

# Telling Stories About Farming: Mediated Authenticity and New Zealand's *Country Calendar*

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## Abstract

Mediated authenticity in New Zealand's *Country Calendar* (CC) television program is explored from the perspective of its producers, and rural and urban audiences. Paradoxically, CC is understood as both “real” and “honest” television and a constructed, idyllic version of the rural good life in New Zealand. Techniques and devices such as a predictable narrative arc, consistent narration, invisible reporting and directing, and naturalized sound and vision contribute to the show's predictability, ordinariness, spontaneity and im/perfection, mediating an authentic yet aspirational view of farming life. We elucidate how factual, primetime television contributes to a shared national sense of “who we are” while navigating different audience experiences and expectations. At stake is New Zealanders' attachment to rural identity, which underpins public policy commitments to the farming sector, at a time when new agricultural politics are increasingly contested.

## Keywords

rural, agriculture, television producers, audiences, media

The presence of some form of rural idyll in popular culture's depictions of the countryside is well established but much less is known about how television producers and audiences conceptualize the idyll or how in factual entertainment television, it

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co-exists with notions of authenticity. This article presents a case study of one of New Zealand's (NZ) longest running and highest rating television programs, *Country Calendar* (CC), drawing on interviews with production staff and focus groups with urban and farmer viewers to identify and explore the aspects of mediated authenticity that underpin the show's blend of reality and idyll.

CC airs in a primetime weekend slot on state-owned TVNZ, a hybrid state broadcaster with a commercial mandate. The locally made show is best described as factual entertainment television, and presents 30-minute profiles of people who live and work on the land. In NZ, where most of the population live in urban centers but agriculture is one of the nation's main economic drivers, television plays a key role in shaping public knowledge and understanding of farming and rural issues. CC's commercial success reflects its popularity with the (predominantly) urban audience and its longstanding cultural connection to farmer viewers over its 54-year history. The show has a commercial sponsor (currently Hyundai) and is also partly funded by NZ's broadcasting commission in recognition of its contribution to national identity: CC has been pronounced "as purely Kiwi as it gets" (NZOA 2014). Described as a "ratings juggernaut," it consistently achieves—by substantial margin—the largest audience of any NZOA-funded program (e.g., NZOA 2020) and even outperforms other shows which specifically target viewers in the highly prized 25-54 demographic (e.g., Stuff 2018). In 2018, the show reached 800,000 viewers per episode (approximately one-sixth of the population), an increase from 580,000 viewers in 2015 (McKenzie 2018).

However, despite its unique place and iconic status in the NZ television landscape (Perry 2013; Bell 1996), there has been, up until very recently, little academic research about CC's makers, content or audiences. Indeed, CC has long fallen into Mills' (2010) category of "invisible television"—programs which are popular with a significant number of viewers but attract little academic attention. An initial thematic analysis of the show, published in 2019, established its dual emphasis on elements consonant with the rural idyll (particularly family, community, and tradition) and progress (Fontaine 2020), linked to the political economy of NZ broadcasting and agriculture. In keeping with its "lifestyle" focus, CC does not directly engage with farming "issues" (such as animal welfare) or agricultural politics. As Geoffrey Craig (2020, 12) argues, while sustainability is increasingly prominent on CC this aspect of farming is "presented less as a political intervention into the dynamics of modern agricultural production and more so as an inclusion into the 'virtues' of the rural way of life." Programs such as CC are thus not ideologically neutral; as Boyle and Kelly (2016, 8) write about factual business television programs, "they spring from key television professionals working in and across a range of media organizations, themselves shaped by their understandings of what they perceive are the needs and wants of both the industry that they work within and the range of audiences they wish to attract or engage." This article therefore extends earlier work on content themes by incorporating the views of CC makers and audiences, within a framework of mediated authenticity (Enli 2015).

## Mediated Depictions of Rurality and Farming

Mediated representations of rurality draw on normative ideals and cultural imaginings about the countryside, which vary across nations and time but frequently converge in portraying the rural as a place of peace and simplicity, natural landscapes and close-knit communities (Woods 2011). This conceptualization is commonly referred to as the rural idyll, with popular culture depictions tending to be utopian and often nostalgic, and the countryside cast as “a place for traditional gender and ethnic identities; a white, middle class, family oriented and unchanging space” (Lagerqvist 2014, 34; Bell 2006); (see also, Chueh and Lu 2018; Perry 1994; Phillips et al. 2001). Further, rurality is often constructed in opposition to the less “natural” urban; for instance, images of farming in the Australian media have been understood to offer the nation “imaginative resources to construct ‘the country’ as a place of respite from the alienation and inauthenticity of urban life” (Phillipov and Loyer 2019, 3), and a similar theme underpins popular farming video game, *Stardew Valley* (Sutherland 2020b).

This association of the idyll with the natural and the real (e.g., Lagerqvist 2014; Phillipov and Loyer 2019) coexists with acknowledgment that idyllic countrysides—from the pastoral portraits of Victorian England to the Instagram accounts of global food producers—are carefully constructed versions of rurality (e.g., Elson and Shirley 2017; Linné 2016; Woods 2011). These constructions highlight particular aspects and downplay others, to the extent that Linné argues “farming fantasies” and “dairy fairy tales” populate the social media feeds of Swedish dairy companies (see also Phillipov 2016). Viewer attachment to these fantasies of the “good life,” and to television’s good life genres, persists even as the original premise is challenged and reimagined against a backdrop of economic instability, social and environmental change (Berlant 2011; Peeren and Souch 2019; Sutherland 2020b).

