-quo welfare group

composed of producers from different farm sectors. Gale (2015) identified a similar struggle in the Australian egg industry between proponents of intensive and extensive production chains, each enlisting animal welfare science discourses in support of divergent positions. In promoting ‘free range’ products, celebrity chefs are necessarily inserting themselves into a pre-established partisan politics.

The growing academic, consumer and industry interest in ethical consumption practices has been paralleled by an intensified media focus on food across the Anglophone West. Driven in part by changing industrial and institutional conditions within the media industries, which have necessitated new strategies for the production of popular, cost-effective media content (Hill 2005), food media—especially food television programs hosted by celebrity chefs—have been embraced by consumers as a means to reconnect with food and its sources, from which they have become increasingly alienated by the complexities of modern industrialised food chains (Versteegen 2010). While the early scholarship on celebrity chefs tended to see them as figures not merely teaching consumers to cook, but also educating them in how to use food in the construction and display of (a desirable, middle class) lifestyle (e.g. Ashley et al. 2004, Moseley 2001), more recent work has engaged with the growing prominence of, and political interventions associated with, celebrity chefs’ media work.

For Hollows and Jones (2010), Jamie Oliver is an exemplary case of the celebrity chef’s transition from a lifestyle expert to a “moral entrepreneur” who seeks to institute social change through the adoption of various food-related ‘causes’. Certainly, the success of Oliver’s *School Dinners* campaign in getting then-UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to commit an additional £280 million in funding for school meals (*BBC News* 2005) has meant that his campaigns have become a model for how popular food politics are enacted within the

contemporary mediasphere. Oliver's subsequent campaigns have addressed not only issues of chicken welfare, but also humane pork production and sustainable seafood, among other issues. Oliver's model of "moral entrepreneurship" has been one adopted by a range of international celebrity chefs, including 'Gourmet Farmer' Matthew Evans in Australia and Dan Barber in the United States, but it is one that has been used especially successfully by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who has used his media profile to campaign for a number of issues: sustainable seafood, self-sufficiency and sustainability, food waste, and perhaps most prominently, 'free range' chicken production.

The international attention that both Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall have generated for their various food-related causes is indicative of the unusually prominent position that British celebrity chefs occupy in public life, both within and outside the UK (Versteegen 2010). As a result of their cultural influence, Oliver's and Fearnley-Whittingstall's campaigns are fought on a number of fronts—from lobbying governments to working with supermarkets—but it is in their media work that the contradictions of their advocacy for labelling and certification emerges most clearly. This is because, in the chicken and egg space at least, the advocacy activities of Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall exemplify a tendency of celebrity chefs to advance an ideal ethics of 'free range' without adequately engaging with the specificities or complexities of the types of free range products likely to be available to the ordinary supermarket shopper. As we will show, such conflation of the ideal and the pragmatic has the potential to both elide the complexities inherent to the certification of 'free range' and to leave consumers unclear or ill-informed as to what they are 'really' buying when they change their purchasing habits in response to the media activities of high profile celebrity chefs.

Behind the logo: certification schemes and the meaning of 'free range'

Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall both use a number of methods to mobilise support for their commitment to higher welfare chickens and eggs. As well as utilising the genre of the campaigning culinary documentary, they also seek to persuade audiences through much more ordinary and routinized means. For example, their cookbooks and websites frequently encourage consumers to buy free range not through shocking exposés of the poor animal welfare conditions of intensive systems, but through repetition. For example, many of their cookbooks specify that eggs should be “preferably free range or organic” (e.g. Oliver 2013) or “free range, of course” (e.g. Fearnley-Whittingstall 2012). Readers are also encouraged to choose “free-range...chicken” sourced from your local butcher (e.g. Fearnley-Whittingstall, 2009), opting for “Freedom Food as a minimum” (Oliver 2013). Oliver’s recipes on his website jamieoliver.com often go one step further by stipulating “free range” in the ingredients lists of recipes.¹ In each case, the audience is never explicitly exhorted to buy free range chickens or eggs. Instead, these strategies of repetition are designed to normalise free range as a natural or automatic choice for the home cook.

