A Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust Report

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Help or Hinder?

How the mainstream media portrays farming to the public

Anna Jones

July 2017

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A

Nuffield (UK) Farming Scholarships Trust Report

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Inspiring passion and potential in people."

Date of report: July 2017

Title	Help or Hinder? How the Mainstream Media Portrays Farming to the Public
Scholar	Anna Jones
Sponsor	The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society and The Trehane Trust
Objectives of Study Tour	• To examine how the urban/rural disconnect feeds into mainstream media coverage of agriculture. • To understand why deep distrust exists between farmers and the traditional media. • To build bridges between two very different worlds.
Countries Visited	USA, Kenya, Denmark, Ireland, France and Belgium
Messages	• The urban/rural disconnect is real, more so in Western and urbanised societies, and both the media and farming industry are contributing to it. • Some mainstream media coverage is clouded by urban bias, knee-jerk distrust of agribusiness, failing to differentiate between campaigners and informers and an over-reliance on too few sources with an overt political agenda. There is a severe lack of agricultural specialism among general news journalists. • Farmers and industry are fuelling the disconnect through a lack of openness and transparency, disproportionate defensiveness in the face of legitimate challenge, disunity among farming sectors and a sense of 'exceptionalism' or entitlement to positive coverage. • The public debate and narrative around agriculture is being dominated by farming unions and lobbyists. Politics at an industry level is drowning out individuals at a farm level, contributing to more distrust.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world's media has never been more powerful – or less trusted.

Its role in shaping the outcomes of the EU referendum and US presidential election of 2016 cannot be overestimated. The spread of 'fake news', an unfamiliar phenomenon at the beginning of this study two years ago, has been deemed a threat to democracy.

Yet British farming, with an uncertain future post-Brexit, arguably needs the media more than ever before. It has some convincing to do – that agriculture is worthy of public money; that consumers should shun foreign labels and choose British instead; that the environment is safe in farmers' hands.

Exploring how the mainstream media can 'help or hinder' that mission – and what lessons can be learned from around the world – forms the basis of this report.

Farmers often complain of a 'disconnect' between themselves and urban people and blame negative or simply non-existent media coverage. But traditional media, in the face of shrinking resources and shortening attention spans, is fighting for survival in a ruthlessly competitive digital landscape. It must target audiences with content that is relevant to their everyday lives. The vast majority of that audience – more than 80% of the UK population - live in towns and cities.

How relevant is agriculture to them?

My research confirms that the 'disconnect' is real, more so in Western and urbanised societies, and both the industry and media have a role to play in it.

Urban bias is endemic within the mainstream media. This can spill over into bias against intensive and large-scale farming systems, driven, at times, more by stereotypes and ideology than informed understanding of the subject. I saw no evidence of urban bias leading to deliberate falsehoods, but it can influence story selection and the way in which a story is told (i.e. the angle).

There is deep-rooted suspicion of the mainstream media among farmers. Many believe journalists attack them unfairly on issues like the environment and animal welfare, but some farmers struggle to separate criticism from legitimate challenge. Knee-jerk defensiveness and a lack of transparency are key barriers to a constructive relationship with the media.

These challenges are not insurmountable. The case studies shared in this report prove that effective agricultural communication and rigorous, balanced journalism are not mutually exclusive. My findings should motivate farmers to engage with the media; and encourage journalists to take a constructive and open-minded approach to agricultural stories.

This is not a quantitative study of media content, but a qualitative analysis of perceptions and personal experience. 'Agriculture' in this context refers mainly to conventional production and the term 'mainstream media' to national press and news broadcasters, with some regional and specialist contributions. This is not a study of social media.

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DISCLAIMER

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My Nuffield Scholarship study is an independent project, entirely separate from my work at the BBC. My findings and recommendations do not represent the views of the BBC, Countryfile, Farming Today or any other programme, publication or organisation mentioned in this report.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I come from a small, upland farm on the beautiful Welsh-Shropshire border, and a long line of farmers going back at least five generations. Dad runs a flock of breeding ewes and a small suckler herd on about 100 acres.

I belong to the borderlands, with the Shropshire plains to the east and Berwyn Mountains to our west. While our farm is on the English side, I went to school in Mid Wales and joined Montgomeryshire Young Farmers.

My childhood memories are of bottle feeding lambs, pushing sheep down the race, riding in the stock lorry with Dad and getting told off for climbing on the bales. Family life revolved around farming but I never considered it as a career. From a young age, probably around 13 or 14, I knew I wanted to be a journalist.

Figure 1: A Farming Childhood: Me on the left with my sisters, Kate and Nicola.

I finished my BA (Hons) in Journalism at the University of Central Lancashire in 2002. I managed to dodge writing a dissertation in favour of producing a radio documentary about the previous year's outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. It was an early indication that farming would feature strongly in my journalistic career.

I was a newspaper reporter in North Wales and the West Midlands before joining the BBC as a researcher on Countryfile in 2006. Three years later, the show moved to a primetime Sunday evening slot. It became regularly the most-watched factual programme on British television, with up to nine million viewers.

Figure 2: At home on the farm with some of the newspapers and magazines I collected during my travels throughout 2016/17

I'm a director these days and mainly work on the investigative items, with presenters Tom Heap and Charlotte Smith.

In 2013 I left television for a while to join BBC Radio 4, as a producer and occasional presenter on Farming Today and On Your Farm. It was here that my interest in agriculture deepened, as I grew to understand the ins and outs of the industry and my place within it. I felt drawn back to my roots and started taking a keener interest in the business at home.

My Nuffield Scholarship is the bridge between my two worlds – farming and journalism.

Chapter 2: Background to my study subject

In February 2017 I spoke to 350 farmers at the Sentry Farming Conference at Newmarket Racecourse about the coverage of their industry in the mainstream media. I opened my presentation by asking the audience if they believed it to be generally positive or negative. They overwhelmingly raised their hands for the latter. During a feisty Q&A I responded to challenges on editorial balance, misrepresentation of facts, the contents of the cutting room floor and a firmly held belief that journalists tell the stories they want to tell with no consideration for the consequences.

The frustrations flowing forth from this sea of distrusting faces were familiar to me, echoing what I've heard during, and long before, the course of this study.

Overwhelmingly farmers feel their industry is negatively portrayed and over-simplified by a disconnected, metropolitan media; and coverage is largely based on stereotypes. A British farmer? Then you're a rosy-cheeked shepherd, scratching a living from a pretty hillside and a flock of Herdwicks: life is a perpetual episode of The Darling Buds of May. Alternatively, you're a gun-wielding, subsidy-swilling factory farmer, who enjoys nothing more than dousing the countryside in chemicals and maiming badgers.

My profession is misunderstood too. In the 11 years I've been covering rural affairs for the BBC, I've been called a 'bimbette' from Chiswick who probably doesn't know what a tramline is and gets easily excited by 'big, shiny tractahs darling'.

Knowing how many Nuffield Scholars get excited about big tractors, the irony of this attempted slur on my rural credentials tickled me greatly.

Farming is not a mainstream issue in the UK. It was barely mentioned during the 2017 general election campaign and the media, quite frankly, has bigger fish to fry. Terrorism, the NHS, North Korea and Donald Trump all grab headlines in a way agriculture can't, and never will – so long as we're not hungry.

And why should agriculture expect a sympathetic ear from the media any more than any other industry or profession?

A senior British journalist told me: "Farmers have a sense of 'exceptionalism'; that they deserve different treatment. Even though it's a tiny industry economically, they still complain about the amount of coverage they get. All they want are puff stories about how good their industry is."

Many would agree that British farming is doing rather well for itself it terms of media coverage. A member of BBC Radio 4's Farming Today team once observed: "We don't have Plumbing Today or Car Making Today".

I believe something is misfiring between the farming industry and the mainstream media in the UK. They just don't understand each other. Building a bridge between these very different worlds is the aim of this study.

Chapter 3: My Study Tour

I picked a diverse range of countries – some with a predominantly rural population, others heavily urbanised. They have different cultural and political attitudes towards farming and food production, and the level of urban/rural disconnect varies dramatically.

KENYA Total population	Rural population 1960[1]	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)[2]	Farming's contribution to GDP
48.4 million	93%	74%	75%	26%

IRELAND Total population	Rural population 1960	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)[3]	Farming's contribution to GDP[4]
4.7 million	54%	36%	12.5%	1.8%

FRANCE Total population	Rural population 1960	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)	Farming's contribution to GDP
66.8 million	38%	20%	3.6%	1.5%

USA Total population	Rural population 1960	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)[5]	Farming's contribution to GDP
323.1 million	30%	18%	1.4%	1%

DENMARK Total population	Rural population 1960	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)	Farming's contribution to GDP
5.7 million	26%	12%	2.8%	1.4%

BELGIUM Total population	Rural population 1960	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)	Agriculture's contribution to GDP
11.3 million	8%	2%	1.6%	0.7%

UK Total population	Rural population 1960	Rural population 2016	Employment in agriculture (% of total employment)	Farming's contribution to GDP
65.6 million	22%	17%	1.4%	0.51%[6]

[1] The World Bank, Rural population (% of total population) (1960 & 2016)

[2] Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock & Fisheries, Economic Review of Agriculture, Kenya (2015)

[3] European Union Agricultural Census & Farm Structure Survey (2010)

[4] The World Bank, Agriculture value added (% of GDP) (2016)

[5] US Department of Agriculture, Ag and Food Sectors and the Economy (2015)

[6] NFU Online, Contributions of UK Agriculture (2017)

Chapter 4: What is 'The Disconnect'?

For 99% of the 65 million people living in the UK today, farming is neither a livelihood nor a way of life.

The entire agricultural workforce, including farmers and their spouses, make up 0.7% of the UK population. Without food processing and manufacturing, the job of farming our land, growing crops and raising animals, contributes just 0.5% to our national income.

UK context

But the disconnect between urban and rural Britain goes much deeper than statistics. It is cultural too.

I live in Easton, a metropolitan, multicultural part of Bristol in the south west of England. My parents farm near a small market town in Shropshire, one of Britain's most rural counties: it does not have a city and only has about 20 miles of motorway.

Many of the issues important to my friends and colleagues in Bristol are in direct contrast to those that concern my family back home.

On June 23rd 2016, everyone I know in Bristol voted Remain in the EU Referendum. Most of my friends and extended family in Shropshire backed Leave. In the 2017 General Election our Bristol West constituency went to Labour's Thangam Debbonaire by a landslide, with one of the biggest majorities in the country. Meanwhile Owen Paterson, North Shropshire's Conservative MP for 20 years, sailed through his sixth general election, increasing his share of the votes.

Politically, culturally, socially – town and country folk tend to see the world rather differently. It is important to acknowledge that, before we can examine how these differences contribute to the media's coverage of farming.

The Disconnect Around the World

This disconnection between urban and rural communities exists all over the world but is most visible in the developed economies of the West, where the majority of the population live in post-industrial towns and cities.