A further strand of content work has established that aspects of rurality lack visibility in the mainstream media. Rural news “appears only to feature when it concerns events that are discordant with dominant discourses, and gets reported in language that evokes imagery of the rural idyll” (Woods 2011, 35). Mainstream media feed rural-urban disconnection in many Western countries, demonstrating a clear urban bias and a preoccupation with negative news about agriculture (Jones 2017). This pattern is exacerbated by lack of industry transparency, changes in the agricultural policy agenda and the rise of a new “politics of agriculture,” marked by complex institutional jurisdictions and clashes of values in areas such as food security and sustainability (Daugbjerg and Swinbank 2012). Furthermore, agriculture’s social license to operate has also been eroded by urbanization, shifting patterns of consumption, the growth of biotechnologies, and environmental and social change, with implications for the sector’s economic viability, and cultural and political influence. In NZ, one of the most deregulated agricultural nations in the world, the politics of contemporary agriculture currently play out around environmental stewardship, land use, and animal welfare. Yet interestingly, government survey data suggests rural and urban New Zealanders have “similar and positive” views of the agricultural sector, in contrast to media coverage suggesting a growing rural-urban divide and polarized views (O’Connor 2018).

Martin Phillips is one of the few researchers to have studied both the producers and audiences of rural television, and his singly and jointly authored studies capture the diverse and complex interpretations of rurality in the reception of television drama (e.g., Phillips et al. 2001). Rather than being passive consumers of the dramatized rural idyll, many viewers understand television's imagery to be partial or even false, with readings that encompass realism, idealism or escapism (Phillips et al. 2001). Phillips' (2012) later work on rurality and television drama includes interviews with NZ producers, including a TVNZ commissioning editor who, when explaining the need for thoughtful crafting of rural visuals to build the idyllic look important to New Zealanders' self-identity, said that "we tend to see ourselves as a rural sort. . .that's part of our iconography" (34). Yet as Phillips notes, rurality was also regarded as problematic by producers, and academic analyses of rurality remain "open to diverse and complex interpretations" (37). However, there are no comparable studies with viewers or producers of **factual** television formats about the rural and/or agriculture, an important gap given the genre's influence on audience responses to media content (Enli 2015). Indeed, factual entertainment formats as distinct from other genres such as reality television are under examined in the literature (Boyle and Kelly 2016). There is also little research into factual television programming about rurality or agriculture generally, though two studies suggest that the rural idyll is a prevailing feature in the closely related lifestyle and reality television formats. Chueh and Lu's (2018) study of Taiwan's *Taiker Etude* lifestyle program captures its idealized and romanticized conceptualization of the countryside, evidenced in rural migrants' dream homes, beautiful physical settings and pleasurable outdoor activities. In Holland, Peeren and Souch (2019) documented how multiple series of reality dating show *Farmer Wants a Wife* were eventually unable to sustain "nuanced realistic images of farming" in the face of the fantasy of the rural romance idyll.

## Mediated Authenticity

Critiques of the rural idyll align with a wider cultural preoccupation with the notion of authenticity and how this is mediated in contemporary media forms. Enli's (2015) theory of mediated authenticity explains how media construct representations of reality that are accepted by audiences as real or genuine, even as these audiences understand that these representations are to some extent illusions. Thus, authenticity is "a currency in the communicative relations between producers and audiences . . . [which] traffics in representations of reality" (Enli 2015, 1). The extent to which media constructions are considered authentic depends on complex symbolic negotiations between producers and audiences, particularly in respect to trustworthiness, originality and spontaneity. This focus on the co-construction of authenticity, by producers and farming and urban audiences, is key to our study of *CC* makers and viewers.

The theory of mediated authenticity has three key components: authenticity illusions, the authenticity contract, and authenticity scandals and puzzles. Authenticity illusions focus on the conventions which lend credibility to media constructions, such as the use of eyewitness interviews in television news. Both fiction and non-fiction

media use authenticity illusions to aid in storytelling but factual genres are expected to bear closer resemblance to “empirical realism” (Enli 2015, 16). Genre is thus a fundamental component of the authenticity contract, a tacit agreement as to what level of manipulation is acceptable, and where producer actions and audience responses are shaped by their shared genre-based expectations of a media text. Further, this contract is reinforced by audiences’ “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 1817 cited in Enli 2015, 17)—their willingness and even need to believe in what they see. When these shared agreements break down, through deception or innovation, this results in what Enli (2015) labels authenticity scandals or puzzles, which are particularly likely to accompany developments in new media and technology.

Based on case studies of predominantly new-at-the-time media formats, Enli (2015) suggests seven tropes of mediated authenticity (predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection) but calls for further research to “explore more systematically how media constructs its illusions of authenticity” (137). Mediated authenticity is paradoxical and has not been widely studied by media and communication scholars (Enli 2015), though the development of related concepts such as mediatization points to scholars’ ongoing interest in how the media, particularly new and social media, construct and change the social world (e.g., Couldry and Hepp 2016). Iversen’s (2018) study of Norwegian voters’ responses to leaders in political advertising is one of the few that extends our understanding of how audiences negotiate and reconcile the tensions of authenticity, for instance between “realness” and “stagedness.”

