

Themes of connection and progress in rural television: New Zealand's *Country Calendar* 1990–2015

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Abstract

Airing for over 50 years, New Zealand's *Country Calendar* (CC) television show tells the stories of those who live and work on the land. This article presents a thematic analysis of 25 years of programme content, identifying a balance of 'connection' and 'progress' themes across this time frame, linked to the political economy of NZ broadcasting and agriculture. The concept of the rural idyll helps explain the connection theme's focus on family, community, a passion or dream, and history and tradition. However, CC's version of the rural idyll goes beyond nostalgia and the expression of shared social ideals to include the practical, day-to-day 'work' of contemporary farming. Ultimately, CC's content is shaped by the broadcasting and agricultural policies and structures which impact its funding, subjects and socio-economic environment.

Keywords

agriculture, New Zealand television, political economy, rural idyll, thematic analysis

Country Calendar (CC) is a lifestyle documentary programme featuring the stories of those who live and work on the land. It is New Zealand's and one of the world's longest running television shows, first airing on state broadcaster Television New Zealand (TVNZ) in 1966 (Smithies, 2015). Remarkably, CC is also among New Zealand's highest rating television programmes for the past 25 years (Quirk, 2017), and its 2019 season is funded for 40 weeks. While most New Zealanders now live in urban centres, an ongoing attachment to the countryside likely reflects farming's contributions to the nation's social and economic development (Fountaine, 1999; Perry, 1994) and permeation of the 'rural colonial myth' (Bell, 1997: 145). Reid (2011: 71) explains CC's popularity in terms of 'the nexus between a perceived nostalgia, national identity and . . . the tenants of

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neoliberalism'. But while CC is frequently cited as an exemplar (e.g. of quality local television), the show's content, producers and audiences have not been empirically studied. This is perhaps not surprising given the scant tradition of media scholarship in New Zealand generally, and within the rural sector (Fountain, 1999).

This article presents a thematic analysis of 25 years of CC content, exploring how the show's themes align with and extend the concept of the rural idyll and are impacted by New Zealand's political economy. Critical political economy theory provides a framework to assess the political and economic aspects of media formats and representations:

'[it] rests on a central claim: different ways of organising and financing communications have implications for the range and nature of media content . . . [and] calls for attention to the interplay between the symbolic and economic dimensions of the production of meaning' (Hardy, 2014: 7).

Following Hardy, this study considers CC and its themes within the context of New Zealand's mixed-model broadcasting environment, where commercial imperatives drive the major free-to-air television networks, including Crown-owned TVNZ, supplemented by contestable public funding for programme making addressing national priorities. In addition, this study recognises that agriculture's political economy also influences rural media such as CC. As Liepins and Bradshaw (1999: 563) argue, New Zealand's agriculture is 'a medium through which a variety of socio-cultural processes and relations have developed'. With the removal of government subsidies for agriculture in 1985 – one of the first steps in a wholesale deregulation of the economy – local farmers became some of the least protected in the world. Neo-liberalism is implicated in a wide sweep of changes in New Zealand agriculture over the past 35 years including in farm size (fewer, larger farms), ownership (fewer family farms, increased corporate ownership) and land use (more lifestyle blocks and diversification, e.g. to viticulture). Other related consequences include intensification (e.g. dairy), vertical integration of production, shifts in rural employment patterns, environmental degradation and privatisation of rural and social services (Haggerty et al., 2009; Jay, 2007; Kelsey, 1999; Mackay et al., 2009; Swaffield, 2014). As in other advanced capitalist countries which experienced a 'crisis in the countryside' during the 1980s and 1990s, these changes occurred unevenly across New Zealand's regions, and have more recently come to co-exist with 'positive' developments, such as the rise of rural tourism (Jay, 2007; Smith and Montgomery, 2003). In such market-oriented environments as now exist in New Zealand and Australia, there is a tendency for '[rural] discourses and practices . . . [to] extol the virtues of competition, entrepreneurship and efficiency' (Lockie et al., 2006: 33; see also Jay, 2007), and for farmers to 'be stalwarts of the free market' (Kelsey, 1999: 218). Ultimately then, CC sits at the intersection of broadcasting, agriculture and economic policy reform in New Zealand, offering a rich site for thematic analysis.

Representations of the rural

Sociologists and cultural geographers have labelled the idealising or mythologising of the rural – its landscape, social environment and rural activities – as 'the rural idyll'. The rural idyll is both 'fluid and enduring' and a 'concrete abstraction' (Wallwork and Dixon, 2004: 24), encompassing the aesthetic and social dimensions of rurality. In Britain, it tends to take the form of 'hedgerows and lanes, village greens and country estates, cultivated fields' (36) and 'small-scale settlements; nature and the natural; community; timelessness and historicity; agriculture; and animals' (Phillips, 2008: 29). Home, (nuclear) family and community are also important, with the idyll allied with 'bucolic and problem free lifestyles where traditional values are maintained and respected' (Hughes, 2004: 133). In the United States, the rural idyll is mostly associated with 'pastoral lands, small towns, close-knit communities, and salt-of-the-earth farm families' (Thomas et al., 2011: 23). Similarly, Australian

media has leveraged Tasmania's highly idyllic rural setting, with its farmers 'carefully styled . . . to embody . . . signifiers of "authentic" farm life' (Phillipov, 2016: 96).