But what is meant by ‘free range’ is rarely specifically addressed. ‘Free range’ does not refer to a single, unambiguous and agreed set of production practices. Indeed, there are a large number of factors, including hen genetics, male chick euthanasia, beak trimming, pullet rearing, cage size, design and structure, indoor and outdoor stocking density, lighting, weather and outdoor shelter, that can affect the degree to which chickens are able to range ‘freely’ (e.g. Dawkins et al. 2003, Rault et al. 2013, Janczak and Ribert 2015, Pettersson et al. 2016). Depending on how these factors are combined in a production system, the degree of ranging that can occur at a particular hour of the day on a farm can vary significantly, from as

¹ For example, his recipe for Sweet Potato and Blue Cheese Frittata asks for “6 large free-range eggs”, while his Mexican Chicken Chilli specifies “2 free-range chicken breasts” (see jamieoliver.com).

low as 3% of the total stock to as high as 35%.² This variation is reflective of the differing standards associated with different ‘free range’ schemes. For example, a recent comparison by Compassion in World Farming (CiWF 2012) of the standards for laying hens and broilers reveals significant variability in the meaning attached to ‘free range’. CiWF compared several major UK free range schemes, including those run by the UK food industry (Red Tractor), the British Free Range Producers Association (British Lion eggs), the RSPCA (RSPCA Freedom Food)³ and the Soil Association (Soil Association Organic Standard). In Table 1, a small subset of CiWF’s 29 criteria are collated to illustrate some of the differences between the schemes.⁴

Overall, CiWF concluded that the Soil Association Organic Standard had the highest welfare standards for both chicken meat and eggs and offered ‘many welfare advantages relative to standard industry practice for all species’ (CiWF 2012: 54). Key criteria contributing to high

² Chiello et al. (2016: 7) report that in the farms they studied, ‘there was a significant difference between flocks in percentage of hens on the range ($F_5 = 20.1$, $p < 0.001$), which varied from 35.1% in the smallest flock to 3.0% in the largest flock.’ Rault et al. (2013: 423) state that ‘laying hens show varied use of the outdoor range in free-range systems. Some hens never go outside and only 10–30% of the flock access the range at any one time.’ Pettersson et al. (2016: 146) report that ‘there are many studies that have reported figures for range use in free-range hens, although these figures are often lower than consumer expectation, rarely exceeding 40%.’ A study on broiler production by Dawkins et al. (2003: 156) reported that ‘the maximum number seen outside during the daylight observation hours at any house was 2864 during the summer (14.3% of the flock)’.

³ RSPCA has, since June 2015, rebranded its Freedom Food scheme as RSPCA Assured. Since the analysis covers texts produced prior to the launch of the new brand and many popular sites continue to use the term, we continue to reference the RSPCA scheme as Freedom Food throughout the article.

⁴ Soil Association’s Organic Standard is included in this comparison because it is both an ‘organic’ and a ‘free range’ scheme.

welfare in the Soil Association scheme were much lower stocking densities, free-range access, provision of overhead cover on range and smaller flock sizes (CiWF 2012: 34). In both egg and meat production, the relevant industry standards—Red Tractor for meat and British Lion for eggs—scored significantly lower on most of these criteria. For chicken meat, Red Tractor scored much lower than Soil Association on indoor and outdoor stocking densities, and on provision of overhead cover and flock size. For eggs, British Lion scored lower on outdoor stocking density, provision of overhead cover and flock size. The RSPCA Freedom Food scheme emerged as a compromise between the industry and organic schemes, providing slightly higher welfare than the industry norm, but significantly less than the Soil Association scheme.

Table 1: Comparison of British Free Range Egg Labelling and Chicken Meat Standards

Criteria	Red Tractor (Chicken Meat)	British Lion (Chicken Eggs)	RSPCA Freedom Food (Chicken Meat and Eggs)	Soil Association Organic Standard (Chicken Meat and Eggs)
Chicken Meat				
Indoor stocking density*	6	-	6	10
Free range access*	8	-	8	10
Outdoor stocking density	3	-	3	5
Provision of cover & protection from predators	2	-	4	4
Flock size	0	-	0	3
Total	19	-	21	32
Chicken Eggs				
Indoor stocking density*	-	8	8	10
Free range access*	-	10	10	10
Outdoor stocking density	-	3	4	5
Provision of cover & protection from predators	-	2	4	4
Flock size	-	0	0	3
Total	-	23	26	32