It was summed up perfectly when I landed in Newark Airport for a connecting flight to Chicago. This is the first conversation I have on American soil, with a US Border Official:

"Purpose of your trip?"
"Study."
"Where are you headed?"
"Chicago, then I'm driving west through Illinois, Iowa and South Dakota."
His eyes shoot up from my passport.
"Why? It's in the middle of nowhere. There's nothing there."
"I'm visiting farms."
"Oh yeah, there's farms out there. Makes sense if you're into farms."
As I turn to walk away, he waves: "Hey! Of all the people I see coming through here you're the first person who's driving to South Dakota!"

Figure 3: “It’s in the middle of nowhere”. View from the silos in Knox County, Illinois.

Figure 4: "There's nothing there". Grain store near Manson, Iowa.

Figure 5: "You're the first person who's driving to South Dakota". Heading into the Wild West.

Geography undoubtedly contributes to a sense of separation, but that's not to say smaller countries are insulated from the effects of disconnect. In tiny Denmark, a quarter of the size of South Dakota, 88%[7] of the population live in towns and cities. Yet it is an agricultural nation, with 60%[8] of Denmark's land mass under cultivation.

As is common all over the world, people can live in bubbles and echo chambers; that is, working and socialising with people who share your view of the world. This 'bubble effect' can further increase the disconnect between agriculture and other walks of life.

Figure 6: Søren Andersen, Head of Press at the Danish Food and Agriculture Council. Copenhagen, Denmark

Søren Andersen, Head of Press at the Danish Food and Agriculture Council (Landbrug & Fødevarer) says: "All the national media are here in Copenhagen. When you live in a big city like this, you don't know any farmers yourself and the whole network of people you talk to, even when you're not at work, are probably also journalists. Most of my friends work in the media."

Ireland is different. It remains tightly connected to agriculture thanks to three things - politics, economics and family. The Irish economy is reliant on the agri-food sector, which came to the rescue following the crash of 2008 and the implosion of Ireland's building boom. The Emerald Isle produces way more food that it can consume and exports 90%[9] of it to lucrative markets all over the world, trading on the story of small family farms, copious rain and the green, green grass of home.

Politically, agriculture carries huge clout. The majority of Irish TDs (MPs) represent rural constituencies and there are separate Government departments for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Figure 7: Jonathan Hoare (left), political advisor to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and Ultan Waldron (right), press officer at the Irish Department of Agriculture. Dublin, Ireland.

Most importantly, farming is in the blood of Irish people. Ultan Waldron, a press officer in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the grandson of a County Kerry countrywoman, sums it up like this:

"You wouldn't have to go too far around the main urban centres to find either first or second generation connections to some sort of farming or rural background."

[7] The World Bank, Rural population (2016)

[8] Agricultural census in Denmark, Eurostat (2012)

[9] Bord Bia (Irish Food Board) (2017)

Figure 8: It's a Knockout. Conna Village Fair, County Cork, Ireland

Figure 9: Tug of war at Conna Fair, Co. Cork. Rural traditions remain at the heart of Irish culture.

In France, while agricultural practices are under great scrutiny, farmers themselves can do almost no wrong. French people identify culturally with food, and therefore with farmers. In times of struggle they tolerate dramatic public protests, as farmers dump milk outside the Presidential palace or clog motorways with their tractors.

Antoine Part of the grain trade organisation Passion Céréales says: “French people do love farmers. When we make studies they say they are good people who work hard, but they have many questions about how farmers do their job - pesticides, GMOs and so on.”

Figure 10: Antoine Part, Press Relations, Passion Céréales. Paris, France.

Figure 11: Foie gras at the farmers’ market. Food is central to French culture and identity. St Emilion, Southern France

Figure 12: Collecting calvados - traditional apple brandy - from a woodland distillery. Normandy, Northern France.

Agriculture is the backbone of Kenya's growing economy. Three quarters of the population make some part of their living from farming and most urban Kenyans have rural roots. This fact had been overlooked by the mainstream media, traditionally more focused on the cut and thrust of African politics. That was until they figured out that farming sells.

In 2013 East Africa's largest newspaper, The Daily Nation, launched a farming supplement called Seeds of Gold, offering practical tips and advice in collaboration with Kenya's Egerton Agricultural University.

In a high-rise building in the pulsing heart of Nairobi, Editor-in-Chief Tom Mshindi tells me how stories about farming increased sales of the Saturday edition by 3,000 copies. This is not a country hindered by urban/rural disconnect.

"We now have a very loyal following in a sector that initially didn't think we cared about them – the farmers," says Tom, "more importantly younger farmers. Look at the demographic of Seeds of Gold and there's a lot of city or town-based consumers of that information. Seeds of Gold has almost made farming hip."

Figure 13: Tom Mshindi, Editor-in-Chief, Nation Media Group, Nairobi

Figure 14: Journalists Julius Sigei and Michael Oriedo with the Daily Nation's weekly farming supplement Seeds of Gold.

Figure 15: Henry Muhia farms 18 acres of maize, wheat, beans and dairy in Nakuru County.

Figure 16: Stanley and Salome Gitau milk seven cows and sell unpasteurised milk direct to consumers from their one acre, zero-grazed dairy unit in Githerau, a busy suburb of Nairobi.

Figure 17: Filming with the team from Shamba Shape Up, Kenya's most famous farming TV show. Me and my partner Alex (left) helped film an episode on a nine acre shamba in Kajiado County.

Shamba Shape Up is produced by Mediae, a charity which uses media as a tool to promote agricultural development in Kenya.

Chapter 5: Help or Hinder?
The relationship between agriculture and the mainstream media

My study highlighted recurring problems associated with the coverage of agriculture specifically in news and current affairs. The key challenges are outlined below.

Urban Bias

When the majority of people live and work in urban areas, it's obvious that newspapers and news programmes will cover the issues most relevant to them – health, housing, education, unemployment, transport and so on. Audiences are king and the survival of a newspaper or commercial broadcaster depends on attracting them in the largest possible numbers. To expect that somehow agriculture deserves special coverage or prominence in this competitive media landscape is unrealistic. This point was made abundantly clear to me during a visit to one of America's biggest daily newspapers.

Every morning the Chicago Tribune's editorial team gather for a news meeting. Ideas for the following day's edition are scribbled onto a white board by the managing editor. It's June 2016 and stories range from McDonald's moving its headquarters to downtown Chicago, Hillary Clinton on the campaign trail in Ohio (a state she would lose to President Trump five months later) and searching for a Chicago angle on the previous night's shooting at an Orlando nightclub.

Agriculture, I'm pretty sure, rarely makes it on to that white board.

Figure 18: Daily news briefing at the Chicago Tribune newspaper

Only one editor hangs around long enough for a chat after the meeting. Deadline looming, she's visibly in a rush, and seems at best amused and at worst bored by my line of questioning.

"Look, we have more stories than we know what to do with," she says. "There are times when we would do these [farming] stories but we wouldn't manufacture that interest. We wouldn't go looking for it. It's not relevant to write about it for the sake of writing about it. Unless it's got immediate relevance to our readers then why would they be interested?"

I point out that everyone eats food, therefore farming and the rural environment is relevant. She agrees the consumer angle is important. If an agricultural issue affects food prices or food safety then, of course, they (most likely the business desk) would cover it but, otherwise, agricultural stories are of no interest in Chicago.

“They [farmers] have a chip on their shoulder about not being appreciated,” she adds.

Figure 19: "Unless it’s got immediate relevance to our readers then why would they be interested?” Downtown Chicago.

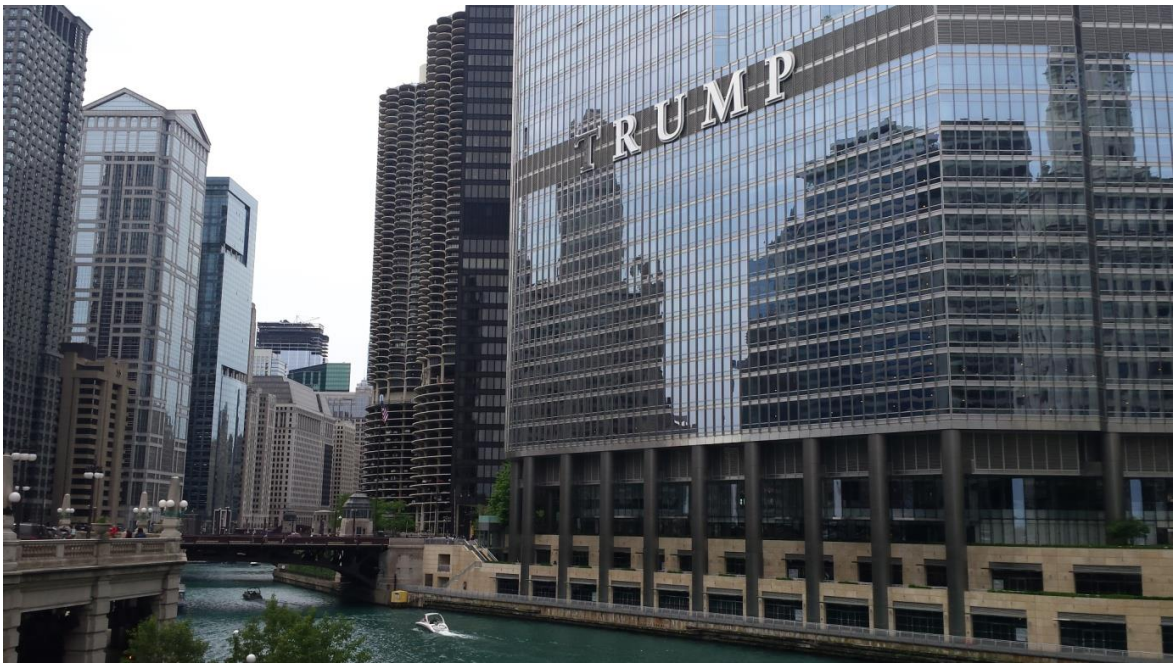

Figure 20: A long way from the ranches and cornfields. Trump Tower, Downtown Chicago.

Urban bias is by no means confined to the big cities. John Petersen is News Director at KOTA TV based in Rapid City. Agriculture is South Dakota's number one industry, accounting for almost a third of the state economy.

Figure 21: John Petersen, News Director, KOTA TV, Rapid City, South Dakota

John knows South Dakota's fortunes are tied up in agriculture. "When ag producers have a good year, urban dwellers have a good year," he says. "If ag producers have a bad year, they don't buy new equipment, pickups and consumer goods."

Yet, despite that, farming stories are few and far between on John's bulletins. Why? The answer is simple:

"Well, most of our viewers are town dwellers," he says. "Rapid City's population is over 74,000 and they are not involved in the ag industry directly. It's certainly not a topic at the top of their list. We know from our market research that weather-related coverage is the most popular and issues like tourism, education and taxes."