Our study addresses these gaps in knowledge by first asking how *CC* mediates authenticity, drawing from interviews and focus group data to explore how authenticity is constructed by producers and perceived by audiences, and in what ways this maps onto the characteristics proposed in Enli’s theory. We explore how farming and urban audiences make sense of and negotiate *CC*’s mediated authenticity in terms of their own lived experiences, and consider the implications for national identity and rural-urban understanding. In addressing these areas, we shed light on how popular, factual, primetime television that tells stories about farming contributes to a shared national sense of “who we are” (or who we want to believe ourselves to be) and our cultural values. Indeed, *CC* can be likened to other local “brands” which act as cultural agents for nation building and attest to important shared values such as innovation and entrepreneurship (Bulmer 2011). In focusing attention on a television program that has been watched by many NZ viewers for many years, but not been studied empirically, we help make visible the authenticity appeals of *CC* for NZ audiences, exploring how these are reconciled with national identity and the contemporary politics of agriculture. At stake here is New Zealanders’ attachment to rural identity, which underpins a public policy commitment to the primary industries and rural communities (including through NZOA funding which supports TVNZ’s production of *CC*), and the farming sector’s ability to influence public perceptions and guard its social license, at a time when new agricultural politics mean this terrain is increasingly contested.

Finally, it is important to note that the academic study of rurality has tended to under-theorize the mediated representations of farming and agriculture, and/or

subsume them into explorations of rurality (e.g., Woods 2010). Therefore, while we necessarily draw from the literature of rurality, we are especially interested in exploring and theorizing farming, and use a subset of rural viewers (i.e., farmers) in our focus groups to reflect *CC*'s focus on people who make their living from the land.

## Method

This article is an outcome of a three-part study of *CC* content, producers and audiences. The first part of our study employed qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to analyze patterns in *CC* content across a 25-year period, establishing the existence of a signature combination of rural idyll and an emphasis on progress in storytelling about a focal person, partnership or family (see Fountaine 2020). This thematic data contributed to a set of discussion questions for part two, where nine people involved with the production of *CC* were interviewed: two producers, four directors, the show's researcher, and a camera operator and sound recordist. All gave their permission to be named in the research. The thematic findings also formed the basis of focus group discussions in part three, where 20 regular *CC* viewers (men and women) from urban and farming backgrounds were recruited using convenience sampling. Participants comprised residents from the city of Auckland and agricultural students with farming backgrounds from a provincial university. All these participants have been given a pseudonym.

As our initial analysis of interview and focus group data progressed it became clear that for producers and city and farming audiences, *CC* is understood as being both "real" and "honest" television **and** a constructed and often idyllic version of the rural good life in NZ. Identifying this paradox led us to the work of Enli (2015), whose theory of mediated authenticity subsequently provided a framework for our exploration of how producers and audiences navigate and resolve the tensions between positive and uplifting storytelling and farming "realities."

## Mediated Authenticity and *CC*

Of Enli's (2015) seven characteristics, we found that *CC* clearly demonstrates three aspects of mediated authenticity (predictability, spontaneity and ordinariness), with some particularly interesting tensions around the presence of a fourth aspect, which we reframe slightly here as "im/perfection."

### *Predictability, Positivity and the *CC* "Formula"*

Predictability relates to "a consistent use of genre features and conventions" (Enli 2015, 136) and the resultant level of trust between producers and audiences, which contributes to authenticity. Unlike Enli's case studies of mediated authenticity, which consider new (for the time) media formats, *CC* is able to draw from high levels of existing audience familiarity, as a show broadcast on TVNZ for over 50 years. Its current format of people-based profiles is relatively unchanged since 1990 (Fountaine

2020), and as sound recordist Don Paulin said: “one of its strengths is that it hasn’t changed too much.”

Unsurprisingly then, the audience groups were confident in identifying a broad narrative arc to a typical *CC* episode: “Where they’ve [the farmers] come from. They start with that. They give you the backstory . . . the middle part is how they go about their day-to-day . . . the end is what they are going to do in the future” (Matt). There were repeated references to this structure and Kate suggested that the range of topics and subjects meant the stories didn’t come across as repetitive or boring: “they might be using the same process but there’s different things to talk about.”

Predictability for the audience was equally connected to the feel of the program: its consistent positivity in showcasing successes or the potential of farming, highlighting resilience, resourcefulness and hardiness while emphasizing the vision of rural NZ as “a good place to live” and “a repository of values” (Shucksmith 2018, 163). “They seem to have a successful format that they try to stick to” (Warren). The consensus across audience groups was that *CC* is informative and positive, that it showcases a wide range of farming activities (which are often distinctive, entrepreneurial, or niche), and is aimed at a general audience: it’s “always positive, it’s always a good story” (Tammy) and “it’s positive in a sea of rubbish . . . it’s always been reliable” (Greg). Furthermore, it rehearses and confirms the myths of national character: “the idea that New Zealanders get in and do it. . . and no mucking about. Give anything a go” (Caroline).