Source: Extracted from *Compassion in World Farming* (2012). Criteria are scored out of 5 except for those considered ‘key’, which are asterisked and which are scored out of 10. Note that the totals provided in this table are for the subset of criteria listed and are for illustrative purposes only.⁵

Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall rarely engage with the full range of hen health and welfare practices implicated in these different certification standards—most likely because the sheer number and variety of free range schemes (both within the UK and outside it) would make this impractical in the context of, say, a cookbook primarily focused on money-saving recipes and not on chicken welfare. Some of Fearnley-Whittingstall’s early cookbooks, such as the original *River Cottage Cookbook* (2001), which includes lengthy guides to sourcing (and producing one’s own) food, dedicate several pages to the complexities of egg and meat chicken labelling. In this book, he describes standards as varying so significantly that “it would be a mistake to interpret the term ‘free range’ as implying a bird that has led a happy or natural life” (Fearnley-Whittingstall 2001). Of the few specific schemes that he mentions, the most widely available—RSPCA Freedom Food—is described as adding “a feel-good factor to the packs on which the symbol is flashed” but is a scheme that does not go “far enough” for animal welfare (Fearnley-Whittingstall 2001).

However, Fearnley-Whittingstall’s more recent media work no longer addresses the specificities of different schemes, the effect of which is to essentially conflate schemes with

⁵ In presenting a summary of CiWF data in this table, it should not be presumed we are endorsing their overall approach. In fact, there appear to be significant problems with CiWF’s methodology, especially with regard to the weightings given to some production factors over others. Our concerns are somewhat different, however, from those expressed in the Red Tractor Assurance response to the CiWF publication, which focused on what it viewed as a range of errors in the assessment of the specific practices the scheme permitted across different industries (Red Tractor Assurance 2012).

quite different animal welfare standards. For instance, in a departure from his earlier advice on RSPCA Freedom Foods, he now states on his River Cottage website that “unless the label states free-range, organic or RSPCA Freedom Food, the chicken you’re buying has probably been reared in intensive conditions”.⁶ This invites readers to view each of these options as equally good alternatives to intensively-reared chicken. Freedom Food is also one of the few schemes specifically identified by Oliver, and indeed, both chefs have received awards from the RSPCA for their animal welfare work (Metro 2008). Oliver describes Freedom Food as a scheme that allows consumers to buy “cheaper chicken... [that does not] compromis[e] on flavour or welfare” (Oliver 2013). He says that “having walked through farms of this standard, I can honestly say I would feed them to my family” (Oliver 2013). Given Oliver’s well-known commitment to buying the best organic and free range chickens and eggs, such an endorsement would suggest that Freedom Food offers not the compromise between industry and organic standards that it was essentially designed to be, but rather provides conditions equivalent to the schemes with the highest animal welfare provisions.

Such broad and non-specific use of the term ‘free range’ perhaps reflects a conflict between both chefs’ genuinely held commitment to the highest possible standards of animal welfare and the practicalities of communicating messages aimed at influencing ‘mainstream’ purchasing behaviour. This is not just a product of the chefs’ pragmatic acceptance that choosing any higher welfare option is better than chickens and eggs raised in the most intensive production systems. It is also a consequence of the practical problem of addressing the variety of free range schemes operative in each of the international territories where their media texts are distributed. For example, in addition to the four schemes listed in Table 1, the

⁶ Available at: <https://www.rivercottage.net/campaigns/chicken-out> (accessed June 2016).

