#farming365 – exploring farmers' social media use and the (re)presentation of farming lives

Introduction

Rural studies now has a well-established corpus of work exploring how rural spaces and practices become (re)presented within areas such as art, literature, film and television (Haigron, 2017; Horton, 2008; Short, 2006) and how these representations serve to perpetuate the 'cultural fantasy' of the rural idyll (Short, 2006, p.144). Equally voluminous has been the attendant critical work which has cast light on how such idyllic representations offer a somewhat sanitised view of the countryside within which many of the more uncomfortable lived realities (and exclusions) become culturally screened out of discourses of the rural (Somerville et al., 2015). Recent work has begun to interrogate how more nuanced and less myopic representations of the realities of rural life may be offered by new forms of popular media including reality TV (Chueh and Lu, 2018; Peeren and Souch, 2019), fictional TV series (Dickason, 2017) and computer games (Sutherland, 2020a, b). This work is important in noting how traditional tropes of the rural may be interspersed with, and potentially challenged by, more everyday, lived, accounts. An area which offers potential for expanding such everyday accounts is that of social media – offering, as it does, the potential for any individual to document and share their lives and experiences with a worldwide audience (Humphreys, 2018) – but, as Chueh & Lu (2018, p.140) have recently noted in the pages of this journal, this is an area which rural studies has been slow to consider. The following paper wishes to attend to this omission through a consideration of farmers' use of social media and an exploration of how it may be used to document and (re)present their everyday working lives and practices.

Although work emanating from the cultural turn noted that social scientists were slow to focus on representations of agriculture (vis-à-vis rural areas more generally) (Morris and Evans, 2004), recent attention has been paid to contemporary depictions of agriculture – both positive and negative – within areas such as print media and television (Fountaine, 2020; Peeren and Souch, 2019). In their exploration of the Dutch reality TV show *The Farmer Wants a Wife*, for example, Peeren and Souch (2019) note that whilst traditional idyllic tropes of rurality may often predominate, these may be reworked through presenting the more everyday realities of twenty-first-century farming through a focus on the lives of farmers. Central to such presentations is a recognition of hard work and the often all-consuming nature of farming activities – something which has been well noted within academic research that articulates how the farming lifescape is one within which the geographical and moral boundaries between home and work are blurred (e.g. Convery et al., 2005). Whilst such difficult elements of lived reality come through, Peeren and Souch (2019) note how editorial control may often default to, or reinstate, more idyllic narratives. The following paper considers how social media, as something which any individual can post and curate, might offer alternative representations of rural farming life.

Beyond rural studies, there is a rapidly developing body of work which has noted how social media, as an increasingly common feature of everyday life, is now one of the primary vehicles through which individuals may present themselves, their lives and places (DeVito et al., 2017). Well recognised in this work is that this social media brings different affordances than other forms of representation and other communication technologies. These include *visibility* (allowing individuals to make their knowledge, preferences and behaviours visible where it was previously hard to see); *persistence* (enabling the communication to remain visible after its author has first presented it); *editability* (where individuals are able to craft,

and redraft, purposeful forms of communication); and *association* (whereby people can attach their communications to other individuals or to a piece of information, through processes such as tagging) (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). As such, social media offer the potential for individuals to share their experiences, and fashion particular representations of the countryside – something increasingly evident within the popular discussions of agriculture. Several recent social media 'events', for example, have started to become part of the farming calendar, such as the *Farmers Guardian's* '24 hours in farming', which, with the UK supermarket chain *Morrisons,* asks the general public to "celebrate farming for 24 hours" through encouraging the use of the hashtag #farm24 and the profiling of farming figures, whilst hashtags such as #farming365 are prevalent amongst the agricultural industry to showcase on Twitter that the work of farmers is an endeavour 365 days of the year.[1] Similarly, *Country Living* magazine recently observed that 'farmer-broadcasters' are beginning to proliferate on all social media platforms, with content views increasing significantly over the last two years (and especially during recent COVID lockdowns). Within the magazine's showcasing of '5 farmers you need to follow on social media' it was reported that "across the country, farmers are turning to social media to offer us a window into their world" (Country Living, 2020).