The rural idyll is shaped and shared by the mass media, with utopian and often nostalgic views of the countryside documented in newspapers (Wallwork and Dixon, 2004), specialist agricultural media (Morris and Evans, 2001), lifestyle television programming (Chueh and Lu, 2018; Phillipov, 2016) and drama (Phillips et al., 2001). While 'the exact recipe for rural bliss varies historically and geographically' (Bell, 2006: 150), versions of the rural idyll appear in many cultures (e.g. Chueh and Lu, 2018; Lagerqvist, 2014), with both common roots and localised influences. For instance, New Zealand's CC 'depends upon a construction of the rural which is a collage of British antecedents, media-specific conventions, local inflections, particular social interests and material constraints' (Perry, 1994: 49). While mediated rurality brings the countryside to those with little firsthand experience (Phillips et al., 2001), rural dwellers are also dedicated consumers of rural imagery (Morris, 2014; Phillips, 2008).

Further, the manufactured or symbolic rural landscape 'condenses and projects various identifications, imaginings and ideologies' (Bell, 2006: 151), and is thereby associated with class and privilege (Phillips et al., 2001; Wallwork and Dixon, 2004), national identity (Bell, 1997; Wallwork and Dixon, 2004), consumption (Chueh and Lu, 2018; Phillipov, 2016), and masculinity, gender and power (Liepins, 2000; Morris and Evans, 2001). As Lagerqvist (2014: 34) puts it: 'The countryside as an idyll in the Western world is, in generalised terms, a place for traditional gender and ethnic identities; a white, middle class, family oriented and unchanging space'. The rural idyll, then, also operates in terms of what and who it excludes (Bell, 2006; Hughes, 2004), including alternative masculinities, women, ethnic and sexual minorities, and solo parents. Rurality is often defined and constructed in terms of the urban other, even as the line between these domains is becoming less clear (Cloke, 2006). In New Zealand, images of pastoral agriculture were for decades entwined with depictions of the national economy, at least until the 1980s when a free market ideology 'decentred all news categories associated with the "old" economy . . . accentuated by traditional divisions between city and country' (Hope, 1991: 331).

Studies of rurality have increased in recent decades but less attention has been paid to agricultural representations (Morris, 2004). While agriculture is just one component of the rural, it has a particular relevance to this study, given CC's focus on those who 'make a living' working on the land, and the historical association between agricultural imagery and the New Zealand's economy. One of the few studies plotting agricultural representations over time is Morris and Evans' examination of gender identities in Britain's *Farmers Weekly* in 1976 and 1996, which considered changes within the context of rural restructuring. Their findings showed that articles about 'modern' agriculture co-exist with 'evocations of tradition and nostalgia' (Morris and Evans, 2001: 379; 380), and that content is mostly apolitical and non-controversial. Changes over time included greater focus on 'alternative farm enterprises . . . as exemplars of farmers' and farm households' ingenuity' and more articles on people with tenuous farming connections rather than farmworkers, both linked to restructuring of Britain's agriculture industry.

CC and the broadcasting environment in New Zealand

When broadcasting was deregulated in New Zealand in the late 1980s, the Broadcasting Commission (or NZ on Air as it was later renamed) was formed as a sort of 'backseat driver' (Bell, 1996: 135). The government-funded agency's mission was to support local content through the distribution of funds to broadcasters from a public broadcasting fee (abolished in 2000) and from within a market broadcasting system (Bell, 1996; Cocker, 2005). The Commission's early decision to prioritise the funding of popular local shows rather than

supporting minority and special needs programming conflated public service in New Zealand with the provision of high rating local content. Consequently, 'the nationalistic provision of popular local programming is majoritarian, dedicated to the production of a consciousness and sentiment of shared identity' (Cocker, 2005: 50–51).

Arguing that New Zealand On Air (NZOA) programming is preoccupied with 'maximum acceptability' and 'lowest common denominator' content, with little in the way of intellectual challenge, Bell (1996: 136) writes that 'NZOA sells us a state-approved version of the nation . . . the most televisual parts of the status quo are showcased in its funding decisions, as the "real" identity of a nation'. Several television examples illustrate her argument, including the then-popular *Heartland* series with its focus on 'the folk-cultural aspects of small town or country district life' (141). CC is mentioned, in passing, as 'determinedly celebratory' (141).

Contemporary NZOA (2018) rhetoric continues to reflect this emphasis on popular local content, proudly identifying CC as the most watched show it funds and as 'classic New Zealand broadcasting at its best' which gives 'rural people their own voice and urban viewers a genuine insight into rural life'. CE Jane Wrightson calls the programme 'quintessentially' New Zealand: 'Our brief, in the Broadcasting Act, is to support content that reflects New Zealand identity and culture. Nothing meets this brief more fully than Country Calendar' (NZOA, 2018).

Although partly funded by NZOA, CC screens on TV1, which is part of TVNZ. TVNZ is a Crown-owned Company which has since 1988 operated on a commercial basis (with the exception of its short-lived public service charter 2003–2011). CC has been commercially sponsored since the 1990s, with at least five of these sponsors enjoying official naming rights (the show is currently named *Hyundai Country Calendar*). Perhaps surprisingly, given rural landscapes have a global currency in television (Phillips, 2008), there have been only minor sales of CC overseas. However, a number of CC specials have aired in primetime over the years, to mark particular milestones (e.g. 50 years) or with a special focus (e.g. rural women), and DVDs of each season's top shows continue to be produced for sale by TVNZ.