UK also has several alternative organic schemes each with subtle variations in the provisions made for animal welfare (e.g. Organic Farmers & Growers Ltd, Biodynamic Agricultural Association, OF&G (Scotland) Ltd). In Australia, five ‘free range’ schemes compete with each other—the Australian Egg Corporation’s Egg Corp Assured scheme, RSPCA Australia’s Approved Farming Scheme, Humane Society International (Australia’s) Humane Choice scheme, and schemes run by Free Range Egg & Poultry Australia and Free Range Farmers Association (Parker 2013; Gale 2015). Matters are even more complicated in the United States, where the Consumers Union website GreenerChoices lists 23 animal welfare labels including American Humane Certified, Animal Welfare Approved, Certified Humane, GAP (Steps 1 to 5) and USDA Organic. The pitfalls of labelling are especially clear here as the USDA organic label meets almost none of GreenerChoices’ animal welfare criteria, with the website stating with regard to ranging: “‘access’ to the outdoors is required but there are no requirements for minimum outdoor space per chicken, access to doors to go outside, or when and how long the doors must be open’.”⁷

Clarifying or Confusing? Celebrity chefs’ engagement with ‘free range’ labels

If consumers were advised of the contested nature of the meaning of ‘free range’ and encouraged to actively discriminate among labelling claims, then mobilising the concept of free range as a kind of broad ethical ‘short hand’ might not be so problematic. However, in much of Oliver’s and Fearnley-Whittingstall’s media work, the effect of employing the term is not to construct free range as a broad category inclusive of a range of practices and standards, but to evoke a specific set of idyllic pastoral images. This is especially the case in their television cooking shows (particularly Fearnley-Whittingstall’s *River Cottage* series)

⁷ Available at: <http://www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/reportChickenLabelsDetail.cfm?RID=17> (accessed June 2016).

and their campaigning culinary documentaries, *Jamie's Fowl Dinners* (2008, UK Channel 4) and *Hugh's Chicken Run* (2008, UK Channel 4). Their documentaries are especially significant because, more than any other aspect of the chefs' media advocacy work, they have been credited with changing consumer attitudes towards intensive and 'free range' chicken and egg production, with measurable impacts on British supermarket sales of 'free range' chickens and eggs.

Jamie's Fowl Dinners was a staged gala dinner for guests ranging from "junk food addicts to free-range foodies", as well as farmers, food producers and representatives of major UK supermarkets. It showed in graphic detail the production processes associated with raising and slaughtering chickens in various commercial systems (battery cages, enriched cages, barns, and free range). Focused on exposing the worst excesses of intensive farming, *Jamie's Fowl Dinners* was notable for the way it sought to disrupt the elegance of the gala setting by surprising diners with a wall of battery cages crowded with live chickens. Throughout the 2-hour special, diners are visibly upset by Oliver's descriptions, footage and live demonstrations of the living conditions experienced by intensively-reared egg-laying and meat chickens.

Hugh's Chicken Run aired as part of Fearnley-Whittingstall's 'Chicken Out!' campaign, which was focused on welfare standards for meat chickens. Aimed at changing the culture of "two for a fiver" (i.e. the British supermarket special of two chickens for 5 pounds), Fearnley-Whittingstall set up his own commercial-scale intensive and free range farms using a manual of "industry standards...published by the industry and government". His aim was to encourage people in his home town of Axminster to care more about chicken welfare and

swap “cheap chicken” for “free range”, as well as to galvanise Britain’s supermarkets into phasing out intensively reared chicken across their stores.

Both *Jamie’s Fowl Dinners* and *Hugh’s Chicken Run* advocate for free range as a desirable, ethical alternative to the horrors of intensive farming systems. Oliver acknowledges that there are a number of ‘higher welfare’ options for eggs, including enriched cages and barn laid, but he describes free range as “five star living” for chickens and at one point implies that anyone who doesn’t choose free range doesn’t “care” about chicken welfare. In his discussions with supermarket representatives about their plans to phase out cage eggs and intensively reared meat chickens in favour of higher-welfare indoor alternatives, he holds the interviews outdoors at a free range chicken farm, where the open fields and lush green pastures not only suggest that free range indeed offers “five star living”, but also may inadvertently imply that these are the welfare conditions consumers might reasonably expect from all of their higher-welfare supermarket chickens and eggs.