The importance of predictability was also apparent in interviews with the show’s makers, where it emerged in discussion of the established and successful *CC* storytelling “formula.” For audiences, narrative and emotional consistency contributes to perceived authenticity, builds trust and increases viewing pleasure but it is also pragmatic for television makers, as producer Julian O’Brien explained:

[I’ve] industrialised the documentary making process . . . I’ve just codified the whole thing . . . it’s all now in this very regular pattern and routine and everyone knows when things happen . . . I’ve got all these checklists and complicated ways of checking . . . trying to do it in a way which people don’t feel like they’re on an assembly line . . . as creative as possible . . . within these constraints.

In the interviews, the evolution of *CC*’s formula was variously attributed to long-standing producers Frank Torley and/or Julian O’Brien, the increased season length (especially since 2013), and indirectly to the competitive television environment. Ex-producer and director Howard Taylor referred to “some very clear criteria . . . to include or exclude programmes. . . participants have to, at some stage, have their hands in the soil.” Julian also referred to his informal “rules,” saying subjects “can’t just be lifestylers [hobby or non-commercial farmers] who’ve got the paddock of lavender . . . they’ve got to have a lot of skin in the game. . . and it’s definitely not a relaxing lifestyle thing.”

However, the audience groups were united in the view that *CC* **does** have an increased focus on lifestylers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the farmer group was convinced

that the show now prioritizes a wider audience than farmers, although they did not explicitly link this to TVNZ's commercial imperatives. Yet there are two related structural issues contributing to this aspect of predictability, reflecting TVNZ's funding model: because the show already draws large audiences, further risk-taking is not encouraged, and given that the urban audience is much larger, commercial logic dictates more stories will be made with this in mind. However, the urban audience also expects a level of what they perceive as "authentic" farming content from *CC*, meaning lifestyle subjects and topics (e.g., small-scale self-sustainability, supplemented by off-farm income) cannot dominate the show, a point that is explored further in our discussion of ordinariness.

### *"Just Driving Past the Gate": Natural and Spontaneous Storytelling*

One of the central paradoxes of mediated authenticity is that television content and performance is planned and organized to appear natural and spontaneous. For *CC*, advance research, judicious use of overt editing, and directorial skill all contribute to the authenticity illusion, supporting the aura of spontaneity. One focus group exchange captured two urban audience members' awareness of this illusion: "they must scout out these farms before they film because they're always picturesque and well looked after, and reality is, a lot of farms aren't like that. . ." (Warren)"Or they film it in a way that you don't see it" (Irene). There was also tacit acknowledgment in the farmer group that television is selective by nature (James: "obviously it's a TV show and they're not going to tell you the bad time they had"). But for the most part such practices were not commented upon, suggesting the show is successful in creating an illusion of naturalness and spontaneity for viewers.

The production practices supporting spontaneity operate at various levels of *CC* storytelling. First, researcher Viv described her role as gatekeeper and the "hard decisions" made behind the scenes to identify suitable *CC* subjects: "I have to scan through and pick out what looks like it might have legs and get on the phone and talk to people." Director Vicki Wilkinson-Baker explained that the program appears natural because of this planning:

by the time you get there with a cameraman and sound operator, really you are prompting them to tell you what they've already said. . .from a journalistic point of view, sometimes that sounds like a bit of cop out: just let them talk. But you don't, of course, because you've done the research, you know what they're telling you is accurate, reasonable, and factual.

Cameraman Peter Young explained the role of his own intuition in filming on location, within the bounds of initial scoping. "We will have a chat before. . .scope out the shoot time—say, five days . . . and then I'll just shoot it." His instinctive responses and non-invasive filming practices enable close connection to subjects and contribute to the illusion of spontaneity. This approach also facilitates "the ideal story" which according to associate producer Dan Henry: "looks like the camera's just turned up



... capturing what is going on.” As Julian said: “like we were just driving past the gate one morning and went in.” Dan continues: “The variety of different shots where the farmer might be talking to you while they’re moving, while they’re driving . . . they’re just chatting while they’re working, is one of the things that makes it genuine.”

Importantly, the filming and production work is not gimmicky or flashy. Julian explained that “we deliberately make it artless . . . it doesn’t draw attention to how it’s made. . . that would break the spell.” The two producers and both technicians recalled earlier styles of storytelling which seem too contrived for *CC* in hindsight, such as using commercial music as background in the late 1980s: “Terribly of the moment but just kind of ridiculous and we wouldn’t do that anymore” (Dan). They noted that elements such as slow-motion and drones have to be carefully managed to ensure they don’t impinge on the central importance of character and story: “When you’re just putting in lovely landscapes for the sake of a lovely landscape, then you’re losing your story. It’s always got to be connected to a person.”

For Don, sound plays a key role in creating what he sees as an authentic viewing experience, grounded in the natural rural environment. His preference was for “natural” farm noises rather than gratuitous music, such as “a distant bull roaring down the valley or something like that.”