While CC currently appears to enjoy flagship status at TVNZ, producers have previously spoken of the 'difficult history' of rural shows in New Zealand, which Phillips (2008: 26) linked to a local preoccupation with audience demographics and marketisation. As early as the mid-1970s, CC producers were looking to broaden the appeal of the show beyond farmers (Smithies, 2015), a process begun under the leadership of Tony Trotter. Long-time producer Frank Torley claimed that in its early days, before Trotter took over, CC was 'boring as batshit, with these guys at agricultural research stations talking at length about changes to farm technology or whatever. The stories are a lot more interesting now' (Smithies, 2015: 20). The show was perhaps lucky to survive a perception among TVNZ programmers, in the late 1990s to mid-2000s, that 'rurality had . . . become a problematic mediascape for the nation's television audience' (Phillips, 2008: 26). Interestingly, this period coincided with a sharp decline in series length for CC: a 23-episode series in 1994 gave way to an 11-episode series in 1995, and an average series length during 1997–2005 of just 14 shows (compared with the current 40). This era of entrenchment also partly overlapped with scrapping of the broadcasting fee, NZOA cuts to television agribusiness show *AgriTech2000*, and Radio NZ restructuring its rural programming (Fountaine, 1999).

Method

This study uses qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyse patterns in CC across a 25-year period. The thematic analysis presented here is the first part of a broader study that also includes interviews with CC production staff, and focus groups with rural and urban viewers of the show.

Table 1. CC sample and overall series length, 1990–2015.

Year	Sample/total series length	New Zealand On Air (NZOA) funding (\$NZ)	Sponsor
1990	3/21	n/a	Mazda
1995	3/11	103,777	Tux
2000	3/13	239,179	National Bank
2005	3/13	200,000	National Bank
2010	4/26	361,588	National Bank
2015	4/30	425,036	Hyundai

Thematic analysis offers a flexible method to study similarities and differences in CC across time, and produce ‘thick description’ of a rich and understudied media format. Twenty programmes were selected randomly within a stratified sample, every 5 years from 1990 to 2015. During this time frame, the show employed a mostly consistent format, running as a series of self-contained, 30-minute episodes in a weekend, early evening, and primetime slot. The 25-year period allowed meaningful examination of change, while also being manageable for qualitative analysis.

There is little guidance in the literature about sampling strategies for weekly television programmes over time, or within seasons of varying length. Ultimately, the number of shows randomly selected from 1990, 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015 was influenced by the length of each season, but was not fully proportional. I relied on qualitative measures of data saturation to guide the end point of the research. Table 1 summarises the sample, and CC’s associated funding and sponsorships in these years.

Thematic analysis was based on my full verbal transcripts of the 20 programmes, capturing everything said by the narrator, reporter and all CC subjects. Most shows were narrated by their reporter, who at times also asked questions, interacted with the subjects, and/or appeared in shot. The verbal transcript was supplemented with notes about visual content.

Eighteen shows were purchased from the TVNZ archive, which contains over 1000 episodes of CC. I began by watching all these shows, making initial observations about consistencies and changes. Then, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), I transcribed the programmes, later adding another episode from 2010 and 2015 to better reflect the season length in those years. With limited funds, I chose randomly from the subset of 20 episodes uploaded for each year to ETV, an educational television resource available through my university library. After transcribing these additional two episodes, I was satisfied that data saturation had been reached.

The next step involved deep reading of the 20 transcripts, underlining key words and phrases, and identifying an initial 1–2 codes in each cluster of text (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Transcripts were then re-read and the first set of codes was refined from 27 to 25. I summarised the key codes to present to CC staff, and 4 months later, after completing these interviews, I revisited these, drawing on my new and deeper knowledge of the programme structure and format. The final codes were reworked and ultimately arranged into two overall themes: connection and progress.

Validity, reliability and replicability

My procedures within Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method of thematic analysis are documented above. I spent 18 months transcribing and coding the CC programme data, demonstrating ‘prolonged engagement and persistent observation’ (Glesne, 2006: 37). Although the sample is not fully representative of the 25-year period, I added episodes to the point of perceived saturation. This article includes detailed quotes or ‘thick description’ from programmes to illustrate

interpretations, and examples from every show in the sample are provided as evidence. Further, my interpretations were triangulated by reviewing themes with a colleague, discussing themes with CC staff and checking interpretations against information reported elsewhere (e.g. Smithies, 2015). One director said she thought my initial themes were ‘bang on and I can see most of them in the story that I’m just editing’ (Fountaine, forthcoming).

Researcher reflexivity

I am a committed viewer of CC, and have been so for the past 10–15 years. I grew up in a farming family where the programme was (and still is) watched regularly. I live on a lifestyle block on the outskirts of a provincial city, and have researched and published about agricultural media and in the area of public service broadcasting generally. Consequently, my analysis is informed by my knowledge of broadcasting in New Zealand, and influenced by my own rural background and experiences.