In June 2016, KOTA TV was broadcasting to a large area with a small population; around 200,000 people across western South Dakota and northwest Wyoming. If farming stories are failing to cut through in a sparsely populated region, economically dependent on agriculture and dominated by vast cattle ranches and cropland, then urban bias is worse than I thought.

A few miles outside Rapid City, Sturgis cattle rancher Larry Reinhold doesn't seem too surprised: "Only 1% of the American population are involved in agriculture," he shrugs. "We're not the audience. But if you were to say this might affect the American consumer, and it could be trumped up just a little bit, then they will cover these kinds of topics."

Figure 22: Larry Reinhold, Cattle Rancher, Sturgis, South Dakota

Figure 23: American quarter horses on the prairie, South Dakota

Is Big, Bad?

Urban bias can spill over into ideological bias. Journalists in Chicago generally have stronger views on modern agricultural practices, industrial farming and corporate ownership than their Midwest counterparts. It is a subject that raises much suspicion.

During my visit to the Chicago Tribune I try out a statistic from Illinois Farm Bureau claiming that 97% of the state's farms are still family owned.

"I don't believe that," comes one blunt reply. "I think they are kidding themselves that they are independent because they have to be corporately owned."

Another journalist speculates that emails or press releases from so-called 'family farms' would most likely come from "zillion dollar public relations firms".

The United States is home to some of the best investigative journalism in the world, some of which is rightly holding America's powerful agricultural industry to account. This is important because urban bias can also lead to a lack of scrutiny on farming. An uninterested journalist who's unfamiliar with the subject risks missing or overlooking the real story.

But equally worrying is the knee-jerk assumption that 'big ag is bad', combined with the prevalence of some pretty wild stereotypes and a complete lack of curiosity about life within the Midwest's 'Flyover States'. There is something uncritical, simplistic and wholly un-journalistic about this.

It is undoubtedly more extreme in the US than the UK, but it does happen in the UK. I've encountered the 'big is bad' bias in my own career, and had story ideas turned down as a result. An editor once told me only small farms were of interest because the big ones "probably got there through dishonest means."

A journalist colleague recently drew my attention to an article in The Guardian asking for readers to share their concerns about 'mega farms'. Pollution, traffic, animal welfare, lack of accountability, noise, potential for accidents – all these are offered up as causes for concern. This approach starts from the standpoint that mega farms must be bad. It's a given.

My friend, an experienced national news and current affairs journalist (with no vested interest in agriculture or personal attachment to the farming industry), could not hide her dismay in an email:

"Talk about 'big is bad' bias! The whole way The Guardian's survey is couched reveals a clear example of what you talk about in your study – that the journalist is (a) biased to assume that big is bad, and (b) doesn't actually have much knowledge or understanding of the arguments involved in the first place. Nowhere is there a tick box for the reader to express how concerned or otherwise they might be about cheap food (which let's face it is what intensive farming is about). Nowhere is there any explanation of their casual assumption that there is a greater potential for accidents on mega farms...is that true? I've never heard it if so."

I totally agree with her reflections. This kind of bias can be based more on a hunch or personal belief than any in-depth understanding of the subject. In my view it prevents a balanced debate, and therefore means that the reader is blinded to a more complex reality.

Figure 24: American Black Angus steers for sale in the land of 'Big Ag'. But why is big, automatically bad?

Figure 25: Big or small, ranching is ranching. A cowboy prepares to muster cattle into the auction ring

Figure 26: US journalist Maryn McKenna

I first encountered Maryn McKenna's by-line in a New York Times Magazine article about the 2015 outbreak of Avian Flu, which swept through poultry flocks across the Midwest resulting in the slaughter of 48 million birds. It was the worst animal-disease epidemic in United States history.

Maryn writes on public health and food policy issues for, among others, The New York Times Magazine, Scientific American and National Geographic. Her latest book explores the history of antibiotic use in agriculture. I wondered if she recognises urban bias in the mainstream media.

"It's one of the problems of reporting on agriculture in the US," she tells me over a Skype call between Bristol and New York. "It isn't interpenetrated with the rest of society the way it is in Europe. We've sequestered agriculture away from the big population centres.

"I feel like there's a real sense that people in all kinds of agriculture, but especially conventional agriculture, feel like they're not understood, not valued, like their stories aren't being told."

She points out that conventional farms are generally found in isolated areas. Not only are they viewed from a distance and with deep suspicion, but smaller, niche farming enterprises are automatically looked upon more favourably.

"Some of that is unquestionably the fault of our mainstream media," says Maryn. "The identification of the food movement with liberal politics and alternative systems makes it more likely those stories are going to be told…especially as a lot of alternative agriculture is populated by inherently interesting characters. The back-to-the-land movements also happen to be mostly on the coasts or in media-friendly centres like Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire."

This analysis suggests the media's preference for 'alternative' farming stories can be driven as much by convenience as by negative perceptions about conventional agriculture. I ask if Maryn believed this to be a problem, or just an unavoidable reality of the modern media. Her answer is decisive:

"No, I do think it needs solving. I think its unchallengeable that in some conventional food production there are practices that can be improved but I also don't think at this point that only smallholdings and non-conventional agriculture are going to meet the protein needs that economies are asserting. If we want to critically examine the way that the world produces food we have to be able to tell the stories of conventional agriculture as well. I don't know the answer to that but I think it is crucial we keep trying."

Figure 27: Iowa turkey producer Brad Moline who featured in Maryn's New York Times piece. When I visited his farm he told me the article

Mutual Distrust

Farmers, generally speaking, are not natural communicators and are instinctively suspicious of the camera, microphone and notebook. Yet more and more they are being told to come out from behind the farm gate and answer the concerns of an increasingly informed and critical public, as well as defend their industry on issues such as the environment and animal welfare.

Meanwhile journalists are hard-wired to be distrustful of the private sector and commercial interests.

This mutual distrust is a brick wall to effective communication. Again, the US throws up plenty of examples.

Figure 28: Donelle Eller, Farming, Energy and Environment Correspondent, Des Moines Register. Iowa, USA.

Donnelle Eller writes on farming, the environment and energy for Iowa's top-selling daily newspaper, the left-leaning Des Moines Register.

"Sometimes I wish they would just play it straight," she tells me over lunch in downtown Des Moines. "There is so much distrust. People ask me, "What's your spin?" I try not to have a spin. I am calling someone on the other side of the argument because I want to know what's happening, not because I have a bone to pick. You are not being attacked – you're being questioned."

Gil Gullickson is crop editor at Successful Farming, a weekly magazine read by nearly 400,000 farmers across the United States. He was astounded when a major agrochemical supplier (a trade group selling chemical additives to mainstream chemical companies) turned him away from a supposedly public meeting.

"And we are mostly for them!" he says rolling his eyes. "I think they are just paranoid. So-called 'Big Ag' groups like that are really scared of transparency. If they are like that with Successful Farming, you're not going to see Huffington Post out there!"

Both Donelle and Gil are experienced journalists, specialising in agriculture. If they have trouble getting industry to trust them, what's it like when a ruthlessly persistent investigative journalist gets their teeth into a story?

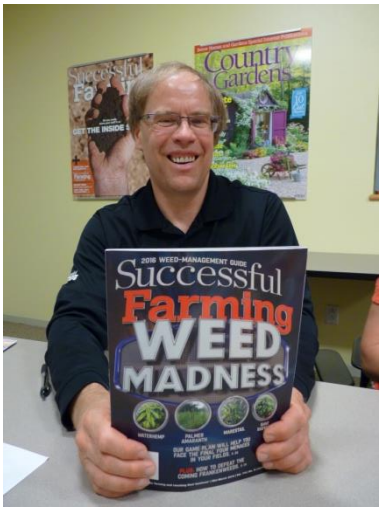

Figure 29: Gil Gullickson, Crop Editor, Successful Farming Magazine. Iowa, USA.

Kjeld Hansen is a well-known author and environmental journalist based in Denmark. He contributes stories to Investigative Reporting Denmark, has written for The Guardian newspaper in the UK and co-founded FarmSubsidy.org, a searchable database of European farm subsidy payments, listed by recipient and location.

Figure 30: Danish environmental journalist and author Kjeld Hansen. Zealand, Denmark.

He was one of the first journalists to break the story of antibiotic resistant bacteria, MRSA CC398 or so-called Livestock Associated MRSA, spreading from pigs to people. In a 10 year period, seven people died in Denmark from untreatable infections caused by MRSA CC398[10], which developed its resistance to commonly used antibiotics on pig farms.

Kjeld was instrumental in winning a court appeal to publish the names and addresses of infected pig farms in January 2016, despite strong resistance from Danish farming organisations. The news headlines that followed resulted in a public health scandal and widespread stigmatisation of pig farmers.

Kjeld openly admits to being more of a campaigner than an informer. He lives on an organic farm, is a passionate proponent of organic food and does not conceal his fierce opposition to intensive pig production. An unpopular man in conventional farming circles, it is a long time since Kjeld was invited on to a pig unit. Sometimes, though, he and the farmers cross paths.

“I give a lot of lectures and speeches and quite often I'm confronted with people,” he says. “I can tell nearly every time. Middle-aged, very clean washed, reddish in the face - those are pig farmers. They sit there, a little sweaty maybe, and sometimes I get 30 seconds before they interrupt.”

Here is the perfect example of mutual distrust. Constructive conversation has broken down entirely between Kjeld and the pig farming community. I challenge him on this.

“It's a long time since we have had constructive discussion,” he admits. “Sometimes I ask myself how much I contributed to that very bad development. Some would say I was part of it of course, and maybe I was, but on the other hand, someone has to say these very inconvenient things.”

[10] MRSA CC398 (*methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus*) accounts for a very small proportion of the total number of infections. According to DANMAP 2015 (Use of antimicrobial agents and occurrence of antimicrobial resistance in bacteria from food animals, food and humans in Denmark, 2015): “Staphylococcus aureus bacteria accounted for 1,973 cases...Twenty-nine (1.5%) of these were caused by MRSA and three of them by MRSA CC398.”
For more in-depth analysis of the MRSA CC398 scandal in Denmark, refer to
https://jonesthejourno.com/2016/11/22/denmark-the-pig-mrsa-scandal/

After lunch with Kjeld, I drive a few miles up the road for a cup of coffee with Peter Kiær. He is a second generation pig farmer with 800 acres and 720 sows producing 24,000 piglets a year.

Figure 31: Danish pig farmer Peter Kiær on his arable land. Zealand, Denmark.

He describes Kjeld as a campaigner "who has his issues", but Peter's distrust of the Danish mainstream media goes way beyond one man:

"Every time there is a negative story about production in agriculture, let's take MRSA, it's bad for business," he says. "I'm 100% sure they do it in a wrong way to mislead people, to make it a big story. It's not good for the farmers at all because somebody tries to paint a picture that the farmers are sick people, who are working with sick animals and injecting them all the time with penicillin. That's how I think some people see us but it's not that simple at all. Then my kids go to school and get asked, "Are you infected because your dad is a producer?"