The following paper considers how farmers utilise social medial to offer us – both farming and non-farming publics - this 'window into their world'. Specifically, it considers how social media is used to present and narrate the work of farming as it happens. The paper does this through considering the communicative practice of "working out loud" (WOL) – a term recently applied to the discussion of social media which considers this as a "process of narrating one's work during the course of its realisation, highlighting its daily and mundane

[1] https://www.fginsight.com/24hoursinfarming

accomplishment" (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016, p.379). We focus specifically on the microblogging platform of Twitter – currently the most popular in terms of usage figures – as accounts are, by default, publicly visible, connections (or followers/following) are unidirectional (in that people can follow others without needing to be accepted as a friend (cf. Facebook)), and the use of hashtags allows individuals to potentially connect to broader discussions and engage with other users. In doing so, the paper seeks to make three contributions. First, it offers one of the first analyses of the different ways that farmers might use social media to talk about and showcase their farming lives; second it considers how social media may offer a lens through which to understand the daily accomplishment of work; and third, it seeks to extend the discussion of the representation of rural lives and practices beyond the dominant focus on more static forms of representation, and more toward a recognition of the everyday, dynamic and contextualised representations that social media may offer and what these might tell us about agriculture.

Social media, (re)presentation and 'working out loud'

To date, research focusing on social media and its use has been more pronounced in the discussion of representing cities than on considering the countryside. Mirroring the wider trend within social science, most urban-focused attention has been on how these platforms offer 'big data' through which to reinterpret urban locations, with attention focused, for example, on how Twitter activity might be used to consider the layout of cities and how people traverse through these (Arribas-Bel et al., 2015) or how the use of geo-tagged Tweets might be used to examine perceptions and uses of different parts of a city (Jiao et al., 2018). Although less voluminous, there is an emerging literature which considers how such broader-scale analyses can similarly inform discussions of the rural. Research in this vein has focused on more instrumental uses of social media, such as how it might be harnessed to both disseminate and capture information. On the one hand, there has been attention paid to how

social media might be used in citizen-science, whereby user-volunteered data might be collected from social media posts to consider agriculture-related issues such as increasing inclusivity within policy development (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2017) and monitoring agricultural practices such as crop plating (Zipper, 2018). Whilst the potential of social media in this regard is vast, it is recognised that there are limitations in terms of data availability and its wider representativeness of the farming population (Zipper, 2018). On the other hand, research has considered how social media may be used to sell products and highlight innovations and new technologies (Chowdhury and Odame, 2014). This literature has focused on how social media may compliment and augment more traditional forms of information dissemination seen in agricultural marketing, education and extension activities (Kaushik et al., 2018). Such broader-scale analyses have also focused on how social media might offer data to inform contemporary rural debates, for example how it may allow 'truths' about food production to be communicated (Rodak, 2020), host debates around animals welfare (Wonneberger et al., 2020), and inform the broader politics of the rural (Schuler and Truong, 2019). Such studies are conceptually informative for the current study in recognising that social media may offer more grassroots representations of the rural (Lundgren and Johansson, 2017).

In taking a more qualitative approach to using social media, Mills *et al* (2019) and Skaalsveen *et al* (2020) have looked at how farmers may use Twitter in sharing examples of sustainable soil management practices and how these may augment other forms of peer-to-peer exchange. It is observed that certain 'influencers' might be significant in disseminating information on a particular theme, with a recommendation being that social media might be more actively used to promote good practice by farm advisors (see also Skaalsveen et al., 2020). Although the farmers spoken to within the research highlighted the value of the

immediacy and convenience the platform offered, there was some hesitancy in suggesting that such online engagement could replace or supersede face-to-face contact (Mills et al., 2019). Similar observations were made by Roche *et al* (2020) who considered how social media may be part of a suite of information sources used by dairy farmers to access information on dairying issues. Whilst they note that social media may be an 'emerging source' of information, its use remained low in comparison to the more traditional sources of vets, dairy producer organizations, other producers, and magazines or newspapers.