Results: themes of connection and progress

The themes of CC, across time, are identified as connection and progress (see Figure 1). Put simply, the connection theme is about ‘people’ and the socio-cultural dimensions of rural life. The progress theme captures the technical, strategic and tactical aspects of farming. All shows contained aspects of the two themes with most being a relatively even mix, particularly in the latter years of the sample (all 2010 and 2015 programmes were ‘balanced’). Less balanced programmes included 1995/3, about the North Hokianga Agricultural and Pastoral show, which was almost completely about social traditions and community. Conversely, the 1990 episode about Southland’s rural downtown was preoccupied with subthemes of progress. While 2000/1 was also heavy on progress subthemes, connection established the context and underpinned the importance of Barry Kingan’s efforts to beat the North Otago drought: ‘This has been Kingan country for three generations. Even as a child Barry wanted to follow in his grandfather and father’s footsteps and two years ago he and Jayne took over the family farm at Five Forks’.

The connection theme

On CC, subjects speak about various social and emotional connections, visually supported by shots of family and community activities, scenic and/or personally meaningful landscapes including farms and farm buildings, and personal photographs and archives. Four subthemes are identified.

Family

Connections with family were visually and rhetorically present throughout the sample with children becoming increasingly visible: in 2015, two generations had a speaking presence in three of the four shows sampled. The dominant family structure in the sample was couples speaking fairly equally (11/20 episodes); just two programmes (2010/1; 2014/4) did not show or name any family or partner of the main subject. The 2010/3 show was the first one where a child spoke, albeit tentatively; more commonly, younger children were shown helping with farmwork.

The family theme was particularly strong in 2015/2, where helicopter pilot Matt Newton introduced his ‘lovely family’ (‘Tammy is a beautiful mother and wife . . . my oldest daughter, Lillian, she’s my rock . . . Gabriel, he’s as strong as an ox’) and explained his ‘village’ approach to raising children. He foregrounded his relationship with his deceased father, which was illustrated with archival footage from a 1987 CC episode, saying:

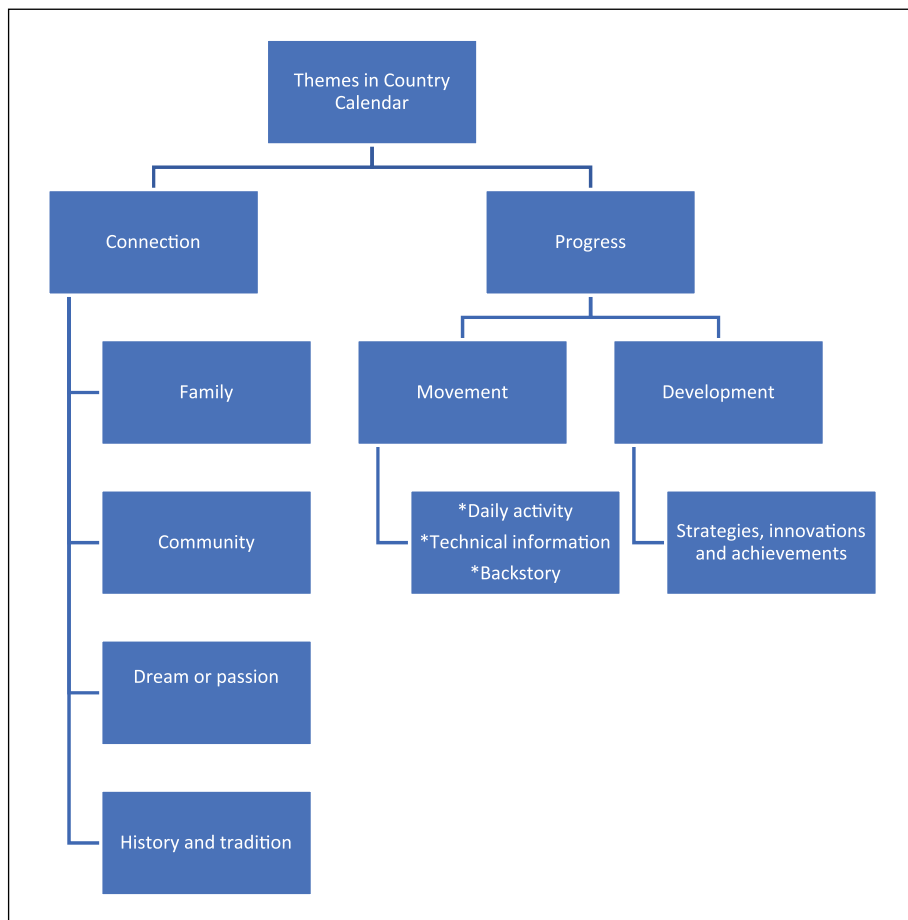


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes in CC, 1990–2015.

‘Although dad’s not here anymore he still has a huge effect on us because the things he engrained in us . . . the work he did on this farm, the work his father did before him and the work we’re doing now will carry on into the next generation’.

Two of Newton’s children spoke about their love of farming and their relationship with their father. The teenaged sons in 2015/4 were also named and shown doing farmwork, playing rugby and preparing for a local drama production, with one speaking on camera about his acting role.

Family was also identified in explanations of the perceived advantages and consolations of a rural lifestyle. For example, Meil Meyer explained:

‘. . . it’s having the flexibility . . . to see my kids after school, and after I’ve finished work me and the kids often go and shift the cows . . . on a difficult day you might see the kids running along the paddock and . . . you smile and that’s what you’re doing it for’ (2015/1).