Another storytelling device enabling a direct and immediate connection between subject and audience, and thus supporting the aura of spontaneity, was the shift (around 2014) away from on-screen reporters and to one consistent narrator—initially long-time producer Frank Torley and now Dan. In effect, this is now one of *CC*’s authenticity illusions (Enli 2015). Dan, who took on this narrator role following Torley’s retirement, combining it with his producing and directing work for the show, explained that:

taking the reporter away in a bid to . . . put the farmer to the forefront and make it more about them . . . there was kind of two parts of the same brief, to get the farmer to tell their own story as much as possible . . . If it can be said by the farmer, let them say it, rather than . . . huge tracts of voiceover. . . [and] no cross-examination style interviewing.

Vicki also reflected on what this change meant for storytelling: “So the reporter went, and we brought the narrator in. And then getting people to tell their stories more. . . and getting them to do little interviews while they’re doing things: while they’re in the yards drafting, while they’re shearing, while they’re stacking hay.” She explained how this format supports the presentation of authenticity:

the viewer feels like they’re right in there with the talent. . . it’s still reasonably authentic storytelling. I say reasonably . . . We still direct things to a degree . . . we do pick and choose what elements we want to put in. We are making decisions, but once you get down to it, the people are telling the story fundamentally in their words. We’re not manipulating things; we’re not engineering things . . . we get right up close to people and they tell their story in their words. It’s very genuine in that regard.

Of course, the presence of the authoritative narrator as “voice of God”—in this case a male voice—is associated with traditional documentary values and creates the impression of objectivity and balance (Beattie 2004), potentially undermining the producers’ emphasis on subjects telling their own stories. However, our Auckland focus group members referred to the narrator’s voice as calm, measured and compelling—“a real farming voice” (Edith)—suggesting this storytelling device supports rather than detracts from the perceived authenticity of the *CC* formula.

A second aspect of spontaneity is storytelling that is personalized, engaging and emotionally driven (Enli 2015). These elements intersect with underlying cultural values in NZ where, as Bell (1997) suggests, farming is claimed as the “backbone of the country” and a “great way of life.” Rural mythologies powerfully inform NZ identity and underpin national characteristics such as being decent and fair-minded and having a friendly, casual and helpful approach. In NZ, as in many other nations, personal qualities of independence, working hard/playing hard, self-reliance, and being your own boss resonate with the imagined national psyche (Craig 2020; Sutherland 2020b). Unsurprisingly then, personalities and engagement were referenced in various ways by all *CC* staff, who spoke of the importance of having people tell a story articulately and passionately. Viv explained that *CC* is “first and foremost about people and about talent. . .how they say what they say, what they’ve got to say.” Howard also attributed an episode’s success to “fabulous talent”: “It’s that simple. Someone whose personality shines. That’s all it takes. You can do any story you like when you’ve got that.” Don noted “in the end the storytelling, probably 80% or 90% of it, comes from [personality].” For Kerryanne, character and passion were intertwined, and any featured subject on the show would: “have to be a character. . .a dogged determined person [with] passion about what they’re doing.” Echoing this, Peter saw “character” as key to the show’s ability to connect with the audience: “a story is nothing unless you can pin it on a character and have this emotional connection.” In many respects, it is this personalized and engaging storytelling that allows *CC* to transcend its immediate farming context and resonate with a wider audience. As Dan said, the episodes should provide “universal stories about people.”

### *Ordinary People Who are Good at What They Do*

Mediated authenticity values the plain or mundane over the glamorous and more apparently contrived: the ordinary person is seen as more representative of “the people” and thus more genuine. For the staff of *CC* and for urban viewers, the show’s talent were perceived as relatable, ordinary or “real” people—albeit doing interesting and at times aspirational things, from establishing a new niche industry or technology to living completely “off the land.” The farmer focus group was more alert to what they perceived as idealized portrayals, including subjects who they regarded as **not** “ordinary” farmers: “they tend to show the top sort of producers. . .they’re not showing the bottom, that’s for sure” (Albert); “[no] neglect or anything, the animals look mint” (Sandra) and “my dairy farm I worked on over summer wouldn’t feature on *CC*, that’s for sure” (David).

Producers were well attuned to the importance of ordinariness in *CC*'s popularity, commonly attributing the show's success to "reflecting" the way things ordinarily are or capturing "the truth": as Viv expressed it, "we try to reflect what's happening out there . . . rather than trying to look for something." Dan noted that *CC*'s subjects are not actors or contestants, but are "there because they are doing what they ordinarily do . . . our people are real New Zealanders, who might not necessarily make the cut on any of those other shows. . . They're not there because they're good-looking or whatever. They're just there because they're good at what they do." Director Katherine Edmond identified authenticity as a key factor in *CC*'s popularity, arguing the audience has good instincts for what is contrived: "I don't think audiences are stupid. And I think audiences know when they are getting something that is authentic and hasn't been interfered with and hasn't been hyped up. . . there is so much that is hyped up that maybe [*CC* is] a relief for people. It's reliable. They know that what they see is an authentic product." Peter also reflected on this: "what I'm trying to do as a cameraman, is to capture really nice moments . . . capturing the truth—just a natural situation." However, Vicki noted that careful research and preparation is required to ensure the interaction between *CC* subjects looks natural on camera:

You can't force stuff, otherwise it just looks awkward on television. Audiences can pick up that . . . I need to [make enquiries] and make sure. . .[so] that when you go and film. . .it will be natural, and it will be genuine.