Much of this previous research on social media in agriculture, and specifically Twitter, has arguably been based on a more technological determinist framing which focuses on how such platforms act as a conduit for access to, and diffusion of, information. In doing so, such research has arguably underplayed the ways these platforms might facilitate (or restrict) the communicative process (Albu and Etter, 2015). In order to offer a more relational framing, we take a sociomateriality perspective which frames social media (and tweets specifically) as having more than just a functional role of broadcasting information. Instead, this sees tweets as having a more performative role in authoring identities (Albu and Etter, 2015) – which are "not exclusively properties of people or artefacts – they are constituted in relationships between human agency (people's goals) and the material agency of the things with which they come into contact (the things a technology's materiality allows or not)" (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016, p.380). In order to consider the role that Twitter may play in the communicative practices of farmers, the paper turns to the idea of 'working out loud'(WOL) (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016, p.379). This term has been employed within recent discussions of the virtual nature of work, and is seen as a communicative practice "that blends talk and text in an interesting way, as it is a form of talk that incorporates elements commonly associated with text, as well as a form of text that may adopt particularities of talk and conversation"

(Sergi and Bonneau, 2016, p.379). Seen in this way, instances of WOL, or tweets, have both discursive and material aspects (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016) and rely on the aforementioned affordances of Twitter (*visibility*, *persistence*, *editability*, and *association*) – with its *visibility* enabling unseen aspects of work to be made visible to others, allowing interactions around this work to become evident, and for this to persist over time in the form of previous tweets (which may be revisited and recontextualised after they are posted). As such, therefore, tweets can have agency and impacts beyond their point of original posting and the ability to relocate into new times and places and to indefinite audiences (Murthy, 2012). Using Latour's notion of hybrid agency, we can see how communication through formats such as Twitter involves not just human actors, but the assembling of "documents, settings, bodies, numbers, and even more 'abstract' elements such as emotions and values" (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016, p.382) as they author the identities of those tweeting. As Sergi and Bonneau (2016) accordingly note, we can examine tweets to consider what people are doing when they engage in working out loud, and what associated tweets are accomplishing and producing.

Sergi and Bonneau (2016) identified six forms that WOL practice can adopt on Twitter, which offers a useful framing to consider the Twitter activity of farmers: *exposing*; *contextualising*; *documenting*; *teaching*; *expressing*; and *thinking in a reflective manner* (see table 1). *Exposing* involves the "materialising traces of work" (p.387), talking about the progress of work as it, or its products, evolve, enabling a process of making visible the backstage work that would not normally be exposed to people beyond the specific work location. This open communication sheds light on the imperfect and the incomplete and may invite feedback on the nature of this work. *Contextualising* seeks to show (and describe) the material and spatial setting of the work, which "maintain the 'ambient awareness' of workers' environment and activities" (p.387). Moreover, they may offer a narration of work, and skill,

which facilitates its interpretation by others. *Documenting* involves a recording of the methods and ways of working, and recording milestones and decisions made. This process might involve reporting on work completed, plans and project ideas, and specific future objectives. *Teaching* is focused on exposing specific ways of working and doing things, and sharing knowledge with others in order that they might observe, learn and replicate these practices. As Sergi and Bonneau (2016, p.391) note, "workers re-materialise their experience into bits of textualised practices that can support 'indirect' forms of learning. However, it is the tweet, with its bits of knowledge, that can do the teaching, based on its capacity to remain the same (its durability), and to transcend time and space". *Expressing* focuses not simply on the work itself, but associated feelings and emotions (positive and negative), whilst *Thinking in a reflective manner* involves, despite the short format of tweets, 'reflection in action' on the work and demonstrates workers' consciousness of their own experience. Through their writing, and others' responses to them, these tweets may, given their textual nature, "facilitate inner dialogue, an effect that has been associated with writing" (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016, p.392).