I challenge Peter on the industry's handling of the scandal, and put it to him that secrecy fuels distrust. To my surprise, he nods and says:

"We have a case to answer, I totally agree and we could have done more. But nothing has been secret, not at all."

In extreme cases like this, mutual distrust can polarise issues to the point all scope for constructive discussion is lost.

Figure 32: Some of Peter's sows

A Lack of Transparency in Farming

The feeling among some journalists that the farming industry is closed off and secretive was echoed in the United States. Monica Eng is a reporter specialising in food policy at WBEZ radio in Chicago. She also co-hosts the foodie podcast 'Chewing', with Louisa Chu, food and dining reporter at the Chicago Tribune.

Figure 33: Food policy journalist Monica Eng in the WBEZ studio in Chicago

Monica has reported on the most controversial issues in food and farming, from GMO labelling to CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations). She has been hindered in some of her endeavours by what she describes as 'Ag Gag' laws. A number of US states forbid undercover filming or photography on farms by would-be whistle-blowers or animal rights groups. It is supposed to prevent isolated incidents being held up as standard industry practice. But according to Monica and many other journalists, it is a cynical attempt to cover up uncomfortable truths.

She says: "Transparency would really help dissolve some of the scepticism that has developed out there through the years of, "We're not going to let you see and, in fact, we're going to pass as much legislation as possible that obscures the picture. Ag-Gag laws, no labelling laws, we're not going to tell you how many antibiotics we're using'. It's a thick scar that's going to need to heal."

Calls for greater transparency are echoed closer to home too. Darragh McCullough is a columnist for the Irish Independent's farming section, a presenter on RTÉ's Ear to the Ground (a rural affairs television programme) and a farmer himself in County Meath.

"I always think it's terrible when a poultry guy or a pig guy won't let us film their operation," he tells me over a pint of Guinness in the centre of Dublin. "If you're afraid about the public realising the truth about your operation that raises a big question in my opinion about what you're invested in."

Figure 34: Irish farmer, journalist and broadcaster Darragh McCullough

But some farmers who run intensive systems are starting to open their doors. Pat Bane breeds pigs in Illinois. His 3,000 sows have 2.5 litters per year, producing an average of 27-28 piglets each, annually. Sitting in a pancake-flat landscape of corn and soybean are several long, low-rise buildings.

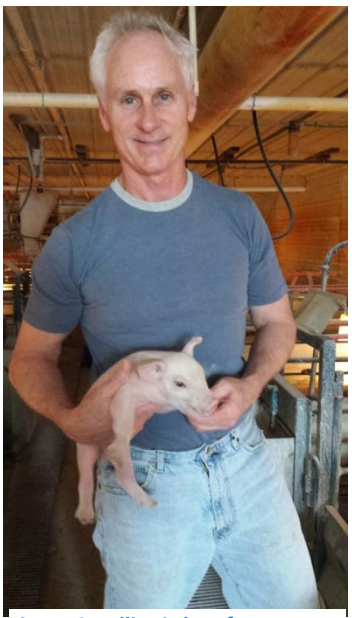

Figure 35: Illinois hog farmer Pat Bane

Three barns for farrowing, one for late pregnancy, two for weaning and insemination and one for gilt development, as they breed their own female replacements. The piglets are 18-20 days old when weaned.

Sow stalls have been banned in several American states, but are still legal in Illinois and Pat uses them. He knows the way that he farms is under extreme scrutiny and has become the Farm Bureau's 'go to' for press interviews. I can see why – he is an affable, gentle man who speaks from the heart, and with pride, about his business.

"I wholeheartedly believe we need to talk about what we do," he says during a tour of his barns. "I think it's an uphill business. No one is talking to the populations on the coast about modern farming out in the Midwest."

And Pat is willing to talk about the good, the bad and the ugly of modern farming – to a point.

In March 2015 his farm was hit with Porcine Epidemic Diarrhoea Virus (PEDv), a virulent infection that wiped out seven million piglets nationally – 10% of America's total. It took Pat seven weeks to bring the virus under control, by which time he had lost 8,000 piglets.

Still, he was willing to talk to the media.

Some months later he had an outbreak of Porcine Reproductive & Respiratory Syndrome (PRRS). His worst nightmare. By then, Pat's enthusiasm to engage with the media was waning.

"It was just so depressing," he says. "A journalist asked if I knew anything about it but I was too distraught."

Even Pat missed an opportunity to be transparent. Even Pat has his limits.

"I'm a little cynical about how to even scratch the surface with people in urban areas," he concludes, holding his hands up in exasperation. "Because there are people on the other side of the fence who just don't agree with what we do and will never agree."

Figures 36 (a) and (b): Sows in stalls in Illinois. Sow stalls were banned in the UK in 1999.

The Red Mist: Why Defensiveness is Damaging

I once voiced an opinion to a group of farmer friends that everyone should have a meat-free meal, every week. A dinnertime conversation very quickly turned into a debate, and ultimately into a row. People got very upset and some left the table.

We all made up the following day of course, but it got me thinking about what had gone wrong. For me, it was a theoretical debate. For them, it felt very personal; a threat to their livelihood as producers of meat.

Figure 37: Should we be drinking her milk? The vegan debate gathered pace throughout 2016 and 2017

Farmers spend a lot of time on the defensive these days; from crop growers advocating the use of certain chemicals to dairy farmers defending the very practice of milking cows. The alternative view is without doubt a direct attack on their way of life. Put simply – what you do is wrong and you should not be allowed to do it anymore.

When farmers find themselves in the media spotlight, defending a position, they eat, sleep and breathe that story. They can't leave it behind and go home. The story IS their home.

Is it any wonder they get defensive?

"It's our lives," says American pig farmer Pat Bane. "When someone criticises you, it's personal. It's hard to say, 'oh yeah, I take your point, I am doing this wrong'."

But knee-jerk defensiveness does not win debates. It clouds judgement and creates deaf ears. It does not come across well to the public.

Guardian journalist and Nuffield Scholar Tom Levitt warns farmers against shooting the messenger over increasingly commonly used terms like 'factory farming'.

"Farmers need to understand why the media and public are using these terms," he says. "A farmer may not see their farm as a factory but if you haven't seen that sort of system before, a person may think, 'this looks like a factory'."

Tom makes a good point. Are people to be blamed for what they perceive, or is it better to try and understand their point of view?

Maeve Whyte, Nuffield Scholar and director of the NFU's Brussels office says: "It's not up to us to tell people how to live their lives but we have to give the alternative view and act with integrity. The industry is always going to face attacks from various parts of society and everyone is entitled to give their view. The question is how to respond to them?"

Figure 38: Maeve Whyte Nsch, Director of the British Agriculture Bureau, Brussels

Fight the urge to spring on to the defensive and embrace scrutiny is Darragh McCullough's advice.

He says: "They [farmers] are too defensive but that's totally understandable because they are at the mercy of a journalist who may know nothing. That journalist, whatever angle they take, could have serious implications for that farmer's business so they feel powerless. It's like standing naked in front of someone you don't know and, whatever impression they have, they run off and put it everywhere.

"But they are too defensive. What farmers don't realise, because they are ghettoised in their own communities and circles, is how fascinating their work is. They don't realise how enthralled the public is with it. Farmers have wonderful stories to tell and if they had the confidence to tell them, warts and all, the public will get it. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Farming versus Environment

I resent presenting farmers and environmentalists as adversaries because their worlds are intertwined and inter-dependent. On certain issues though, it is unquestionable that there are clear battle lines. Two debates in particular received a lot of media coverage during the course of this study – neonicotinoid seed treatments and their impact on pollinators, and the safety of glyphosate, the world's most widely used herbicide.

Farmers often claim to be under attack from environmental groups and the green lobby, something the Farmer's Guardian isn't afraid to point out when it refers to "yet another attack on the industry". I put that observation to FG's editor Ben Briggs.

Figure 39: Ben Briggs, Editor, Farmers Guardian. UK.

"That will never appear again now you've pointed it out," he vows with a laugh. "Though that does make me think about the lexicon used in Farmer's Guardian. We maybe do feel slightly under attack. It just highlights the regularity with which we have to defend ourselves."

In 2014 Heather Hancock, now chairwoman of the Food Standards Agency, conducted an independent review into the BBC's coverage of rural affairs in England, on behalf of the BBC Trust.

One of her key findings highlighted that farming issues were often viewed through the 'lens of the environment'.

It's a fair assessment that farming stands more chance of making it on to the news agenda if there is an environmental angle. Most audiences identify more easily with the environment (we feel a deep sense of ownership over it), than a straight story about food production.

But when it's 'agriculture versus environment', are farmers really the underdog? Or are they simply losing a war of words?

Figure 40: Robbie Blake, Nature and Biodiversity Campaigner, Friends of the Earth Europe. Brussels, Belgium.

Biodiversity campaigner Robbie Blake at Friends of the Earth Europe explains the war is waged on two fronts – in private, through traditional lobbying, and in public, through the media.

"I think our strength as NGOs comes from raising awareness of important issues and working through the media to do that," he says. "That's our major strength, that's one of the major tools we have. In terms of real influence on higher level politicians and the way they cast their votes, we have much less influence."

Robbie believes environmental groups are winning in the media, while Europe's farming organisations carry more weight in the corridors of power.

"There is a saying in Brussels that the farming lobby is the most powerful in the city," he adds pointedly.

So it boils down to politics. All very well in the heart of Brussels, but I put it to Robbie that it's ordinary farmers, not the lobbyists, who get caught in the political cross-fire. He thinks long and hard before answering:

"We may have some responsibility because there's very much a sense that the bad news story or the big threat is always the thing that's effective at getting a response in the media. What would induce someone to write a letter, or sign a petition if it's not pressing and urgent? And we do that in good conscience - these are issues that need to be addressed and need to be part of public debate. It would be great if there was more nuance to it but, as a journalist yourself, that's like wishing the sky wasn't blue!"

The media is a weapon and NGOs use it well. But is it fair for the farming industry to play victim, and complain of attacks on their industry? Is this not democracy in action?

Three years on from her review I email Heather Hancock to ask if she thinks the situation has changed. Is farming still viewed by the media (not just the BBC) through an 'environmental lens'?

She writes back: "I do consider that the media generally continue to see farming stories as (a) minor and (b) often, but not always, environment led. Perhaps this is caused by the need to get an angle on any story, some point of controversy or disagreement, and the environment versus agriculture one is easy."

On a sunny morning in May I arrive at a quirky cafe above a bike shop in Oxford, where people chat over artisan coffee and beneath penny farthings hanging from the ceiling. I'm meeting a master of communication, an artful, quick-thinking debater. Unfortunately for farmers, he tends to use those skills against them.