However, ordinariness has its limits in television storytelling and not all routine aspects of farm life are captured in *CC* stories. Don reconciled this by observing the power of visuals and the challenges of television-making more generally: "I mean you don't go around a farm and take pictures of cast sheep or an animal that's not well . . . once you take a picture of it, it elevates its importance and there's no way round that . . . *CC* has got its integrity, we don't jazz things up . . . we tell things as they are. . . [but] we wouldn't highlight a negative element unless it was an important part of the story." On the other hand, Katherine recalled instances where, watching the show, she felt *CC* had "crossed a line" in asking subjects to do something they would **not** ordinarily do, such as sleep outside under the stars: "yes, they might do it, but they weren't doing it at that time when we were there. So, it was almost like acting. We asked them to set it up and pretend to do it." For her, *CC* is "authentic, it's not getting people to act, it's that observational documentary thing where you really are trying to make people feel that they've turned up." As Julian also noted, exaggeration can weaken the audience's connection to *CC*: "The moment you start getting in those areas of 'oh could we exaggerate this or that or throw this thing in, I'm immediately going, 'is that going to ring quite true to the viewer?'"

The other potential distraction from ordinariness is *CC*'s focus on aspirational stories, particularly those which appear accessible and appealing to urban audiences (e.g., centering on "entry level" smallholdings and the accompanying lifestyle). Katherine noted:

we certainly do (and this is both a point of popularity and contention) a lot more lifestyle blocks, horticulture blocks, product stories than when I first started . . . [now] the mix does include many more lifestyle . . . because everything in television is so ratings driven [and] . . . about what Aucklanders like to watch.

Dan argued that *CC* will retain its popularity while rural people continue to want to see themselves, and while urban people want “their weekly dose of rural life—giving people that kind of aspirational ‘this could be my ticket out of here’ . . . You see someone who is in Taranaki [a farming province] growing salad greens on 2ha. You go, ‘actually, that’s achievable. We could sell our [Auckland] villa, buy a plot of land and we could do that.’” Peter concurred: “There’s a huge audience in Auckland that probably sit there on a Sunday and watch it thinking, ‘We could do that.’” These words were virtually mirrored in the urban focus group where Greg said: “That’s part of its appeal. There’s still a chance for us yet.” And particularly for urban viewers, *CC*’s blend of the ordinary and aspirational, in stories which feature people “like them” taking on a challenge that culminates in the rural good life, appears to resonate. Caroline said that *CC* “is really honest . . . there is no sensationalism ever. It’s a place you can go to and it’s going to be good, down to earth, positive stories.” This co-existed for her with the show being “aspirational, this lovely life . . . and ‘these are these lovely people.’” If these members of the urban audience had any sense of disconnection between *CC* and ordinariness it lay in the affordability of boutique products that had featured on *CC*: “[artisanal] stuff can be a little bit middle class. If you’re got a really tight budget, you don’t go there” (Caroline).

Indeed, *CC* producers claim to be vigilant about keeping the program grounded in what they see as the realities of farming, with both Dan and Julian referring to an informal litmus test that helps balance the influence of the two differently sized audiences. Dan said:

we would know about it very quickly if . . . the whole season [was] entirely pitched at an urban sector . . . If we stopped being a genuine farming programme . . . And if the rural sector stopped feeling like the programme was relevant to them, then I think we’d be in trouble because that would filter back to the urban audience.

And Julian concurred: “the rural/urban divide is not such a gulf that they won’t over time communicate that to their cousin in Epsom [city suburb] . . . and will say ‘Oh you watch *CC*, that’s bullshit really. It’s actually nothing like that and you’d better come onto the farm and have a look.’” Julian explained that the urban audience don’t want only pleasant and interesting but enjoy “this added thing . . . that this is actually real, this is actually what happens. . . The biggest kind of touchstone for keeping it real in my mind is, ‘what will rural people make of this when they watch it?’”

### *The Warm Bath and the Rosy Glow: Navigating im/perfection on CC*

Enli (2015) argues that a performance of authenticity requires some elements of imperfection to help it appear more real. While authenticity was referenced in the

interviews as being central to the success of *CC*, in a bid to respect the wishes of their talent, directors will also sidestep imperfections and occasionally agree to leave things out of an episode. For the most part, this reflects program makers' connection with, and sense of obligation to, the talent. A positive depiction is *quid pro quo* for the subjects' time and effort. Dan explained: "we feel quite protective of. . . the farmers who have given up a week of their lives and welcomed us into their home . . . we will always do our very best to portray them as well as we can . . . anything that was going to make them look bad or come across as goofy, we will remove it." Katherine also referred to this sense of responsibility: "It's like you actually go and live with these people [and] get right inside their story. . . it is a huge privilege. And with it comes some responsibility." She went on to explain how:

Farmers are often quite concerned about how [they] will look to other farmers . . . they will talk to you about, 'I don't want you to show those [animal] weights' . . . Or if their dogs are behaving badly, they'll be slightly worried about how other farmers will perceive them. . . And we always say to them . . . 'You don't have to worry. Your muster [rounding up of stock] will look perfect when it gets to *CC*.' So that's the rosy glow. We do make musters look perfect. And if the paddock has a huge number of thistles and looks awful, we won't use that shot. So, it's authentic, but we definitely go for what looks good and portray them in a good light.

