

Nuffield summary 2018-2019

Yvon Jaspers

'How do I tell the farmer's story to the larger audience?'

Since 2005 I create and present the TV-program "*Farmer Wants a Wife*" for the public broadcasting station: a program about the love life on the countryside, about people that vulnerable as they search for a partner for life. Now, fifteen years later countless marriages have been performed and over 80 babies were born. Not only the love lives, but also the viewing figures are a great success. With a market share of around 50% and an average of three million viewers, very few programmes on Dutch television perform better.

Coming from a farmers family, I have long felt the urge to not only tell the love story of the country side but address the real life that farmers face. In the past 15 years while visiting farmhouses, I witnessed the tough battle that many farmers fight. How they struggle for survival in a world which is drenched in complex rules and regulations. How they are forced to make huge investments without knowing whether these will still meet the requirements after a period of ten years. How they need to deal with animal activists that secretly occupy their stables and with a farmers community that is internally divided about the most preferred way of farming.

I was looking for a way to create a TV-programme that, on the one hand, has high entertainment value, thereby drawing the same large audiences that also traditionally view the popular programme *Farmer Wants a Wife*. On the other hand, I wanted the new programme to address technical knowledge, farmers trade-offs, controversial issues such as animal welfare and the mutual link between nature and agriculture. I want the programme to be triggering a nuanced discussion about where our food comes from, based on facts instead of opinions.

To find inspiration about the new TV-format, I travelled to several continents around the world. I'll give you an overall impression of my findings, of course this does not do justice to all the people that I have visited in each country.

My journey started in the United Kingdom where I met various TV-producers, journalists, chefs and farmers asking them about their vision on how to reach the larger public with the real farmers story. ("*Country File*", "*River Cottage*", "*Farmers Cookbook*", etc). The English seem to have chosen an approach in which they broadened the agricultural story by giving the floor not only to farmers but many other stakeholders as well. They focus on the strong sentiment surrounding "the countryside" to reach larger audiences. Cooking, baking, gardening, hiking, hunting, eating and the four seasons are themes that are highlighted in their TV-formats to dress-up the farmers story. Not all farmers are happy with this approach as they sense that their situation is over-romanticized, thereby disguising their tough existence.

In the United States I visited a number of agricultural recreational sites, farmers' museums, urban agricultural projects, educational centers and agricultural pioneers. ("*Brooklyn Grange NYC*", "*Museum of Science and Industries Chicago*", "*Blue Hill at Stonebarns*", "*Indiana State Fair*", "*Fair Oaks*", etc) They showed me how communication about

agriculture in the United States is dominated by statistics: they impress the public by stressing their performance and large-scale production. Sometimes farming seems to be one big competition, citizens are almost forced to choose sides: you are either in favor of conventional mega-farms, or you prefer to be at the other side of the spectrum favoring small-scale organic agriculture. Both camps try to tell their story in a convincing manner. Personal stories from the farmers are not often used.

In Africa I visited a Rwandan committed TV-maker who tried hard by himself to offer a weekly farmers programme as well as two women who successfully produced an agricultural radio show catering 80% of the farmers in Rwanda. (*Radio Huguka*) In Africa, it is not the television but the radio which is the main mode of communication to the larger public. The farmer is the main character in these shows and the nature of the programme is mainly educational: what is the best time to sow, how to prepare the land, what kind of pesticides to use, etc. In Kenya, I discovered a popular TV programme (*'Shamba Shape up!'*) that portrayed farmers' stories and successfully reached out to millions of people.

Finally I travelled to China. To my big surprise, this is where I found the Holy Grail. In Beijing I visited the studio of CCTV7, an exclusive agricultural TV channel employing thousand professionals. The CCTV7 channel exists for over 22 years, currently offering 14 agricultural TV formats, eight hours per day, reaching 1.3 billion people. The channel is broadcasted in various countries outside China, such as Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, Egypt, South Africa, Laos, Myanmar en Cambodia. Programmes address agricultural innovations, country life, science, sustainability, entrepreneurship, food and human health. The shows are increasingly translated in English and French thereby enabling coverage of the whole African continent.

These inspiring journeys and encounters strengthened my believe that there is a great demand for the real farmers' story. In the meantime, two series of my new TV-format, called *Our Farm*, have been broadcasted in the Dutch television. The personal story of the farmer is the centre point of the programme. With a market share of 20% and between 1.5-2 million viewers, the programme is a tremendous success. Also the farmers in the Netherlands have expressed their great appreciation for *Our Farm*.

The management of Netherlands Public Broadcast station (NPO) is now fully aware about the need and urgency of sharing the farmers story with the Dutch public. A third programme in which Dutch farmers meet with their foreign colleagues will be recorded in 2020. The first country of exchange will be Rwanda. My Nuffield journey has been crucial in developing this new format as well as to convince the higher management to provide a platform for farmers on Dutch television.

The stories of so many farmers that I met in the last two year are truly existential: they deal with matters of life and death, for their customers as well as for themselves. Their stories have made a deep impression on me and inspired me hugely to fight for the farmers voice to be heard on public television.

Please check Our Farm (Onze boerderij) on:
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