"Farmers have it really, really easy compared to any other industry," says Guardian columnist and environmental campaigner George Monbiot.

Far from being treated unfairly in the media, he contends that modern agriculture escapes scrutiny due to the public's deep, spiritual connection with the rural idyll. He rattles off a long list of poets, painters and writers, whose work reinforces the image of pastoral life as pure and innocent in contrast to the corruption of the city; a positive PR campaign that's benefited farmers for centuries.

"Wordsworth has a lot to answer for, as much as I admire him," he laughs.

The modern media, according to George, has picked up the baton from Wordsworth.

"Journalism today is playing into that cultural context. They [farmers] so rarely get challenged. If they had the scrutiny politicians have they would be lambs to the slaughter."

Figure 41: George Monbiot and me. Oxford, UK.

George Monbiot is a man who trades on his talent to argue, subvert and antagonise. If people don't get angry at his column he's out of a job. Is he an equal match for, perhaps, a less articulate - more easily rattled - farmer? If the pen is mightier than the sword, does he not wield Excalibur and the farming industry a stubby pencil?

I put it to George that he runs rings around his opponents. He replies: "They don't have any basic grasp of how to argue or how to make their points, which makes it rather boring. The people who get the most rattled are the ones who are not used to being challenged."

I passed this message back to Ben Briggs at the Farmers Guardian, whose own outspoken writing style may be agriculture's answer to George Monbiot.

"I think he is farming's bogeyman and I think he loves that," he says with a shrug. "He understands how to play the game better than a lot of people in agriculture."

Industry and the Individual

Are 'farmers' and the 'farming industry' the same thing? I don't think they are. Yet journalists (myself included) use these terms interchangeably. It never occurs to us to analyse the difference.

A recurring criticism throughout my research has been that the industry, mainly in the form of farming unions, is dominating the public narrative around agriculture, and drowning out the voice of individual farmers.

A senior British journalist, who wished to remain anonymous, said this: "The NFU is such a dominant voice and creates the farming agenda. I wish there were counter voices that would offer different narratives on farming. I think it is way too dominant and a big part of the problem...they've become almost synonymous with what's good for farming in Britain."

But it is not the unions who write the articles and broadcast the bulletins. I believe lack of knowledge about agriculture and a shortage of contacts within the industry results in journalists routinely falling back on the same sources.

American radio reporter Monica Eng admits the charge: "Where would you find the email address of this guy who's really busy running a 3,000 acre farm? I would need to go through the Farm Bureau[11] because the Farm Bureau has a whole list of farmers that they can refer you to."

Figure 42: Monica Eng in the WBEZ newsroom in Chicago

Farming unions provide a great service to the media – they are professional organisations with copious amounts of accessible data, press officers on call 24 hours a day and statements quickly prepared on key issues of the day. Crucially, they are a one-stop-shop for reliably articulate interviewees.

[11] The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), more commonly referred to as the Farm Bureau (FB), is the largest farming organisation in the United States. Each state has its own regional Farm Bureau.

However, they are also political organisations, lobbyists, with an agenda and a party line – all the things journalists are trained to question and challenge. The irony is that the media, by over-relying on these familiar sources, is fuelling the distrust we explored earlier.

I put these criticisms to Maeve Whyte, Director of the British Agriculture Bureau, which represents the four UK farming unions in Brussels. She is unapologetic for the NFU's prominence in public debate.

"I think without a shadow of a doubt that's the most important thing in lobbying – that we can shout with a louder voice. That is what we are paid to do, to be the voice for a sustainable and profitable industry. What is the alternative?"

Figure 43: Maeve Whyte in her office at the British Agriculture Bureau in Brussels

Figure 44: The voice of UK farmers, or a voice?

I suggest that the voice of industry, by being so loud and effective, is unwittingly drowning out those individuals on the ground, who may think differently.

"But that's up to the journalist to pin that down and find that different view," she points out. "Although I would disagree that the farmer on the ground doesn't have a voice. Honestly, if I don't do something right, the first person to call me up on it is the farmer on the ground!"

I explore the idea with Maeve that bypassing the union and contacting farmers directly, particularly those commodity producers who do not deal directly with the public (and therefore tend not to have media-friendly websites), is a challenge for journalists.

"Finding these natural communicators who can speak on a topic in a short space of time is not so easy," she agrees. "That's why the NFU network is good because we can generally get someone who will talk and say something."

I can't argue with that. The NFU is exceptionally good at representing the collective view. It is the voice of industry and that is an essential service. But farmers must also speak out as individuals, and journalists must get better at finding those individual voices.

Lack of Specialism in the Media and the 'Farming Ghetto'

George Monbiot agrees with farmers on one thing - the shocking lack of agricultural and environmental knowledge in the general media. He has some toe-curling examples:

"I was once in a meeting with 150 TV executives and I asked how many had a science degree. I was the only one. A so-called environmental journalist once asked me what CO_2 was. This is a huge problem which extends far beyond farming. There's a total lack of knowledge in certain areas."

BBC News scrapped its Rural Affairs Correspondent post some years ago, despite calls for it to be reinstated following the Trust review of rural affairs coverage in 2014. It never did.

A colleague at BBC Bristol tells me specialism is rare at a regional level too:

"I'm not sure how many BBC regional newsrooms have any kind of rural affairs or environmental correspondent these days – not many. Certainly Bristol [which covers the South West], with its rural counties of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Somerset, doesn't have one. It has corries [correspondents] for business, health, home affairs, politics – but nothing rural."

The frustration is echoed in the USA. Agricultural correspondents have been axed from most of America's major networks and newspapers, with a few notable exceptions. Reuters, Bloomberg and The Wall Street Journal all retain respected agricultural writers.

For the most part though, in-depth farming coverage is limited to niche, specialist publications.

"The likes of CNN are woefully uninformed," says Mike Wilson, Executive Editor at Prairie Farmer magazine in Illinois. "It's laughable how shallow their questions are. We used to have a writer who could spout off about the mainstream guys. He'd say they are all big jerks and only the ag guys really know what's going on.

"I think the biggest problem with the agricultural media is we preach to the choir," he continues. "Ag media has a 'members only' attitude; if you come from a farm then you're in the club."

And most general newshounds are definitely *not* in the club.

Dublin-based journalist and broadcaster Ella McSweeney believes Irish farming coverage is ghettoised; siphoned off into technical supplements and specialist programmes that mainstream audiences can skip over and ignore.

Figure 45: Irish food and environment journalist Ella McSweeney

"We have a chronic shortage of mainstream view and analysis," she says. "Farming tends to be put in the business section but if you only see farming as a business you're missing a trick. It is something much more fundamental, cultural and emotional than that. All the questions in farming should be open and accessible to the general public. There is virtually no investigative journalism looking at areas of food and farming and general environmental issues."

Ella believes there are too few journalists critically examining key policies in Irish agriculture. I ask her for an example.

“Huge amounts of money are being poured into agri-expansion,” she replies. “Dairy expansion has been at a gallop’s pace for the last eight to 10 years but if you look at the statistics they don’t bear out very positively for farmers. The numbers of farmers are reducing, farm incomes aren’t anything to scream about, people are leaving the land. Try to interrogate that and you will get the door slammed in your face pretty quickly, so there is this terrible mix of a lack of openness and transparency but also a narrow viewpoint.”

Lack of Unity in Farming

There are mixed messages coming out of the farming industry, and a tendency for farmers to highlight the downsides of another agricultural system rather than the upsides of their own. Conventional and organic producers are equally guilty of this tactic.

Midwest rancher Larry Reinhold has a good example as we drive around the vast prairie where he raises Hereford cattle and quarter horses.

“South Dakota is one of the leading buffalo states,” he says. “I know people that raise them and as soon as they have a microphone they're saying it's so much better for you than beef, it's this and that, it’s grown and raised in the same place. But you're not doing anyone any favours by putting down another farmer. If you have to put somebody down to raise yourself up you have lost. You cannot do that. You have to measure your product by its own standard otherwise you're not doing anyone a service.”

Disunity and industry sniping confuses journalists trying to understand the real story.

Figure 46: “If you have to put somebody down to raise yourself up, you have lost”: South Dakota rancher Larry Reinhold.

Chapter 6: Help or Hinder? The Farmer's Responsibility

The challenges laid out in the previous chapter paint a rather depressing picture, suggesting the media's coverage of agriculture is largely hindered by all sorts of problems. But farmers and industry can also be part of a solution - to help, not hinder - their relationship with the mainstream media.

Openness and Transparency

Honesty is the best policy. When industry tries to control or conceal a bad news story, it generally doesn't work out too well.

Figure 47: Sows in loose pens. Zealand, Denmark.

In Denmark, MRSA CC398 (aka Livestock Associated MRSA or Pig MRSA) was brushed off by the farming industry when it first reared its head in 2007. After all, the bacterium is not harmful to pigs, other countries have it much worse and it poses only a very small risk to humans. What's the problem? It's no big deal.

By 2016 the bacteria had spread to 88% of conventional Danish pig farms, seven people had died from infections caused by 'Pig MRSA', a court battle resulted in the naming and shaming of infected farms and the ensuing public health scandal dominated the Danish press and just would not go away.

Sometimes, even when the story is ugly, it's best to get it out there.

Figure 48: Filming on a Danish pig farm for BBC Countryfile.

Three months after visiting Denmark as part of my Nuffield research, I returned to make a film for BBC Countryfile about antibiotic resistance on pig farms. This time the pig industry flung its doors wide open. Maybe it had learnt a lesson the hard way, knowing you can either roll with a story or watch it run away without you.

The Danish Agriculture and Food Council invested a huge amount of time in answering our questions – no matter how sensitive or uncomfortable those questions got. Two intensive pig farmers, who I found through the Danish Veterinary Institute and a private sector company, took the brave decision to allow us to film inside their barns, knowing full well their methods of production are the subject of much scrutiny and public opposition. The images sparked outrage among some viewers yet, for those farmers, transparency and honesty was worth the risk. I have no doubt this took a huge amount of courage.

Figure 49: Farrowing sows in an antibiotic-free system. Jutland, Denmark.

The finished film was well-received by all those who helped us make it, on both sides of this polarised debate. I believe openness and transparency lies at the heart of a balanced story.

Embracing Scrutiny

Darragh McCullough is an Irish journalist and television presenter. He's also a farmer with 300 acres and a 15% stake in a dairy partnership with his neighbour. In the space of one year, Darragh and his business partner expanded their herd from 360 to 480 cows, as many dairy farmers are being encouraged to do in Ireland, with its seemingly insatiable export market for milk.

But such rapid growth had unforeseen consequences. An outbreak of salmonella resulted in massive calf mortality; killing a quarter of the heifers and even more of the bull calves.

"That's a welfare problem," Darragh states simply, "because we had calves dropping like flies."

So what did he do?