However, while *CC* directors acknowledged their duty to the talent, they were simultaneously conscious of not being too perfect. Katherine for instance praised a recent story that had included information about disappointing sale prices for the bull farmers profiled in the item. Vicki explained her own efforts to include some difficult material in a story about a young farmer coping with her first drought: "I had to film in two sections . . . They had to get rid of a lot of stock. . . we could have ignored it, but we put it in. I thought it was important to . . . talk about how tough it had been on them all." Howard said he would like to see a few more *CC* stories without a clichéd happy ending, though he acknowledged the show's mandate of positivity: "I'd like sometimes . . . to have a story that ends up negatively . . . but look, we are a warm bath." Katherine reflected that what she called the "rosy glow" could be tiresome:

If I've got one criticism . . . we do an awful lot of, 'I love my life, and it's great, and I'm so lucky'. . . maybe this is the bit that we don't get across in quite the same way—that it's just incredibly hard work. . . we do talk about hard work, but I don't think we leave people with an impression of how hard and dirty and relentless it is.

Audience focus groups also articulated these tensions between what they saw as reality and *CC*'s "rosy glow." Warren from the urban group noted, "it's not showing the loneliness and the remoteness in the middle of winter. . . the sun is shining," and as a contrast he referred to statistics about high rates of suicide in NZ's rural sector. Similarly, the farmer participants referred to the prevalence of mental health problems among NZ farmers and Tina noted the disconnect between this and *CC* "kind of mak[ing] farming look so pleasant and easy . . . they do touch on the challenges

they've faced. . . obviously they don't want to put negative stuff on TV but . . . it's not a real pleasant job all the time." And Thomas: "there might be a false impression that on a farm there's always sunny days, it's never raining, never muddy, they don't really show the whole rough and tumble . . . the niggly stuff a farmer has to go through."

However, alongside their critique of *CC*'s selectivity and upbeat nature the farmer focus group welcomed *CC*'s emphasis on what they saw as positive content, depicting the developments and rewards of farming, offering a much-needed balance to the negative farming stories they saw elsewhere in the media and online. Here, *CC* was seen as helping both the industry and individual farmers, as the following quotes suggest: "[farmers] are putting so much effort in . . . they need to be given a little love" (Kate); "It's really tough on them; [*CC* can] give them a big boost" (Thomas); "there's so much negative stuff out there to do with farming and for [a good farming story] to be on TV at primetime, for everyone to watch. . . kind of makes everyone involved in the industry feel good as well" (Tina). *CC* was clearly a source of inspiration for these young farmers, a vindication of their own life choices, and a boost to morale: "watching some of the stories you feel quite proud that's happening in your country and they're such a good example of how we farm over here" (Tina); "reminds farmers how good being a farmer is . . . [even in the bad times]" (Thomas); "farmers . . . and other people [can see], that we're doing a good job" (Owen). Finally, it was noted that the positive vibe of *CC* also brings rural people together, offering some common televisual ground to bond over: it's "quite social between farmers . . . Monday's smoko's [tea break] always like 'did you watch *CC*?' . . . everyone . . . on the farm . . . just talks about the episode so it does bring rural communities together" (Matt).

## Discussion and Conclusion: *CC*, Mediated Authenticity and the New Politics of Agriculture

*CC* is a long-running, much loved and well trusted television program, which presents aspects of the rural idyll while committing itself to providing versions of authenticity that resonate for its producers, and farmer and urban audiences. While interpretations of authenticity tend to vary among audiences (e.g., Iversen 2018), our study captured a shared commitment to this notion as embedded in *CC*—suggesting that both rural and urban audiences are invested in at least some aspects of the rural idyll, even as their reasons for being so will vary. Enli's (2015) framework of mediated authenticity helps explain how interpretations of realism and a "rosy glow" can and do co-exist in this factual television programme about the NZ countryside. The show's authenticity contract is maintained through its low-key approach to storytelling, with no visible reporter, an emphasis on articulate subjects who speak for themselves, and non-intrusive visual and sound editing. In our interviews and focus groups, program-makers and audiences articulated similar views of the show's structure and style, and while the interviewees identified various research and planning processes that supported their vision for a direct connection between subjects and audiences, viewers still regarded *CC*'s storytelling as natural and artless. Our study demonstrates that the different audiences' views of authenticity are successfully mediated through Enli's (2015) categories of predictability

and spontaneity. In addition, with some caveats, ordinariness and imperfection also contribute to *CC*'s aura of authenticity. There are, however, some tensions between audience groups with respect to what constitutes ordinariness and overall, the balance between im/perfection is where *CC*'s authenticity is most actively negotiated. This is unsurprising given that assessments of authenticity represent a level of perceptual fit in the eyes of the audience rather than any objective mapping onto "reality" (Sutherland 2020a).