Community

The importance of local, physical community for emotional and practical support was identified as a subtheme of connection across many shows. For example, at the drama club of West Otago, ‘we’ve

got people from all walks of life . . . that's what happens in a small community, you just all get behind it', and in the 'rural open home' example of 2010/3, 'townie friends come to experience life on the farm and go home with enough firewood to get them through the winter'. For Emily Crofoot, who had left her family farm in New York for Castlepoint Station, playing the organ at the local church contributed to community acceptance (2000/3). 'A network of friends and neighbours' were said to help the Mills on busy days (2005/3) and for American immigrant Dale deMeulemeester, 'we had no idea of country living and luckily we came into a valley where the neighbours were very receptive and helpful . . . they showed us everything we needed to know'. This subtheme also captured the notion that rural communities can be slow to fully embrace newcomers, possibly requiring certain initiations. In 2015/4, Sarah Adam said that after moving 19 times in her life, living on Wilden Station for 15 years was a record, and her husband joked, 'We're nearly locals – I'd say another 5 years, we'll be locals'. In 1995/3, the reporter talked about the local agricultural show as 'time for everyone in the community to demonstrate the whole gamut of rural skills . . . if nothing else, competing in events like best chocolate cake is one way for newcomers to gain acceptance in the community'.

The community subtheme was also identified in references to teams and international worker groups, which were an occasional proxy for more traditional family and community ties. For example, shepherd Geoff O'Carroll (2010/4) described working on Molesworth Station as 'different to other places . . . you're working as a big team . . . living in close quarters . . . yeah, there's a real team environment here'. In 1995/1, Stephen McGrath was shown living an alternative lifestyle but ' . . . although [he] lives alone, people seem to arrive when they're needed. Some come from an international scheme called Willing Workers on Organic Farms [WOOFers]'. And 2015/3 showed a group gathering for a meal, with Debbie Campbell explaining:

'we get the WOOFers around and all the team to celebrate . . . we have some pretty wonderful people . . . [who] give us a lot of help on the farm . . . good food, glass of wine and a cold beer is always a great way to finish a very hard week'.

Networks of international labour were also present in 2010/1, where Dan Steele's Eco Warriors programme provided a steady stream of volunteer staff for his isolated farm tourism venture.

The community connections of rural people were occasionally established in opposition to the city or, for immigrants, their country of origin. For example, the Port Waikato bush carnival is:

'only an hour or so from Auckland but it's much further away than that in outlook . . . the kids are keen to tackle a challenge which may leave some of their townie counterparts heading for . . . shelter of mum's skirt'.¹

Similar reference to New Zealand's largest city occurred in 2005/2, which profiled 'wealthy Auckland widow' Christine Fernyhough's purchase of Castlehill Station and her journey to learn about high country farming: 'It may be basic knowledge to farmers but less than a year ago Christine lived an Auckland life and the d-words – dipping, dagging, drenching and debt – had hardly crossed her mind'. The city–country binary was more fluid for Madeline Rix-Trott in 2010/3:

'My mother grew up on a dairy farm in the Waikato and she's gone from the country to being a city girl. I've grown up in the city so I'm basically a city girl at heart and I still have to have my city fix . . . but also I wouldn't swap the country to go back and live in the city'.

Dale DeMeulemeester explained how he 'left America hoping to find a place where he could live what he regarded as a sane and healthy lifestyle, seeking a place to settle outside the cities' (1995/2). Similarly, Fieka Meyer said 'we came here and we never look back . . . now when we go and visit our family in Holland we are always very glad when we see clean green NZ again' (2015/1). The community subtheme was occasionally prompted by reporter questioning. For example, in 2005/3, the reporter posited that 'you're a long way from anywhere here, aren't you?', to which Lynn Mills replied: 'I guess in some people's terms . . . but you just get used to that . . . you're not at the shop every other day but . . . it's not a problem at all'.

A dream or passion

A further component of the connection theme was the pursuit of a dream or passion, which was referenced in several shows. For example, 'Neil was born in the city but it was always his dream to be a farmer' (1990/1). The Crofoots had also dreamed for years of farming in New Zealand, and spoke of earlier visits, including on their honeymoon. This subtheme of a dream or vision was not always explicit but was coded as present in narratives of emotional connection to a lifestyle or the physical environment, particularly those that minimised financial concerns:

Out on the river [Bob's] never bored and he says he's got a job that can't be beat . . . the rewards aren't just in making a living from the water – being on this waterway and being a part of it is reward enough in itself (1990/2).

Extra income would help the couple build their high country hunting and wagon trek business though Raewyn says for now having the chance to be on Erewhon is just about enough by itself (2010/2).

These days Phil and Georgie get some time to enjoy the swamp instead of spending all their time battling it. It's been a long haul developing a sub-tropical nursery from scrub and swamp . . . It cost them \$20,000 a year for their research . . . but they're not counting – they're living a dream and it's sometimes hard to put a price on that (1990/3).

I mean you look around you, you have this as a workplace, you have fantastic family and friends to share good times with . . . this is wealth for us, it's not all measured in dollar terms (2010/3).

For the Mills, who originally lived in town, the decision to farm miniature Highland cattle 'was a heart rather than a head decision' (2005/3). Christine Fernyhough:

'fell in love with [Castlehill Station] on a day like today . . . I didn't have any knowledge of farming so I didn't look at things like fences and buildings and cattleyards so I've been surprised at the amount of money I've had to put in . . . ' (2005/2).

Debbie Campbell bought an orchard she 'fell a little bit in love' with, within a week of resigning as a business analyst (2015/3).