He put it on telly.

"I think it's so important that you put warts and all in front of people," he says. "If you give people a sanitised version of agriculture they will think it's all roses and sunshine and not appreciate the trials and tribulations and the heartbreak and the losses."

Easy for him to say, but what if audiences don't like what they see? Darragh responds with this:

"Don't go sweeping it under the carpet until we have got a great big monster under there and one day somebody happens to stumble across it! We expanded, we did everything right but we got a disease outbreak and it really hit our calf mortality and we have struggled."

Darragh believes putting his story on national television sparked discussion further down the chain. He imagined the conversation between others in the industry:

"The milk processors will say, 'Did you see your man on TV? What's he doing telling everyone about that? We'd better get on to all our farmers and make sure they're switched on to the challenges of expansion because we don't want more stories like that on there."

"Obviously it takes confidence and familiarity with how the media works and to be a communicator," Darragh continues. "If you'd asked me to do that 20 years ago I would have curled up in a ball. But we have nothing to be ashamed of. Yes shit happens, yes some of this is ugly, yes there are things we're not particularly proud of but if they [farmers] put it out there they might be surprised how the public would sympathise with their situation."

A subsequent vaccination programme and settling down of the herd sorted out the problem. Darragh is a realist and knows the 'happy ending' isn't as good a story, but he adds one very important point:

"At least there isn't a potential exposé lurking in the shadows."

Empower the Individual

There are times when one voice can speak louder than an entire industry, when a personal story cuts through the political noise.

Traditionally the job of promoting agriculture and liaising with the media has fallen to our farming unions but increasingly individual farmers are stepping up and speaking out.

Danish pig producer Peter Kiær felt the farmer's side of the story was not cutting through in the general media, so he made a video on his mobile phone and sent the footage to Denmark's national broadcaster DR.

"I wasn't trying to make it look good or bad - just neutral. I tell it how it is, and you can see how the pigs live," he says.

Figure 50: A screenshot of Peter Kiær's video from Facebook (#baeredygtigt translates as #sustainable)

Peter filmed every area of the farm, including the pregnant and farrowing sows. He posted the video on Facebook and it was viewed more than 40,000 times. There were some challenges to the images, with some likening it to a prison, but Peter is not deterred by opposition – in fact he embraces scrutiny.

"First of all, people can see what's going on," he explains. "Then they can have their reaction. The benefit is that I also learn something from the people who look at it, from the citizen. Everybody can learn something."

Peter suspects there are only two or three conventional pig farmers in all of Denmark filming their farms and posting the videos on social media. He urges others to join him.

"They don't think it's necessary! For many years we just leave all those things to the main farm organisation. But this is just so simple - anybody could do it with an iPhone. There is a vacuum in the media."

Husband and wife team Troy and Stacy Hadrick have a Black Angus herd in South Dakota, running 400 mother cows as well as growing wheat, corn and soybeans on 4,000 acres.

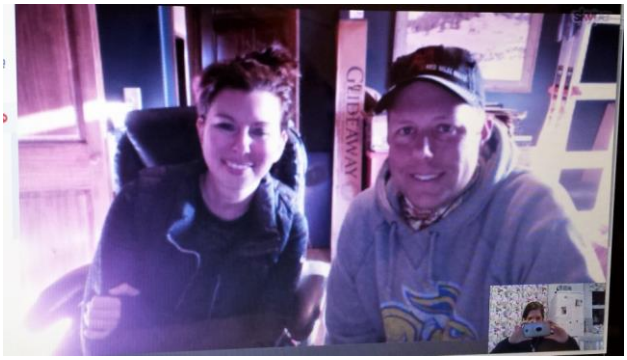

Figure 51: Stacy and Troy Hadrick chatting to me from South Dakota, via Skype

In March 2002 they featured in a New York Times Magazine article written by the internationally renowned food writer Michael Pollan. The piece was called 'Power Steer' and followed a single steer (purchased by Pollan himself) through America's beef supply chain, from its birthplace on Stacy's family ranch through to finishing at a Kansas feedlot.

Michael Pollan spent a few days with the Hadricks, learning about their cow/calf operation and picking out Steer No. 534, the hero of his story.

Some months later, when the story appeared in the New York Times Magazine, it wasn't what Troy and Stacy had expected.

"Basically," says Troy, "he was telling people in the article that our system of raising beef cattle in the United States is destroying the environment. It smells bad. It's polluting the water. If you eat that beef it's going to make you sick. I mean he went through the whole gamut and it was a huge kick in the gut to us. We just couldn't believe that he'd completely ignored everything that we'd shown him.

"It just became very obvious at that point that he had a story written in his head before he ever came out to see us. That he really just needed some names and some faces to plug into this narrative that he wanted to tell, which was basically he wanted to scare people about the food they're eating. It worked, it did scare people and that was the genesis of this big push to go towards a grass-fed beef product."

The Hadricks felt burned. They do not accuse Pollan of lying; but do feel they were duped into opening up their farm to a journalist who would abuse their trust and promote one view of US beef production. They claim he never revealed to them the tone of his piece, or asked them to respond to its many criticisms before publication.

Troy and Stacy hoped it would all go away, but two years later the article was incorporated into Pollan's first book - The Omnivore's Dilemma. It became an international bestseller.

I've read Omnivore's Dilemma. Overall, I found it to be well-informed and thought-provoking – this is not a clueless tabloid journalist spreading sensationalisms. Pollan understands American agriculture and he is well within his rights to hold the industry to account on what many people view as controversial practices (it is worth mentioning he is far harder on the feedlot system than cow/calf operations).

But, equally, it has a deeply critical, campaigning tone. It urges readers to turn their backs on conventional beef and buy pasture-reared, grass-fed meat. He stakes out a position and eloquently makes his case – and that's fine.

What isn't fine, according to Troy and Stacy, is their side of the story isn't sitting beside Pollan's on the bookshelf. So they took matters into their own hands. They started Advocates for Agriculture and now travel all over the world speaking out about farming and offering an alternative view to Pollan's.

Figure 52: Telling their own story: Troy and Stacy Hadrick pioneered America's agricultural advocacy movement.

Troy says: "We've even had people say, "Hey, you're those factory farmers", and yet, when we walk them through what we do and the reasons we do the things that we do, at the end of the day they say, "Well I don't understand why that does make you bad", or "You don't seem like you're out there intent on destroying the environment and abusing your livestock on a daily basis." We say, "No, obviously we're not."

"Most people in this country find farmers and ranchers very trustworthy. Now they might not find farming and ranching trustworthy, but farmers and ranchers they do."

I reach out to Michael Pollan, asking if he'd like to respond to Troy's comments. I'm delighted when he replies to my email.

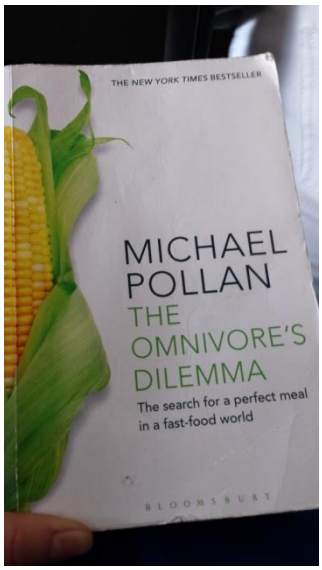

Figure 53: My copy of Omnivore's Dilemma was a thought-provoking travel companion during my Nuffield research.

"I never described the ranchers as factory farmers - they're not," he writes.

"It's always been my sense that the ranchers' upset over the article had less to do with anything I said about them than about the system they are a part of - and they are by far the most sustainable, least objectionable or brutal part of the system. Which is why the industry likes to put ranchers like Troy forward as the voice of the system. The feedlot and slaughterhouse have never to my knowledge publicly replied to the piece or the criticisms in it."

Having spoken to author and subject, my own personal view on America's conventional beef system rests somewhere in the middle, that inconvenient area of grey where reality often dwells. But what about other readers, particularly those in US cities where Pollan's view is their only window into the conventional ag world? Would they question critically, or adopt fully, this emotive and convincing narrative?

The Omnivore's Dilemma is held up as guiding light on food ethics – but where fact meets opinion is down to you, the reader, to decide.

No Politics. Just Farmers.

The individual speaking from personal experience, about their own farm, is extremely powerful. Forming a diverse network of such individuals, and providing a reliable resource for journalists, is the next step.

Most news stories and current affairs features follow a similar structure. If it's a controversial subject the journalist or researcher will look for three voices - for, against and a case study.

It's easy to find the first two – generally a senior office holder from an organisation like the NFU (National Farmers Union) or CLA (Country Land and Business Association) pitched against a charity, NGO or campaign group like Friends of the Earth or Compassion in World Farming. But finding a genuinely independent case study is much trickier.

I think back to all the times I've searched for case studies, wishing there was some kind of 'casting agency' for farmers; somewhere I could find good talkers without political agenda or a rehearsed message. It would be a diverse network, representing the various sectors of British agriculture – conventional and organic, large and small scale, housed and free-range, upland and lowland. Neutral voices speaking from personal, visible, tangible experience.

They would perform two tasks; providing independent testimony for the media and a unified message for their industry; proof that all farmers share a common goal – to produce food. They just choose different ways to do it. Historically, conflicts within the farming industry (often leapt upon by the ever conflict-hungry media) have led to divisions between different sectors and systems. I believe that, as long as you are farming responsibly, safely and sustainably, it is possible to 'farm and let farm', to celebrate your own system without denigrating others.

It's an optimistic vision – one that has been politely dismissed as cloud cuckoo land by countless people throughout my Nuffield journey. But on my final research trip to France, I found exactly what I was looking for. And it's working.

France is home to the second largest dairy herd in Europe. Its 4.5 million dairy cows are spread across 60,000 family-owned farms; with the average herd size around 60 to 65 cows.

Figure 54: Normandy grain farmer Jan Bertot doing a weekend shift in the parlour for his dairy farming brother Thierry.

Jean-Marc Beche works for CNIEL, the umbrella organisation for the French dairy industry. He is the founder and director of a national 'farmer witness network'. It's a group of 35 dairy and beef farmers from all over France, trained to communicate with the public, via the mainstream media.

In very simple terms, Jean-Marc's scheme provides media training – but this is a tool, not an objective. The aim of the network is to offer an authentic, personal insight into farming issues. The media training is about learning to relax and be yourself on camera or in front of a microphone - not how to dodge questions or push a party line.

Jean-Marc says: "The group we have is very diverse. We have organic, conventional, small farms in the mountains and others with 400 beef cattle – that's a really big farm by French standards. They must represent the whole of France and its diverse production models. The reason for that is they learn from each other and also the journalist needs diversity.

"It is a culture of differences and they are very tolerant. The spirit is everyone will be up front with the positive benefits of their farm but never by criticising what the others don't have.