In respect to ordinariness, *CC* subjects are at least in certain key ways "people like us": as Dan noted, they are not actors or reality show contestants, and very few are public figures. For the most part, subjects are ordinary New Zealanders filmed going about their usual daily activities. Both components are important to the producers' vision that the show presents as if the *CC* film crew were simply passing by the farm and decided to drop in, and in the main, audiences accept this natural style. However, as Boyle and Kelly (2016) note in the context of business programming, viewers with direct experience of a field will bring different expectations to their reading of factual genres. In our study, this presented as rural viewers comparing *CC*'s depictions of farming with their own lived experiences, and subsequently identifying gaps in the show's claims to authenticity. These gaps were subsequently reconciled with reference to the mediated and human propensity to present the self in a positive manner and acknowledgment that the high standards exemplified in *CC*'s showcasing of top operators and portrayals of "industry best practice" do objectively exist even if they are, in farmer viewers' experience, not necessarily typical. Interestingly, Sutherland's (2020a) application of the experience economy to farming gameplay suggests the value of layering multiple forms of authenticity, helping explain how the coexistence of the ordinary and the exceptional on *CC* may strengthen rather than puncture the authenticity contract.

On the other hand, the urban viewers did not bring the same depth of lived experience to their readings of *CC* so more readily accepted that *CC* storytelling was honest and realistic and responded warmly to its sense of possibility ("we could do that"). This taps into both natural and referential authenticity which draws from collective memories and cultural longings (Sutherland 2020a). Part of NZ's rural idyll myth entails the belief that at least some version of the farming lifestyle is accessible to everyone, and *CC* rhetorically preserves this belief through its tendency to downplay issues such as declining land affordability (Fountain 2020). The readings of our urban participants were also less focused on industry practices and more attuned to the human dimensions of *CC* storytelling. Clearly then, *CC* follows the formula that Boyle and Kelly identify for most successful business shows, which "understand the importance of narrative and emotional identification and seek to humanize the business world" (2016, 154). Yet it is also the case that *CC* must maintain a balance between its emotional and practical appeals: for its commercial survival, the show needs to attract a sizeable urban audience, who expect to see idealized representations of an authentic slice of farming life, while retaining sufficient respect with farmer audiences to ensure they will agree to be profiled on the show. In other words, even if viewers do not share a clear set of criteria for judging *CC*'s authenticity, they recognize and respond to a

perceptual fit aligned with their worldview, and we argue this remains central to the show's continued popularity.

Negotiation around what we refer to here as im/perfection emerged in interviews and focus groups as perhaps the key challenge to *CC*'s authenticity contract over the longer term. The show's tendency to deploy a "rosy glow" or act as a "warm bath" was regarded as a potential limitation by at least some of the farmer audience, who expressed reservations about the accuracy of depictions vis-à-vis their lived experiences, and referred to the absence of topics such as farmers' mental health. The show's romanticizing style was also identified as a shortcoming by some directors who found it tiresome and limiting, even as they appreciated the opportunity to tell subject-driven stories in primetime television and acknowledged the contribution of positive sentiment to *CC*'s sustained success. The need to balance these competing pressures is part of the commercial television environment and is not new. However, the rural idyll's persistent grip on televisual representations of farming arguably reduces *CC*'s ability to meaningfully engage with contemporary agricultural politics and non-generalized, non-idealized and overlooked aspects of contemporary farming (Peeren and Souch 2019) such as mental health, rural crime and farm safety (Jones 2017). This form of personalized television also entrenches rather than interrogates the social values entwined with the rural good life in NZ national identity (Shucksmith 2018). As Sutherland (2020b, 14) argues with reference to farming game *Stardew Valley*, idyllic representations mean "the sanctity of farming as a moral practice is preserved, but disconnected from debates on meat consumption, animal welfare, pesticide use, pollution, and intensification." There is a risk that in an increasingly urban society confronting challenges around climate change, sustainability and food provenance, *CC*'s positive and people-focused storytelling, which sidesteps political problems and tends to gloss over social issues such as sustainability or controversies around animal welfare, will be increasingly undermined by new media practices and platforms enabling for instance undercover filming and online animal activism. These resulting, differently mediated versions of farming may cast *CC*'s more positively framed content as inauthentic or anachronistic, and erode the authenticity contract. In our farmer focus group, the increase in animal activism was discussed as challenging for individual farmers and the industry's reputation, and some practices were described as unfair and non-representative: "sneaking up on farmers" (Kate), and "one in a million person decides to do something dumb . . . and all the farmers bear the brunt of it" (Thomas). These same participants referred to instances of fake news about farming circulating on social media and their own efforts to help non-farming friends and workmates interrogate these claims. As Enli notes, concerns about fake news and authenticity are important precisely because of the power of media to inform and persuade about subjects outside audiences' direct experience. However, Jones (2017, 29) argues that a careful response to this new environment requires not defensiveness but for rural storytelling to become more "warts and all" and willing to embrace greater scrutiny. This is an important challenge for *CC* as NZ television's leading farming program.

While our study establishes *CC*'s successful navigation of realism and idealism in its depictions of the NZ countryside, it also identifies the challenges it faces



in maintaining this sense of authenticity at a time when farming practices are more contested, and the free-to-air television environment is increasingly risk-averse. By applying the nascent concept of mediated authenticity to an important yet under-theorized subfield of rurality, and establishing how realism can co-exist with the idyll in factual entertainment television, this article contributes to our limited knowledge about the production and reception of factual storytelling about farming. However, more work is needed to better comprehend the role of television and new media in mediating rural-urban understanding in a changing world.

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