On *Hugh’s Chicken Run*, Fearnley-Whittingstall similarly implies that production systems for meat chickens adhere to internally consistent animal welfare and production standards, and that all free range systems are equally ideal. In setting up his own chicken farms, he follows a “manual” of industry standards that invites us to see ‘intensive’ and ‘free range’ as coherent, standardised systems—despite the existing variations across UK free range schemes. *Hugh’s Chicken Run* includes a scene in which local Axminster residents are shown labels of the 20 or so brands of free range and intensive chicken available locally, which would have been an obvious opportunity to discuss the varying definitions of free range. Instead, ‘free range’ on *Hugh’s Chicken Run* is associated with the same types of bucolic pastoral scenes that it is on *Jamie’s Fowl Dinners*. Even though Fearnley-Whittingstall says his commercial-scale free

range chicken farm is quite different to raising home-grown chickens at River Cottage, the only substantive difference the viewer sees are those related to the scale on which he is operating. The conditions in which the birds live—access to lush green pastures, shady trees and dirt to scratch in—appear to be very similar to those of his pampered River Cottage flock. Moreover, his experiment to encourage local residents to switch to making ‘free range’ purchases by having them raise their own chickens for meat and eggs seems to imply that there is something equivalent in the conditions experienced by these home-reared free range birds and those of their commercial counterparts.

The representation of free range chickens in *Hugh’s Chicken Run* and *Jamie’s Fowl Dinners*, along with the documentaries’ exhortations to consumers to choose ‘free range’ in their weekly supermarket shop, may unintentionally encourage audiences to conflate these idyllic ‘free range’ images with the commercial ‘free range’ products on sale in supermarkets and mainstream retailers. While a few commercial free range production systems might approximate the bucolic pastoral idyll favoured by both Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall, most do not. The realities and commercial pressures of mainstream free range production mean that, rather than a universally agreed “manual” of industry standards, there is considerable variability around ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ practices. Auditors assessing whether a farm complies with a particular certification standard frequently employ their own judgement about whether the observed performance on a particular criterion lies within an acceptable range. The judgements that need to be made in crafting a standard and assessing conformity to it can thus generate a significant gap between popular image and reality—between the ideal image of ‘free range’ chickens boldly roaming over grassy pastures and the reality of them crowding indoors in apparently cramped, smelly conditions.

This disjuncture between image and reality provides the context for embarrassing media scandals, such as the one that occurred recently when the UK's *Daily Mail* released footage of a 'free range' chicken farm owned by the Member of the European Parliament, Stuart Agnew (Craig 2016; *The Independent* 2016). The footage, secretly filmed at night by an animal activist, revealed a crowded, smelly coop with diseased, featherless chickens. The farm was certified under the RSPCA's Freedom Food label for 'free range', prompting the charity to launch an immediate investigation into the operation to safeguard its own reputation. Yet it found nothing in the operation breached its standard, with the RSPCA's head of farm animals, Marc Cooper, reported as concluding that the hens had been recovering from a bout of enteritis and that he was "satisfied that the producer had done everything he could and should" to ensure animal welfare (qtd. in *The Independent* 2016).

In another recent media incident, a professor of veterinary science, Christine Nicol, was taken to task by the animal welfare lobby for concluding that hen welfare in furnished cages was in many cases significantly better than those kept under free-range conditions. "The problem is that the management of free range systems in the UK at the moment is so variable, that although you get some brilliant farms, you also get some that are really really not good," she told BBC reporter, Helen Briggs (qtd. in Briggs 2013).

For the most part, then, the idyllic images of free range chickens depicted on television bear little resemblance to how commercially farmed chickens actually live their lives, even when certified 'free range'. If, as Bell et al. (2017) argues, the aim of celebrity chefs' media activism is to "responsibilise" consumers to solve food crises via their consumption choices, by engaging only minimally with the specific animal welfare standards of alternative production methods, these documentaries may inadvertently encourage viewers to consider all 'free range' or 'higher welfare' systems as essentially equivalent. This is perhaps one of

the more problematic consequences of media messages aimed at changing the consumption choices of ordinary, often price-sensitive, supermarket shoppers: due to the scale on which they operate, and the demand to produce competitively priced meat and eggs, even ‘free range’ supermarket chickens must be raised in conditions that reflect the commercial realities of large-scale farming, rather than in the bucolic circumstances presented as ‘ideal’ in both chefs’ media work.