"The farmers are not industry speakers or politicians; they just witness their own job. When they come to do the training they expect to be given a prepared message or special vocabulary. We tell them all they have to do is talk about their job. We just train them in how to get that across and to be clear. If they talk about the economy or politics they will only talk about their own farm and livelihood. He will never say whether a policy is good or bad – just how it affects him."

Figure 55: Meeting the hero of my research - Jean-Marc Beche at CNIEL, the French Dairy Interbranch Organization, in Paris.

Members of Jean-Marc's network must be truly independent – not office holders in unions or trade organisations, or lobbyists of any kind. The scheme is funded by a range of farming organisations, reflecting the full diversity of French agriculture, and journalists connect to the network through those official channels, or go directly to Jean-Marc.

"The journalists appreciate it," he tells me. "They always have a last minute deadline or a topic they have to turn around quickly. I give them the contact and they always call back afterwards and say the farmer was a good one."

The training isn't only about talking, but listening too. Jean-Marc invites activists from anti-capitalist organisations and environmental groups to come and talk to his farmers. It's an exercise in listening and understanding, stepping out of their comfort zone and having an open mind.

He organises trips to the theatre in the centre of Paris, encouraging the group to immerse themselves in urban culture. “Parisians go to the theatre and people in the countryside are not doing that so much. It’s a chance for the farmers to come and see how the rest of society is.”

Jean-Marc’s model bears some similarities to schemes run by LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming) but in my view the structure most resembles that of the Science Media Centre[12]. I believe a similar venture would work brilliantly for UK agriculture.

[12] The Science Media Centre (SMC) is an independent venture working to promote diverse voices, stories and views from the scientific community to the news media when science is in the headlines. More than 100 supporters including scientific institutions, media groups, charities, universities and corporate organisations provide a donation to support the Centre achieving its objectives. The SMC makes all organisational and editorial decisions independently of funders.

Chapter 7: Help or Hinder? The Media's Responsibility

It's not all down to the farmers. My profession - journalism - has a moral responsibility to address some of the challenges explored in Chapter 2. Editors, producers, programme makers and journalists can improve the media's coverage of agriculture and rural affairs without jeopardising balance, fairness and impartiality.

Should it 'Bleed to Lead'? Tackling Negativity Bias

In March 2017, the programme I work for - BBC Countryfile - made headlines in the Daily Mail and the Daily Express when it was accused of taking an 'anti-Brexit' tone.

Knowing how seriously we take editorial balance, rigorously checking and analysing our scripts, I don't believe this for a second. But it worries me profoundly that some of our viewers feel we are biased. It points towards a much wider problem, afflicting the global media.

You see, the media *is* biased. Not against Brexit, for example, but towards negativity. We've been accused of doom-mongering and naysaying: "Why aren't you reporting the good things about Brexit?"

Ok, let's roll with that. And while we're at it, let's give credit to Jeremy Corbyn for a Labour manifesto that mobilised a new generation of voters. Let's get behind Theresa May in the Brexit negotiations and focus on the deal, rather than the no deal. Let's discuss the achievements of the Liberal Democrats during the Coalition instead of one broken promise. Let's celebrate how immigration contributes to society. Let's look at the increasing wealth in the developing world, how fewer babies are dying of malaria and more women than ever before are getting an education.

Sound a little odd? That's because the media narrative is a negative one the world over, about everything. To balance a story is to reach for the drawback and the downside. Real news is something someone doesn't want you to know. Positive stories are adverts, free airtime. It has to bleed to lead. This is our media culture.

Is it damaging society? I believe so. Does it need to change? Absolutely. And one man in Denmark is leading the charge.

Ulrik Haagerup is Executive Director of News at the public service broadcaster DR, Denmark's equivalent to the BBC. An award-winning investigative reporter, he is one of the most influential journalists in the Danish media.

He is pioneering a new movement in journalism called 'Constructive News' (aka 'solutions focussed journalism'). Its message is unequivocal – that negativity destroys democracy and reporting only what's wrong in the world pushes voters towards populism and quick fix politics.

Constructive News is about adopting a fresh approach to news reporting – a new culture.

Figure 56: Ulrik Haagerup, Executive Director of News, DR. Copenhagen, Denmark.

"My profession has misled itself for the last 30 years, believing that the goal of great journalism is to be critical," says Ulrik. We are sitting in a glass-panelled office, overlooking the busy newsroom at DR headquarters in Copenhagen.

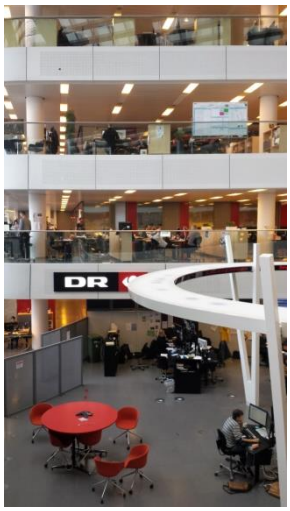

Figure 57: DR newsroom, Copenhagen

"The goal of great journalism," he continues, "is to help people understand more in order for them to make up their own mind. In order to do so you have to be critical – but it's a tool, not a goal.

"I've come to believe that the real purpose of journalism is to give people the best obtainable version of the truth. But it turns out there's a huge gap between reality and the perception of reality. If you ask people in France, "how many people are Muslim in your country?" On average, they will say that 31% of people in France are now Muslims, almost one third. The right number is 8.2%. If people have a completely wrong picture of the world, can we say that we [the media] are not to blame for it?"

Very often the truth is a complex web of light and dark, good and bad, problems and solutions.

Figure 58: A Must Read: Constructive News by Ulrik Haagerup.

In his book, 'Constructive News', Ulrik makes the case that problems and crisis dominate the news agenda while solutions largely go unreported. He believes true balance lies in the 'three pillars of journalism': hard breaking news (exposing a problem), investigative journalism (apportioning blame and holding to account) and solutions-based stories (moving forward and facilitating change). Without all three the public is denied the best obtainable version of the truth.

Ulrik's words were not a complete revelation to me. I truly believe I have been practising constructive journalism for years – I just didn't know what to call it.

Week in, week out, Countryfile's investigations highlight problems and reach for solutions. When I write scripts for Tom Heap or Charlotte Smith, I often include this line at the end of the first film: "So what can we do about it? Is there a solution? That's what I'll be finding out later."

Hopefully that line of script is familiar to you, as a viewer, because it's in there most weeks.

I am a passionate believer in this kind of journalism. It is progressive, forward-facing and constructive. An antidote to 'fake news' and a ray of light, cutting through in the post-truth era.

It just feels right.

Look Beyond the Usual Suspects

Journalists are working around the clock. Shrinking resources and ever-tightening deadlines in an age of competitive 24 hour news means they increasingly don't have time to contact dozens of sources to get the story.

However, over-reliance on one source, and most commonly in this context it is farm unions, is lazy and damages trust in both the media and the industry. I believe journalists, particularly those working in mainstream, general news, must look beyond the 'one stop shop' to include a wide range of rural organisations. Agricultural colleges and universities, rural charities like the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, levy boards, research institutes, think tanks, trade bodies and agricultural societies (my sponsor the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society has a vast directory of enthusiastic farmers, ready and willing to talk to the media). My intention is not to undermine the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and the vital role they play in public debate; but to enrich the discussion around farming and bring more voices to the table.

There is a responsibility on editors and producers to differentiate between a specialist journalist and a campaigner, and to make that difference clear to audiences. The word 'journalist' is not a protected title. It can be applied to an objective observer who reports facts and presents both sides of the argument, or an activist who uses journalistic tools to push an agenda.

Both the impartial informer and the investigative campaigner are essential for democracy to function properly; but it is dangerous for democracy if audiences cannot decipher one from the other.

Figure 59: Who shall we invite on the programme today? Think outside the box. Look beyond the usual suspects

Broadening the Remit Works: The CountryWide and Countryfile Effect

Specialism should not be at the expense of broad appeal. Burying farming coverage in technical publications loaded with jargon has a ghettoising effect. It's by farmers, for farmers.

There used to be a programme on RTÉ Radio 1 in Ireland called Farm Week. It broadcast at 7.30am on Saturday mornings to around 40,000 listeners and was a respected, heavyweight agricultural programme.

Figure 60: RTÉ presenter Damien O'Reilly preparing to go on air

In the early 2000s Damien O'Reilly took over as presenter from the late Joe Murray, an Irish radio legend, and made his own mark on the show.

"I started to introduce non-agri, more rural, foodie 'Countryfile-type' stories," Damien recalls over a cup of coffee in the RTÉ canteen in Dublin.

In 2006 he asked the schedulers to move Farm Week to the 8.30 slot on a Saturday morning. They agreed but stressed it must be accessible and engaging for a non-farming audience.

Damien's listenership increased from 40,000 to 140,000.

Three years later, spurred by Farm Week's growing popularity, Damien went back to the RTÉ bosses. This time he wanted a live programme and a producer. Again, they agreed - but on one condition. He had to change the name.

"They didn't want it to be the farming programme because it's too compartmentalised so we compromised and called it CountryWide."

Audience figures jumped again, now topping 200,000.

"We have a really loyal listenership and I think we've helped bridge the gap between rural and urban," says Damien. "90% of our listeners are not farmers but we bring them farming stories or food-related stories in a very user-friendly way. It's about entertainment, education and enlightenment."

Figure 61: In the RTÉ Radio 1 studio with CountryWide presenter Damien O'Reilly

That same year, 2009, a similar tale was unfolding on the other side of the Irish Sea. BBC One moved its Sunday morning stalwart Countryfile to a primetime slot. It was an overnight success as viewing figures rocketed by literally millions, putting rural affairs firmly in the spotlight.

Countryfile remains regularly the most-watched factual programme on British television.

But this was not without criticism. Both CountryWide and Countryfile have been accused of being too 'soft', somehow deserting hard-core farming issues or 'rose-tinting' the countryside by appealing to a broader audience. At the beginning of my Nuffield journey I felt vaguely apologetic for this. Today, I will happily take on that debate, and passionately defend what these programmes do.

Farming desperately needs a bigger mainstream profile – not inward-looking echo chambers. At this year's Nuffield Triennial Conference Day many of the speakers lamented the fact that farming barely featured in the 2017 election campaign. The hard truth is that it's an irrelevance for our political leaders – unless they are reminded.

Farmers need ordinary people to see them. Countryfile and CountryWide are windows into their world. Through a remote control, people are transported to the remotest corners of their country; places they would otherwise never see, nor care about.

Countryfile, with its powerful combination of cinematic beauty and 'soft' stories, draws in massive audiences, allowing our investigations to inform millions of people about issues few mainstream programmes would touch. Soil health, farm safety, sheep rustling, potato prices, rural broadband and mobile phone coverage, fly tipping, dog attacks, rural mental health services, council farms…I could go on and on.

Show me another primetime programme that can bring stories like these to so many people.