Sergi and Bonneau's (2016) framework allows us to recognise the performative nature of tweets which is achieved through tweets' affordances. These WOL practices are enabled by particular elements of Tweet's affordances – specifically *multimodality*, *durability of tweets* and their *capacity to transcend time and space.* Twitter's multimodality is significant, as the ability to combine text, image and video allows a person to say more than they are able through words alone. Moreover, the tone of tweets is not pre-determined – unlike the conventions we might expect in a written report, for example – so tweeters are free to 'talk', via tweets, in distinctive and personalised ways. Tweets do not dissipate in the same way as talk, so take on a level of durability as they exist for others to observe long after they have

been posted and, on the flip side of this, leave a trace which individuals may wish to later modify or erase (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016). Perhaps most importantly for our discussion of farmers, this durability allows them to transcend time, whilst their virtual nature means that they can be viewed and retweeted across multiple spaces, well beyond the geographical location of the originator.

Methodology

In order to explore farmers' social media use and the (re)presentation of farming lives, this research draws upon a thematic analysis of 5000 farming tweets selected via purposive sampling, generated through a chain-referral approach (after Heckathorn, 2002). Initial identification of farmers was undertaken via the use of the hashtag #farm24 as a 'topical marker' (Einspänner et al., 2014) connected to the farming industry. As Wang and Wei (2020, p.4) note "the use of hashtags on Twitter is not only a tool to bookmark the content but also a symbol signalling the membership of a community" and the Twitter bios and most recent tweets of those using these hashtags were viewed in order to differentiate between those identifiable as farmers and others, who would not be included in the analysis, such as agricultural organisations. Given that the Twitter API restricts searches to display tweets of up to a week old, forty-nine tweets were shown from a search of #farm24 which consisted of seven unique farmer(s). The use of the browser extension 'Ncapture' allowed the most recent 100 tweets from each of the seven farmers to be imported into an NVivo project file (NVivo, 2020) to form the first phase of the sample.[2] Data were captured at both tweet and user level, allowing specific content and broader themes to be analysed. In addition to the written corpus of the tweets, the meaning of any attached photographs and videos were included in the analysis to avoid extracting tweets from their context (Boyd and Crawford, 2012).

[2] Although, by definition, social media has a global reach, the sample was selected from those in the UK.

The second phase of the sample was generated from the followers of the initial farmers – with a chain referral approach allowing a 'second wave' (after Heckathorn, 2002) of farmers (4 followers per initial farmer) that were not directly related to the original hashtag – in order to attempt to reduce homogeneity and bias within the sample. A third wave of respondents was developed from this second wave until a total of 50 farmers were sampled. Whilst Twitter's API makes it difficult to generate a representative sample, these 50 farmers were selected on the basis of offering a range of different farming types and types of communication practices engaged in. Although Twitter does not require biographical details to be given, or location stated, it was possible to glean (from bios and posts) the geographical spread of the sample[3], and that all farming types were represented and that 16 of the farmers were women, 29 were men and 5 were from farm-level accounts (the specific person tweeting not specified).

Once collated into Nvivo, a thematic analysis was undertaken whereby patterns within the data were identified (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Firstly, the data were coded in relation to 'working out loud' practices to examine the applicability of this schema to farming since it was developed in the context of Twitter users from an array of professional domains (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016). In addition to these categories which focus on what the tweets achieve as a form of communication, the narratives of farming lives communicated by tweets were interpreted. Each tweet therefore was coded based on a two-level analysis and included any accompanying multimedia. The second stage of coding was emergent as patterns across the data were identified in an inductive fashion through in-vivo coding which sought to retain phrases used by farmers. Coding began as a descriptive process in tandem with analytic

[3] The regions covered included The South West (5); South East (5), East Midlands (7); West Midlands and Wales (10); Eastern England (8); North West (5); The North East and Scotland (4); Yorkshire (5), with one profile location not identifiable.

memos to document synergies across codes which were developed into themes. For example, the ways in which farmers engage in dialogue are examined through threads which place tweets within the context of ongoing discussion, as well as the tone of tweets; namely irony, metaphors and humour which can be ignored in quantitative approaches to 'big data'.

