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## Mediating good food and moments of possibility with Jamie Oliver: Problematising celebrity chefs as talking labels

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the powerful and mediating role of celebrity chefs over audience relationships with food through analysis of Jamie Oliver and his recent series *Save with Jamie*. The paper firstly situates the role of celebrity chefs theoretically, defining them as 'talking labels' who may act both as knowledge intermediaries and boundary objects to connect audiences with food in multiple ways. Here chefs actively construct and mediate discourses around 'good food'. As trusted, credible, well-liked public figures, chefs step into our private home spaces through our televisions to convey food information in a charismatic, entertaining and accessible way. Like traditional food labels, chef's words can be 'sticky' and take hold in public imaginations in a way that goes far beyond the capacity of food products labels. Yet the relationship between chefs and audiences is far from straightforward and so the paper secondly aims to explore how these talking labels are understood and 'used' by audiences in their everyday food practices. Drawing selectively from a large scale audience survey ( $n = 600$ ) as well as the series, *Save with Jamie*, this paper reveals the different ways that audiences 'talk back' to chefs both positively and negatively to create moments of simultaneous possibility and resistance for audience relations with food. This revealed complex relationships between audiences, chefs and food. It also suggests that the powerful work on celebrity chefs functions as part of a new mediated mechanism within today's food governance.

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### Introduction

Jamie, Nigella, Hugh, Gordon, Heston, Delia. In the UK, many television chefs are so familiar to us that their first name is all we need to think of them. Their cookery shows, recipe books, and their warm, welcoming personality are all designed to provide an hour or so of entertainment. Yet, as scholars in cultural and media studies have articulated, celebrity and television chefs are so much more than just entertainment (Salkin, 2013). For example, Joanne Hollows and colleagues detail the ways that celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver offer a particular form of 'domestic masculinity' that works to disavow cooking as a form of labour (Hollows, 2003). This also speaks to the ways in which he has been legitimated as a 'moral and social entrepreneur' with the authority to fix the ills of 'broken Britain' through the responsabilisation of individual eaters (Hollows and Jones, 2010). Slocum et al. (2011)—also focusing on Jamie in the context of his US-based, healthy-eating Food Revolution working to '...change how America eats, one lunch at a time' (178)—critically assess the ways that the programme not only shamed and ridiculed the poor and their

diets, but that it failed to even mention, let alone confront, the structural inequalities institutionalised in the foodscapes of the US. Related research on Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (Bell and Hollows, 2011), a key purveyor of the 'campaigning culinary documentary' in the UK (Bell et al., this issue), critiques the 'inevitably classed' aspects of ethical consumption that is produced through Hugh's various desires to get us to eat more ethically. Thus, celebrity chefs and their embodied 'figures' enter fully into our private home spaces through television, cookbooks and the internet to construct and mediate knowledge around food, at the same time they seek to influence and disciple our food choices and practices, most notably around the debatable notions of 'good food' (Abbots, forthcoming).

Building on this recent cultural studies scholarship, this paper works to not only take celebrity chefs seriously, but to further analyse their roles as key figures that mediate our relationship to food. In this, the paper works to contribute to current debates about the ways our 'worlds of food' (Morgan et al., 2006) are governed in contemporary societies (e.g. Friedberg, 2004; Guthman, 2003; Guthman and Mansfield, 2013; Mansfield, 2012). To do so, I focus on the powerful mediating and governing role of the media, here in the form of celebrity chefs, on society-food relationships. While only beginning to be touched on in geographical scholarship (Piper, 2013; Slocum et al., 2011) and often done so only in passing

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(e.g. Goodman et al., 2010), it is my hope that this paper, in conjunction with the rest of this special issue, begins to highlight the importance of critical scholarship on the role of the food media in shaping the complex, situated and multiple ways of being with, relating to and eating food.

Overall the paper has two key aims. First, I wish to conceptually situate celebrity chefs within the work of Sally Eden and colleagues (Eden, 2011; Eden et al., 2008a, 2008b). This influential work has usefully employed empirically-grounded discussions of food labels to show how they work to mediate information between food and consumers. In drawing on this work, I suggest that celebrity chefs are a form of ‘talking label’ similar to food labels; as such, they act as both a cultural intermediary and boundary object to construct knowledge around choosing/shopping, cooking and eating and connect audiences to food and themselves. Traditional food labels and chefs have points of overlap in their provision of branded knowledge to consumers. What today’s celebrity chefs uniquely offer though, is a conveyance and translation of large amounts of complex food and nutrition information in a living, breathing ‘package’. The talking label attempts to be understandable and accessible to the public, and ideally serves as a familiar, engaging and trusted figure allowing a more human connection than labelled goods sitting on a shelf. Yet unlike an inanimate label, the ‘talking label’ is more vulnerable to inconsistency and contradictions, especially given their capacity to engage with their audience in real-time formats through platforms such as Twitter.