Figure 62: Directing an interview about conservation agriculture for BBC Countryfile with presenter Tom Heap and LEAF Chief Executive Caroline Drummond in Gloucestershire at the height of summer. Filmed by my favourite cameraman Nigel Bradley.

Inspiring Passion for Rural Affairs

There is momentum building here and now is the time to capitalise on it.

National newspapers like The Guardian, rattled by being so out of touch with public sentiment following the EU referendum, made a concerted effort to venture outside London during the 2017 election campaign, with some impressive focus on farming issues too. The Times now has a countryside correspondent and BBC News has tasked one of its environment correspondents with the rural affairs brief, recently hiring a dedicated rural affairs producer too.

Brexit has boosted the mainstream profile of food and farming. Jeremy Hayes, my former editor on Farming Today and now Senior Editorial Adviser at BBC News, notes that the agricultural labour issue has crept up the bulletins and Defra gets more mentions in the newsroom since Michael Gove was appointed Environment Secretary. “Politics seems to be the sauce which makes rural stories tasty to the metropolitan media,” he says wryly.

Countryfile’s primetime success continues, whetting the appetites of TV commissioners for more rural content. Recent years have seen shows like First Time Farmers on Channel 4, Lambing Live, Back to the Land with Kate Humble and two series of Harvest on BBC Two. Farming Today remains a popular daily fixture on the BBC Radio 4 schedule. Meanwhile, The Archers has its own Nuffield Scholar!

Yet agricultural specialism in the mainstream media remains incredibly rare. Agricultural correspondents are largely extinct; subsumed into the environment, business or broader rural affairs brief. I doubt this will ever be reversed, but neither do I think that’s necessarily a bad thing.

Rural affairs is a rich, rewarding genre encompassing environment, energy, wildlife and conservation. Farming, so inextricably linked to all those things, must be at its very core. It is equally important to remember that social issues like education, poverty and crime are just as relevant in rural areas, yet are so often viewed from an urban perspective. These stories are crying out for our focus and attention.

I believe there is enormous potential for journalists, like myself, to work with colleges and universities to spark more interest in rural affairs; to encourage young, aspiring journalists to consider it as a specialism, and a subject worthy of understanding throughout their career.

Figure 63: A Charlotte Smith, presenter of Farming Today and Countryfile

Figure 64: Tom Heap and me during filming for Countryfile

Chapter 8: Discussion

When I embarked on this journey I expected to study the prevalence of farming in the mainstream media, i.e. the amount of coverage it receives. But that feels somehow unimportant and irrelevant now. This has become far more an exploration of tone and perception, the angles journalists take, the questions they ask and how farmers respond, under pressure, to scrutiny and challenge.

Worryingly there are problems on both sides of this divide, for I do believe there is a deep disconnect between conventional agriculture and the metropolitan news media.

Our job as journalists is to give readers, viewers and listeners the best obtainable version of the truth, balanced and impartial information and to clearly signpost the difference between fact and opinion. I've seen examples of the news media unconsciously reinforcing stereotypes and naively swallowing preconceived ideas about modern agriculture, driven, I believe, by urban bias, a lack of specialism and a lack of curiosity about rural life.

But I've also been reassured by a growing appetite for rural affairs features and documentaries, particularly on radio and television. Farming is trending.

I've been shocked by some unhelpful attitudes within the farming industry. I have come across an inward-looking snobbery about the perceived cluelessness of the mainstream media, a lack of transparency on key issues of public interest, disproportionate defensiveness in the face of legitimate challenge and a tendency to 'shoot the messenger' instead of taking a long, hard look at itself and the way it communicates with the public. Farmers have played the victim for too long, complaining of attacks on their industry when they should be rising to the challenge, opening doors, building relationships and championing their point of view.

There are too few farmers and journalists who have a foot in both urban and rural life; who can see, without prejudice or preconception, the frustrations on both sides. This has filled me with determination and passion to build a bridge; to challenge both the media and the farming industry to walk in each other's shoes.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

1. The urban/rural disconnect is real, more so in Western and urbanised societies, and both the media and farming industry are contributing to it. While 'rural affairs' is a growing genre, agricultural specialism in the mainstream media remains incredibly rare.

2. Urban bias is endemic. This can lead to farming and rural issues being ignored, over-simplified or viewed purely from a metro-centric angle. Healthy journalistic scepticism can cross the line into ideological bias against conventional, intensive or large-scale farming systems.

3. Farmers and the industry are fuelling the disconnect through a lack of openness and transparency, disproportionate defensiveness in the face of legitimate challenge, disunity among farming sectors and a sense of 'exceptionalism' or entitlement to positive coverage.

4. Taken in a global context and in spite of urban bias, UK farming receives a fair amount of media coverage, relative to the industry's size. Programmes like Countryfile, which have broadened the appeal of farming to huge audiences, are doing the industry a valuable service.

5. Finally, the public narrative around agriculture is being dominated by farming unions and lobbyists. Politics at an industry level is drowning out individuals at a farm level, contributing to more distrust in the mainstream media.

This has sparked something in me - a personal mission to set up a network of independent, trusted and diverse on-farm communicators. This is a new and original concept for British farming; and an exciting post-Nuffield challenge for me. Watch this space.

Figure 65: On to the next challenge

Chapter 10: Recommendations

These have been structured for two key stakeholders who have equal influence and a shared responsibility in shaping the story of what farming is, what farming does and where farming is going.

For Farmers:

- **Farmers must get better at talking to journalists and the mainstream media.** Challenge is not criticism, questions are not attacks. Fight the red mist and learn to embrace scrutiny by acknowledging, and responding to, the views of those who think differently.
- **Increased openness and transparency**. Particularly around controversial subjects like intensive livestock production. Access to farms is absolutely essential in order to bridge the urban/rural disconnect. Attempts to keep journalists in the dark about the realities of modern food production are doomed to fail. Farmers must be prepared to not only defend, but champion their production systems. If they don't believe in them, no one else will.
- **A diverse network of independent farmers.** Work with industry to develop an inclusive network of free-thinking farmers, from across all agricultural sectors and systems, willing to speak openly to journalists with passion and without politics. Providing personal, 'on the ground' testimony on topical issues without pushing an industry agenda or denigrating other farming systems. A project is already in the pipeline. Look out for 'Just Farmers' in 2018.

For the Media:

- **Journalism with integrity.** If farms and agribusiness are to open their doors, they must be able to trust the media to deliver constructive journalism. While continuing to report the problems in agriculture, editors and programme makers have a duty to report solutions too. Adopting Ulrik Haagerup's 'third pillar of journalism' (solutions-based stories) would be a step forward for news culture.
- **Urban bias.** Tackle urban bias by challenging metro-centric stereotypes about farming and rural life. Cultivate curiosity - not preconceptions - about all farming systems. Facilitate specialism in rural affairs. Differentiate between campaigners and informers.
- **Inspire passion for rural affairs.** It's time to generate interest in agriculture and rural life among young, trainee journalists by speaking to urban schools, colleges and universities. Established and respected journalists like Countryfile's Tom Heap and Farming Today's Charlotte Smith would be of enormous help in this mission. We journalists who have made a career out of rural affairs specialism must share our passion and inspire others to follow in our footsteps.

Chapter 11: After my study tour

My Nuffield Scholarship was timely. What a tumultuous two years…the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, Donald Trump sits in the Oval Office and politics is beyond polarised. It's tribal. It is easy to despair at the divided society we find ourselves in; where the box you tick on a ballot paper somehow then categorises who you must be as a person. However, my Nuffield Scholarship has taught me one fundamental truth:

People are people. Politics is not people.

I've spent two years working across a political and cultural divide, hearing stories from vastly different worlds and charting deep controversies within the world of agriculture. I've met resilient farmers in some of the remotest corners of our planet and eminent journalists in our greatest cities. I've played permanent Devil's Advocate in a journey that spans the diverse political spectrum.

I am now using the insights from my Nuffield Scholarship to build bridges, challenge preconceptions and nurture understanding between groups who otherwise may never think to even try and understand each other. In February 2017 I spoke to hundreds of arable farmers at the Sentry Farming Conference about working with the media. My profession came under fire, and I hope I threw some fire back as well. It was a nerve-racking experience and the first real test of my convictions, but a bit of 'gloves off' open dialogue seemed to go down well.

In September I was generously sponsored by the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) to attend the annual African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF) in Ivory Coast. To be part of the conversation about driving agricultural transformation across Africa was a huge honour. I witnessed Governments, aid donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector commit to helping millions of smallholder farmers move from subsistence into commercial agriculture. This would be a revolution; a trigger for economic growth right across the continent and, thanks to Nuffield, I'm part of it.

As well as working with the world's smallest and poorest farmers, I have been invited to the United States to speak to those at the larger end of the scale. In November 2017 I will address the South Dakota Cattlemen's Association at their annual convention. America's beef industry has fought many battles with the media. I think it's great that the ranchers of South Dakota are embracing the issue, are open to talking about it and want to hear what I have to say.

Looking ahead to 2018, I am going to help more farmers at the grassroots engage constructively with the media by setting up a network of free-thinking, independent farmer communicators – similar to what has been achieved in France. I am looking for volunteers and sponsors to help me get this concept off the ground. It's called 'Just Farmers'.

But don't think for a moment I am crossing the fence into public relations. I remain, first and foremost, a journalist. My job is not to make the farming industry look good by promoting its qualities and ignoring its failings. I will continue telling fresh and surprising stories about agriculture. I will carry on making challenging and balanced rural affairs journalism.

My duty is to the best obtainable version of the truth.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

My Nuffield Farming Scholarship is dedicated to my late uncle Simon Jones; a proud stockman who loved talking about farming. He was enormously supportive of this study but sadly passed away before it was finished.

Figure 66: My uncle, Simon Jones, and me at a family wedding. Simon farmed beef and sheep on a council farm near Knighton in Powys. He is forever in our thoughts.

I would like to thank the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust for spotting some potential in me, and The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society and Trehane Trust for taking a punt on a non-farmer. Their generous sponsorship has changed my life.

Special thanks must go to my Alex, who I met just as I was embarking on this incredible journey two years ago. He's my back-up team and cheered me on all the way. My Nuffield Scholarship has been a wonderful third wheel – but I'm looking forward to it being just us!

To my Mum and Dad, who let their 35-year-old 'townie-fied' daughter move home to the farm for almost a year - thank you for the home-cooked meals and constant encouragement.

To my Nuffield mentor Nic Snell, the most patient man in the world. Sorry for all those cancelled meetings. Thank you for not giving up on me.

And thank you to Bill Lyons, Joanna Brame and Susan Aartse-Tuyn at BBC Countryfile for giving me the one thing that made this scholarship possible - time off.

I've met many amazing people, all over the world, and heard hundreds of stories. Frustratingly I couldn't include all of them in my report. Please know that every meeting and every interview informed my thinking and inspired my findings.

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