Given that Twitter is the most public social media platform – in that tweets are publicly visible unless a user purposefully makes their account private - it has been suggested that informed consent may not be needed (or possible) as the information is accessible within the public domain (Beninger et al., 2014). Alongside this, Twitter API means that tweets older than one week are not retrievable through search engines, meaning that where tweets are quoted, such as in the following paper, originating tweeters are not easily identified. To ensure the anonymity of the users sampled, however, we followed the approach of Ahmed *et al* (2017) of masking tweet data (including tweet date and time), username and distinguishing characteristics of photographs and using paraphrasing, rather than verbatim quoting, of tweets, whereby the format and tone of the tweet is replicated, but the exact wording is modified to preserve anonymity.

Showing farm work in action

Sergi & Bonneau's (2016) repertoire of the six forms of WOL practice were well evident within the tweets of farmers and are useful in framing how Twitter is used by farmers in discussing, and reflecting upon, their work. *Exposing* was one of the more voluminous approaches revealed through the social media analysis, with the majority of respondents using this to show some of the 'backstage' (after Goffman, 1959) work of farming which had not previously been visible. In the more general academic discussions of work, it has been suggested that there are many aspects of this work that do not produce material traces.

Indeed, as Star and Strauss (1999) note, there may be some occupations – such as athletes and musicians – where there is a conscious desire to keep the work of training and rehearsal hidden, and thus separated from the spectacle of performance. In the case of farm work, it is often suggested that certain material elements come to act as a proxy for successful farming – such as the appearance (and abundance) of crops or the presentation of healthy livestock, which are taken as evidence of the appropriate choice and application of farm practices or reflecting good elements of stockpersonship (Burton, 2004; Riley, 2016). For example, whilst the latter of these may be displayed at purposeful events such as farm shows (see Holloway, 2004), Twitter had an important visibilising power in two main ways. First, such material evidence of farming work is often ephemeral – such as the short windows of crops being ready for harvest, or the livestock ready for market or slaughter – and tweeting pictures, for example, allowed this to be made more durable across time (see Figures 1a and 1b). Second, whilst such proxies of successful farming practice are usually only accessible to those in close geographical proximity – and hence the reference by Burton (2004) to the surveillance of near-neighbours through 'hedgerow farming' – the ability of Twitter to transcend time and space was significant as it allowed farmers to relay this evidence of their positive farming to a much broader, and less geographically proximate, audience.

In addition to this general approach of exposing the spaces of the farm to a wider audience, Twitter also allowed farmers to present the phases of their work, and some of the intricacies therein. The durability of tweets was seen to have a twofold importance to this exposing. First, the tweets could form an ongoing narrative through which progress could be updated – an approach that might include farmers retweeting their own earlier tweets: "[replying to their own, previous, tweet] this crop has really progressed since last spring" (Farmer 9). Second, the associated 'recordability' (Hancock et al., 2007) of tweets was significant as it could

facilitate a comparison to previous years' activities. Sergi and Bonneau (2016) use the metaphor of a 'diary' in relation to Twitter posts, and this has a resonance for agriculture, where there is a clear seasonality and level of repetition to many of the activities. As seen in the example of Figure 2, tweeting pictures of specific seasonal activities, such as crop planting, allowed farmers to both set up a particular storyline - presenting a forward-looking narrative of their hopes for the crops - and also to show, through replying to previously posted messages, the evolving traces of this work as the crop develops over time. Hashtags were sometimes used within this documenting approach, and unlike their use to connect to broader themes and audiences – which will be discussed later in the paper – these were often bespoke to the particular farm (such as #bankfarmharvest2020 and #daveiscropping), which enable the most recent tweets to coral together tweets from different time periods into a linking narrative, as audiences are able to link/click through the hashtags and find its associated use in previous tweets.