Given the highly concentrated nature of the poultry industry and the poor animal welfare conditions experienced by most birds raised for meat and egg-laying, it is perhaps understandable that Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall may wish for consumers to choose birds raised in ‘ideal’ conditions, while at the same time accepting that even slightly higher welfare standards are an improvement in the lives of a large number of birds. In the UK, six companies accounted for 60% of total production of the 83 million broiler (meat) chickens sold in 2013 (Crane and Lacey 2015). Individual premises average over 100,000 hens kept under highly intensive conditions. Around 80% of broiler hens in the UK live permanently in crowded barns and are completely unable to access the outdoors. The conditions experienced by the majority of birds are such that a widespread consumer shift to schemes with even marginally better welfare provisions might be seen as overall improvement to hen welfare. But given that Oliver’s and Fearnley-Whittingstall’s exhortations to choose ‘free range’ occur within a context of media representations in which we see only the horrors of intensive systems or idealised free range methods, it may not be clear to audiences that all free range schemes do not necessarily reflect the celebrity chefs’ more exacting animal welfare standards.

Conclusion

In Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall's media work, 'free range' is both normalised and idealised. It is not only touted as the only thinkable choice for people who "care" about animal welfare, it is also framed as the gold standard of ideal conditions. Across the celebrity chefs' media campaigns, 'free range' chickens are invariably presented as happy chickens roaming in bucolic green fields, rather than those living in the predominantly indoor conditions that is the experience of many certified free range schemes. This is the case even when they endorse specific schemes. Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall's more recent endorsements of RSCPA Freedom Food, for example, do not make clear that this is a scheme that aims to achieve higher welfare indoor conditions and is not equivalent to the highest welfare free range and organic standards: instead, "free range", "organic" and "Freedom Food" are often used interchangeably in both chefs' media work. Their tendency to treat free range as a single, unambiguous standard highlights how their participation in, and mainstreaming of, activist food politics can (advertently or inadvertently) place them in alliances with industry and certification bodies whose standards may be, at best, only partially aligned with their own 'ideal' animal welfare values.

Their high profile media campaigns have had demonstrable effects on consumer purchases, prompting both increased sales of free range and diminished demand for intensively reared products. However, the failure of these campaigns to engage with the complexities and contradictions of certification standards means that audiences may not necessarily know what they are buying when they follow celebrity chefs' exhortations to "choose free range". Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall's failure to engage with this complexity may be in part a consequence of the global context of both chefs' media work: that is, given the large number and variation of certification schemes globally, and the need to present clear messages about animal welfare in ways that are sensitive to the price concerns of 'mainstream' consumers,

the pragmatism of Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall is both understandable and—perhaps—inevitable. The celebrity chefs should be commended for seeking to shift social values in the direction of better animal welfare and away from the most egregious forms of intensive agriculture. However, their tendency to subsume their animal welfare messages within other media texts (such as cookbooks focused primarily on money saving recipes rather than chicken welfare issues) or within campaigning culinary documentaries that adopt heroic narratives of ‘good’ free range versus ‘bad’ intensive systems ultimately makes it difficult to include more complex discussions about the specifics of certification standards.

This is partly an effect of the genre conventions of these types of media texts and campaigns, which prioritise clear messages and simple solutions in order to galvanise action. A lengthy documentary about the challenges to developing a single agreed standard for free range is likely to be much less compelling viewing and be much less likely to generate consumer change than Oliver and Fearnley-Whittingstall’s more engaging campaigning culinary documentaries. But as well as “responsibilizing” consumers to solve food system problems by changing their own consumption behaviour (Bell, Hollows and Jones 2015), these documentaries’ simplistic exhortations to ‘choose free range’ place an additional (and unstated) onus on consumers to ensure that individual labelling and certification standards meet their own ethical values and animal welfare expectations. These campaigns’ catchy, simple slogans may help to galvanise consumers to take action, but these actions will ultimately take place in a much messier, more complex realm than what we see on screen. This is one of the key challenges to ‘mainstreaming’ ethical consumption practices. The campaigns of high profile celebrity chefs may indeed offer consumers a (partial) pathway to realising ethical consumption values, but they also entangle both consumers and celebrity chefs in discursive practices (i.e. “choose free range”) that simultaneously reflect a genuine

commitment to making ‘better’ choices, highlight the nature of ‘free range’ as a contested discursive space, and lead to simplistic representations of our food system that may ironically obscure more than they reveal about our food’s real conditions of production.

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