Yet, what do audiences actually think about these interventions and the things that celebrity chefs are saying to them about food? This then is the second aim of this paper: An exploration of how these talking labels are understood, ‘used’ by audiences and, thus, in effect, talked ‘back’ to in different ways and formats as audiences use them both to change their diet but also to resist these ‘better’ ways of eating. This is explored through two different research encounters and empirical contexts: the first involves the responses to an online survey that asked audiences about their engagements with celebrity chefs. While part of a much larger survey on the ‘celebrityisation’ of society (e.g. Chouliraki, 2013; Goodman, 2010; Kapoor, 2013; van Krieken, 2012; Wheeler, 2013), I pull selectively from this survey to analyse responses to the specific questions asked of audiences in terms of their engagements with celebrity chefs, their programmes and the information they work to provide.

Conducted in 2013, a theoretical sampling approach (Glasser and Strauss, 1967) was used to target respondents likely to have an existing broad awareness and engagement with celebrity culture. The survey was conducted online and sent to staff and students at King’s College London as well as other online celebrity-chef related networks, all of whom were asked to ‘snowball’ the survey within their own social networks; six hundred ( $n = 600$ ) completed surveys were returned. A mixture of open and closed questions was used, permitting some in-depth qualitative data to be collected. Both Channel 4 and its food programming are particularly strong in reaching ABC1 (i.e. upper/middle class, high income) groups, with an average monthly reach of 86.9%, performing particularly well with 16–34 year olds (Channel 4 Sales, 2014). This viewing profile fits well both the survey cohort as well as the audience of celebrity culture more broadly (Turner, 2004). Jamie Oliver’s audience is of course wider than the survey respondents, but this data provides novel empirical insight into audiences who are aware of Jamie Oliver and his brand and who have watched his shows and others relating to celebrity chefs and food programmes on UK television. While there are limitations to survey methods, particularly in differences between reported and actual behaviours, empirical research into the ways that audiences engage with celebrity culture is lacking (Turner, 2010). This survey provides valuable data to address this, revealing audience

perceptions and engagements across a range of celebrity chef, food programme and audience encounters for the first time.

The second objective of this paper involves the specific analysis of one of Jamie Oliver’s latest TV programme and campaign called *Save With Jamie* and specifically that related to the Twitter hashtag #savewithjamie. Focused on ‘austerity cooking’ designed to help audiences cook cheap healthy meals, the associated programme *Jamie’s Money Saving Meals* and surrounding media became rife with tension that opened up, but also complicated the relationships between the audience and the chef. Specifically, Oliver and, by proxy, the *Save With Jamie* campaign garnered negative publicity in the run up to the airing of the TV programme in 2013. This controversy was in large part catalysed by comments Oliver made around food and poverty in Britain. In an interview to UK television magazine the Radio Times, Oliver said he found it “difficult to talk about modern day food poverty” because “seven times out of ten, the poorest families in this country choose the most expensive ways to hydrate and feed their families. The ready meals, the convenience foods” (Daly, 2013). In other words, the talking label of Oliver said the ‘wrong’ things about the connection between poverty, food and cooking and a major backlash ensued. Yet despite this controversy, *Jamie’s Money Saving Meals* was well received by audiences and critics, while the *Save With Jamie* cookbook topped bestseller lists (Guardian, 2013). The tension between Jamie’s controversial comments and vast book sales remains and speaks in part to the endurance of Oliver’s appeal as a celebrity chef. It is argued that Oliver’s campaign opened up ‘moments of possibility’ that simultaneously involve instances of both resistance and approval which I track and analyse across #savewithjamie and other media responses to his comments and programmes.

The paper continues as follows: First, I briefly explore the ways that celebrity chefs work to ‘perform food’, particularly around defining ‘good food’. Secondly, I move to analyse the ways that celebrity chefs are first, boundary objects, but also ‘talking labels’ that act as ‘live’ knowledge brokers between people, food and eating. Third, I explore the ways that celebrity chefs do ‘work’ on audience understandings and engagements by analysing several moments possibility facilitated by both old and ‘new’ media platforms. I conclude briefly with a few short statements about taking this research forward.

### Celebrity chefs as talking labels

Food programming works on many levels, it has evolved from being more than just ‘how to’ TV from the traditional formats such as Delia’s *How to Cook*, to shows that entertain and inspire, such as Heston’s *Feast* or Jamie’s *Ministry of Food*.

[Food on 4, 2010]

Food TV and associated media now is not only for so-called ‘foodies’ (Johnston and Baumann, 2010). No longer do these shows seek to merely educate us in terms of ‘how to’ prepare and cook food. Today, food television emulates what other successful genres do, and what more generally TV is good at: it works to entertain, inspire and create desire (Skeggs and Woods, 2012). Active and direct intervention by food media into our lives seeks not only to connect and inform us of what and how to eat, but also promises to make us better in multiple ways: better cooks, better socially, better at caring for friends and family, better lifestyles and well-being, better homes, better connected to food and those producing it, better global citizens even (Rousseau, 2012). With chefs rarely off our screens or bestseller lists, there is ample opportunity for them to be placed, and place themselves, as powerful players in today’s neo-liberal and responsibilised landscapes of food governance (Goodman et al., 2010; Guthman, 2007, 2008). Increasingly mediated governance regimes open up space for a range of new

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