This linking together of individual tweets into broader narratives was seen to take a more structured form in the way *exposing* their farming lives was evident within the tweets of farmers. A common approach observed across the farmers analysed was the process of what Goffman (1959, p.33) refers to as 'dramatizing' work, whereby in order to make their work visible, individuals typically infuse their activities "with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory factors that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure". Three variations on this were apparent within the sample - each of which offered different narratives of farming life - and these can be labelled as *dramatic events*, *ongoing storylines*, and *characters within a soap opera*. Reporting on dramatic events involved both the scale of more everyday dramas – such as those associated with the weather ("we are rushing to get the harvest in before the heavens open" (Farmer 13)) – through to more spectacular events such

as the need to call the fire brigade to a farm fire (Figure 3). Whilst these examples were often more isolated events, a second approach to this dramatizing was through the creation of more ongoing and continuous storylines. Here, events would be presented – including machinery breakdowns or livestock illness – and the story played out through subsequent tweets which gave follow-ups (often in near real-time) and documented the progression of these everyday dramas on the farm (Figures 4a and 4b). In addition to highlighting the dramatic nature of farming life, these also allowed a sense of professional identity to be developed as they commonly provided evidence – or what Goffman (1959) calls 'confirmatory factors' - in the tweets of how farmers overcome adversity, or how they may draw on the good will of others in overcoming particular problems. The third approach – labelled 'creating a soap opera' – also takes the style of documenting ongoing, and often interlinked, storylines, but these focused less on the spectacular, dramatic or dangerous, and considered more everyday activities on the farms. As a result, these were often more humorous, with farmers, farm workers and animals all positioned in the role of characters, whose activities would be reported on, with new stories emerging, and some plot-lines revisited over time (Figure 5).

The multiple ways of revealing work were interlaced with the process of what Sergi & Bonneau (2016) refer to as *contextualising*, in which tweets create and maintain an ambient awareness through offering details around the spatial and material contexts of the work reported on. The most basic form of contextualisation observed involved the farmers harnessing the multimodality of Twitter to present pictures of the (often visually stunning) landscapes in which they farmed. Whilst comments in response to these tweets often focused on their visual beauty, the accompanying text presented by farmers more often drew out their significance to the active and ongoing work of farming. A common approach used, here, was farmers drawing parallels to – and, in doing so, highlighting distinctions from – other spaces

of work. This metaphor of the farm (and the farming landscape) as an office – which included specific examples such as the milking parlour, the tractor seat, fields and even the slurry pit - provided an interesting narrative device (Figure 6). At one level, they served to draw out the farmer's professional identity – recognising farming as an occupation and comparable with other places of work. At the same time, the use of humour in these often-incredulous comparisons – setting the sanitised space of the office against the outdoor and often dirty nature of their farm – served to highlight the very different contexts and nature of their work. Such examples are of relevance to our broader understandings of the representations of rurality. Whilst there is a bias toward the more picturesque within more traditional representations of the rural (Short, 2006), those presented on social media foreground the landscape as a living and working one, which is (re)constructed through farmers' labour – akin to what Mitchell (2003, p.237) refers to as landscapes as social products, as "'labor ossified, concretised, and materialised". Within this presentation of landscapes as a space of work and activity, two approaches to contextualising were observed. The first was to tweet - often using the aforementioned dramatizing - about navigating the everyday challenges of the specific landscape, and included reference to the particular weather patterns experienced there, the harshness of the climate, or the wet (or dry) nature of the land. Second, was the approach of situating their farming activities within the wider societal benefits – relating either to the specific material space itself – "we are creating the landscape for you to enjoy" (Farmer 21) – or the outcome of their practices "we are putting the milk on the table for all you waking up this morning" (Farmer 16), contextualising their farming activities beyond the specific micro-context of the farm and into the wider landscape and society.