Importantly, emotional connections to the environment were often presented as independent from land ownership, again minimising economic influences. For example, many of those 'lucky enough' to have worked on Molesworth Station had 'fallen in love with these hills' (2010/4). Similarly, Wilden manager Peter Adam said: 'you treat it [the land] as your own and otherwise it wouldn't work . . . ya put your heart and soul into it' (2015/4). The retired manager of Castlepoint Station put it this way: 'We never worked here, we lived here' (2000/3). A leased block of Maori land was said to be an 'integral part of family life for the Newtons' (2015/2). Here, Matt Newton joked that his lease had been secured though 'meeting on Waitangi Day and . . . swapping two pigs, no muskets or blankets though', a coded reference to colonial land transactions in New Zealand directly followed by a positive comment about the arrangement from whanau chair Peter Stockman. Connections to the sea also defied ownership but reflected quality of life, with Mike Moss explaining how sustainable dairying means clean harbours and waterways where his children and their future children will continue to be able to 'catch a feed' (2010/3).

History and tradition

Connection to history and tradition was foregrounded in several shows, particularly those about hill or high country stations. The 2000/3 show began with the sights and sounds of the Castlepoint

Beach races, said to have first run in 1875, with the adjoining station owned by the same family since the 1870s. Dan Steele's Blue Duck Lodge in the remote and rugged central North Island was surrounded by abandoned farms and buildings: 'stark reminders of the broken dreams of the returned WW1 servicemen who tried to farm here' (2010/1). History underpinned Steele's expressed commitment to sustainable, non-intensive farming practices supplemented by wildlife protection, adventure tourism and restoration of pioneer buildings. Referring to settlers' mistake of clearing the land, he said:

'I'd like to open up all these old roads and preserve all of the history of the place so it can be enjoyed by New Zealanders for generations to come . . . it was the last frontier of New Zealand farming and the whole thing failed and [there's] some really important lessons'.

Fernyhough too was captivated by the rich history of Castlehill Station (2005/2). While showing her favourite parts of the historic woolshed, she was asked by the reporter if it was 'this old romantic thing' that attracted her. She replied that she had soon got over that: 'I won't be able to eat on Mr Clarkson's initials on the old door, but I do like that sense of history, and I'm pleased that I've got custodianship of it to keep it alive for a bit longer'.

Tradition loomed large in 2010/4 where for Jim Ward, managing Crown-owned Molesworth Station was more than just another job: 'It lives inside you: you eat it, sleep it, breathe it . . . There's a huge tradition here and it's great to be part of . . . and be able to carry that on, it carries its own mana with it'. Here, tradition was entwined with national significance, given the Station's government ownership and open public access:

'We . . . hope that once in a lifetime every New Zealander takes the time to come through – maybe not all in the same day [chuckles], but you know certainly over their lifetime – cause it's their land and we want them to be comfortable with what's happening here'.

Finally, the tradition subtheme included references to farming practices such as a 'back to basics' approach to organic dairying. Mike Moss expressed dismay that traditional farming systems and knowledge are dying out: 'I often think back about little things my dad would do and say . . . essentially pre WWII most people farmed pretty naturally and fairly organically . . . we don't want to lose that knowledge' (2010/3). Tradition was also referenced in discussion of community events such as the 'unashamedly rural and traditional' bush carnival in 2005/1, which is 'kept going the Kiwi way, by enthusiasts'.

The progress theme

This theme encompasses both the movement and development aspects associated with the concept of progress.

Movement: daily activity, technical information and subject backstory

In the first instance, the movement subtheme is a verbal and visual reflection of the daily activities recorded by the CC crew during their farm visits. As subjects ranged from eel catcher and cheese-maker to station managers and beef entrepreneur, a wide range of daily activity was captured in the sample. For example, 2015/1 followed Meil Meyer through various stages in cheese production, storage and packaging, with him explaining: 'what we've got here is a really simple cantilevered press system . . . and we just put a 5 kg weight on the end here and then as you can see it really starts to press the cheese out'. The technical subtheme captured industry or scientific facts relevant to the story. For example, 'Bob's eels are first sorted for size; staff also check they're in reasonable health . . . then they're left in a constant flow of fresh water . . . to clear out their digestive system' (1990/2). The occasional use of expert sources supported this subtheme (e.g. 1990/1, 2000/1,

2010/4). Less common was the subject backstory, capturing the backgrounds of those who had come to farming in later life: for example, 'in her previous life Christine was well known for founding *Books in Homes*' (2005/2). For those with longer rural histories, backstories were more likely to be coded under development.

Development: strategies, innovations and achievements

The theme of development, exemplified in attention to subjects' farming strategies, innovations and achievements, was central to nearly every CC episode. For example, in 2015/3, Debbie Campbell walked around her orchard picking avocado and explaining the different types of fruit, the pollination and ripening process, and her new approach to tree pruning. Further, she explained how her unique southern location influences her markets, and why she moved to farm gate sales and a smaller customer base.

A broad range of strategies and innovations were identified in the sample, including developments in science and technology often linked to new methods of pest and disease control (e.g. Landcare research project using sentinel pigs to track TB on Molesworth Station in 2010/4), environmental management (e.g. fencing waterways in 2010/3, trapping pests in 2010/1), livestock management (e.g. building herd homes for wintering cows in 2010/3) and marketing (e.g. 2005/2). These strategies were commonly enacted by subjects during filming: in 2005/2, Fernyhough was shown placing branded stickers on bottles of whisky as part of her new marketing drive. In 2015/4, shots of Wilden Station's winter shearing were accompanied by an extended visual and verbal explanation of how and why it is done, presumably aimed at a more urban viewer who might find the approach counterintuitive. Peter Adam demonstrated the use of a winter comb on a sheep, while explaining 'it's like leaving your woolly singlet on'.

The emphasis on strategies, innovations and achievements commonly resulted in a positive focus. The 2000/2 show summarised the years of entrepreneurial activity that culminated in Brent and Shirley Rawstron winning 'Farmer of the Year' in 2000: 'what they started on 76 acres in 1976 has become a business turning over \$2 m a year'. However, this show also charted their challenges and setbacks, and other episodes were more explicitly prompted by adversity. In 2000/1, the development theme was underpinned by CC's three dated visits to Barry Kingan's farm, made over an 18 month period corresponding with the progression of a North Otago drought. The show plotted his responses, from off-farm grazing and supplementary feeding to the eventual sale of breeding stock, paid employment, refinancing and finally, the end of the drought.

Diversification was a commonly referenced strategy in the development theme. Though not all episodes used the term, virtually all showed examples (e.g. the Mills farm cattle and grow tomatoes and calla lilies for local markets, 2005/3). Several stories referred to passive income from Manuka honey hives and on-farm tourism ventures were discussed in 2000/3, 2005/2, 2010/1, 2010/2. The most explicit reference to diversification as a strategy of economic survival was in a series of personal vignettes exploring the plight of Southland farmers at the end of New Zealand's first major recession post-deregulation: 'Deer and cows graze in ever increasing numbers in Southland. Farmers are on the lookout for ways to spread their eggs into several baskets. Another popular alternative is cut flower and bulb production' (1990/1). Through the years, the need for diversity in farming operations appeared increasingly taken-for-granted. For example, the approach of 1990/1 contrasts with 2015/2 where Matt Newton's combination of helicopter business and farming was explicitly noted by the narrator ('he's found a unique way to make these different features harmonious'), but the diversity of his farming operation, which included Manuka honey, dairy grazing, sheep and cattle, was not.

References to innovative business models such as joint ventures (2000/2, 2005/2, 2010/1, 2010/2), corporate owners (1990/1, 2000/2), advisory boards (2000/3) and farm gate sales (2010/3,

2015/3) were also part of the progress theme. The 2000/3 show followed the Crofoot advisory board's visit to Castlepoint Station and explained the thinking behind this initiative:

'we're coming from a different culture . . . a different orientation of farming . . . our feeling is if we can pull some heads together to give us some national perspective . . . we've got a lot to learn and this helps us get there quickly'.

An emphasis on entrepreneurial thinking was also identified in the Rostrums' restaurant and function centre (2000/2), selling their meat and wine directly to visitors. Interestingly, of the 17 shows that were about one individual, couple or family, only seven presented a traditional, owner-operator model of farming (though five more involved extended family).

Finally, strategies of hard work, resilience and self-sufficiency were also common in the progress theme. For example, Graham Mills made liquid fertiliser from his worm farm, asking 'why buy it all when we can make at least some of it' and later saying, 'I kinda think it's just a good upbringing that you shouldn't be afraid of work' (2005/3). Ted Tickle was described by one of his bull riders as a 'tough wily old critter . . . up at about 5 o'clock . . . out in the rain, hail or snow'. (2005/1) Going without creature comforts at home, especially while focussing on developing the land or business, was also mentioned in several shows (e.g. 2015/4, 2015/2, 2005/3, 1990/3).

Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence that despite sweeping changes in New Zealand agriculture, CC's depiction of rural life has for the past 25 years retained a remarkably consistent emphasis on connection and progress. These themes capture a localised version of the New Zealand countryside that incorporates but extends beyond the rural idyll and is firmly embedded in the neo-liberal discourses and structures of contemporary farming. This supports Perry's (1994: 49) argument that 'New Zealanders . . . mobilise . . . images of the rural differently from those societies whose wealth and wellbeing does not rest upon agriculture'.

An important – but perhaps not unexpected – finding is that the connection theme clearly aligns with elements of the rural idyll. Across the sample, family, community and tradition featured regularly, occasionally defined with reference to the urban or global 'other'. Further, CC's version of rural life in New Zealand is presented as classless – or at least a place where the importance of money and land ownership is downplayed, though this egalitarian sentiment is in some tension with the show's simultaneous focus on progress. Just one subject, Christine Fernyhough, was described as 'wealthy', though by making several references to the financial challenges of farming she minimised the differences between her and others, thereby rhetorically preserving the accessibility of the rural lifestyle. The tendency to downplay the importance of money while focussing on subjects' 'way of life' allows the show to gloss over many of the financial barriers and costs of farming, during a period of declining land affordability in New Zealand. At the same time, the dimensions of connection map neatly onto NZOA's claims that the show is 'quintessentially New Zealand' and align with the agency's aspirations under current broadcasting policy to reflect national identity and values.

Like other mediated rural idylls, CC also excludes the potentially problematic dimensions of New Zealand's country life. All the main subjects in the sample were Pakeha New Zealanders and the nation's colonial history of land confiscation and wars was only hinted at in 2015/2's coded reference to 'muskets and pigs'.² There was a general absence of political comment or criticism, with a couple of exceptions including 1990/1's references to politicians and financiers 'put [ting] the boot in when farming was down' and the loss of government funding for local education services. Two shows in the sample could even be interpreted as forms of 'soft advocacy' for the rural sector. It is difficult to see the 2010/3 episode titled 'clean dairying' as unrelated to the concurrent

national debate about the environmental impact of ‘dirty dairy’. A surprising comment about farm ownership rules also appeared in Jim Hickey’s introduction to the 2000/3 episode about the new US owners of Castlepoint Station:

‘Who should be allowed to buy NZ farms? Should there be a law against overseas ownership? But isn’t it good for the economy? Well, we’re not buying into the argument but we have a story that just might change some people’s attitudes about overseas investment in NZ farmland’.

Set up in this way, it is hard to argue that CC, sponsored at this time by the National Bank, was not buying into the argument: the show included explicit endorsement of the Crofoots from two long-time Station employees, and showcased a family apparently devoted to their adopted community and farming life. CC’s positive portrayal of rural life has been noted – and critiqued – elsewhere (e.g. Selwyn, 2013; Smithies, 2015; Trotter, 2016), supporting Morris and Evans’ (2001) finding that much contemporary agricultural coverage is apolitical and non-controversial. Of course, CC’s core remit is not current affairs or journalism, and it therefore cannot be expected to do the ‘heavy lifting’ associated with these formats. However, the broader lack of in-depth current affairs programming in New Zealand means there are few other forums for discussion of important agricultural issues, leaving the idyll as the dominant rural representation in mainstream, primetime television.

Notably, while CC contains many of the components and omissions of the rural idyll, the thematic analysis also identified a concurrent emphasis on the day-to-day and strategic work of modern agriculture. Various extended sequences of working farms and farmers imbued the sample, providing a view of rural life encompassing daily and often ‘technical’ activity. Here, a political economy framework supplements the limited explanatory power of the rural idyll for this crucial aspect of CC. CC firmly reflects the neo-liberal values of contemporary farming in New Zealand, with its increasingly naturalised emphasis on markets, diversification, innovation and entrepreneurship. For example, while the CC subjects of 1990–2000 were still ‘smarting’ and ‘struggling’ in a deregulated environment, by 2010 market development had become an accepted part of farming rhetoric on even New Zealand’s Crown-owned, iconic Molesworth Station. Episode 2010/4 opened with spectacular shots of snow-capped mountain peaks and shepherds riding in springtime’s morning light, and working here was framed as a privilege. But for manager Jim Ward, this distinctive environment was also an undeveloped economic opportunity:

‘I’m not marketing person at all but I know that we’ve got something very special here, it’s a very special environment and a very special iconic place to New Zealanders so . . . if we can build on that relationship with this environment with the produce we put out I think we’ve got a real opportunity **to market our beef**’.

The farmer’s voice, which is central to CC’s approach to storytelling, here permits an uncontested emphasis on neo-liberal values and naturalises this worldview through a seamless connection with the established idyllic tropes of the New Zealand countryside.

The apparently greater balance between connection and progress themes in the latter part of the 25-year period also has a political–economic dimension linked to the broadcasting policy environment. The constant presence of these two themes reflects the need to maintain both urban and rural audiences for the show, and suggests an increasingly well-integrated programme ‘formula’. Despite the oft-cited notion that ‘no farmer should learn anything from watching Country Calendar’ (Fountainne, forthcoming), my analysis documents the clear presence of farming information in the series, though not at the expense of an emphasis on people. As CC producer Julian O’Brien has said, the programme is ‘. . . primarily about people, not rural current affairs . . . we live or die on the ratings, so this show wouldn’t exist if it was only watched by farmers’ (Smithies, 2015: 20). Indeed, the show’s real and rhetorical emphasis on ‘the people’ both underpins its ratings success and allows its funding body NZOA to argue its wider social value, thereby serving current broadcasting policy

priorities. Commercial imperatives also underpin CC's sponsorship arrangements and the fluctuations in series length, which first declined then more than tripled over the sample period.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis of a television programme watched by thousands of New Zealanders for over 50 years captures the multifaceted relationship between local media formats, economics and rural society. CC's themes of connection and progress reinforce and extend our understanding of the rural idyll, downplaying ruptures in rural communities linked to neo-liberal agricultural policy and serving a mixed-model broadcasting policy with its emphasis on high rating local content and national identity. The integration of these themes is underpinned by an approach to storytelling which privileges rather than interrogates the farmer's voice, simultaneously capturing and glossing over the complexities of life in New Zealand's countryside, where, for instance, iconic landscapes are both 'very special' and 'marketing opportunities'. Whether these patterns are unique to New Zealand or also apparent in other market-driven agricultural nations needs further research. For now, CC continues to tell the stories of farming people to a diverse, primetime television audience, occupying a treasured place in the local television landscape and providing an enduring televisual record of New Zealand's version of the rural idyll.


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Notes

1. A gendered analysis will be reported elsewhere. In short, there were more than twice as many male subjects in my sample as female, with women least visible in 2005 and 2010. A 'man alone' motif co-existed with an emphasis on men as family leaders, and historical and sporting references were almost exclusively male.
2. While no indigenous farmers appeared in my sample, CC has showcased Maori agriculture and entrepreneurship (e.g. *Seeds of Change*, 2011; *The Power of Whanau*, 2016; *From the Ashes*, 2018; *Motu Magic*, 2019). Interview and focus group data about Maori representations will be reported elsewhere.

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