Whilst the previous examples show how tweets may offer a level of spatial contextualisation, Twitter was also used by farmers to put forward a more temporal contextualisation. At one

level, this was seen to take the form of a more general history, through tweets such as "hundreds of years of farming have produced this beautiful landscape" (Farmer 11), and how farmers considered themselves to be "following in the footsteps of many hardworking farmers" (Farmer 44). Such tweets, accordingly, served "a performative role as author of identities" (Albu and Etter, 2015, p.9) by presenting a professional farming identity as one of "custodians of the countryside" (cf. Howley et al., 2014), in which they view their work within a wider temporal framework, and as being just the latest addition to a longer history. At a second, and interrelated, level, this broader temporal framing was applied to the context of the individual farm and, more specifically, the farming family.[4] Here, the common farming motifs of the family and intergenerational family relations were present, showing both how current work was following on from, and benefitted by, the work of predecessors, and highlighting difference and progress within how particular practices had changed over time (Figure 7).

Showing how farming works – educating the public

Sergi & Bonneau (2016) identify the process of *documenting* as how Twitter may be used to record milestones and decisions that have been made, as well as describing the methods that workers have taken in achieving these. Amongst the farming tweets, this facet worked alongside those of *exposing* and *contextualising* to highlight the multifarious, complex, and often arduous, nature of farm work. This was achieved in large part through what may be referred to as the 'time-stamping' of tweets. Although the time and date of posts are given within the platform, the time-stamping referred to here was achieved through the specific referencing within the tweet, as seen in the examples in Figure 8a and Figure 8b, from a livestock and arable farmer respectively.

[4] Over 90% of farms in the EU are classified as family farms.

Such examples echo the earlier reference to the unpredictable nature of farm work – highlighting how it is at the mercy of the vagaries of the weather and the needs (and unpredictability) of animals. Through time-stamping their tweets, farmers highlight to their audience the distinction between the time-expanding nature of farming and the often time-defined nature of many other occupations. This distinction is reinforced, in the second example, through the strategy of using hashtags, which allow a self-conscious connection to wider debates and communities through the affordance of association. As Jackson (2007, p.409) suggests, hashtags can be seen as hypertexts which do "the work of appropriating information from disparate sources into a coherent whole". In the case of farmers, this hypertexuality allowed the use of hashtags to connect to the wider virtual community of farming and, in doing so, echo the sentiment in their tweets of the 24-hour-a-day nature of their occupation. As shown in figure 8a, this was often accompanied by connecting this to how their work shapes, or is related to, a wider audience.

Whilst there were multiple examples of what Sergi & Bonneau (2016) refer to as 'documenting daily choices' - such as "decided that today's job to tick-off is to finish cleaning out the stalls" (Farmer 2) – this was also used to show the longer time horizons in which farmers often situate their work and which offer elements of WOL more bespoke to farming. This often involved the seasonal flow of farming, where the selection of crops, or breeding cycles, for example, were long-run plans:

> *"We're hoping that this new wheat seed will work well with our land…we'll keep you posted"* (Farmer 6)
>
> *"Hoping this fella [stock bull] will be giving us some hefty calves in the spring"* (Farmer 16)

Here, the aforementioned approach of setting forth a future story line was apparent, and served to illustrate how farmers' everyday activities were situated in common seasonal rhythms, where the outcome of particular aspects of this work will be quite diffuse and not realised until some time into the future. This time gap was accommodated by several farmers through the retweeting of, or replying to, earlier tweets where they could update on the current situation – such as harvesting or calving cows - and show how their practices had required forward planning. Beyond the recurring seasonal patterns, farming tweets also included examples of generational timescales, where much longer-term plans were documented. These included the purchase of land such as in the case of farmer 13 who commented "a lot spent on this new land which will benefit the generations after me". Alongside illustrating some of the particularities of farm work, these tweets served to author identities as they act to materialise such examples of objective cultural capital which are not always visible beyond the farm, but are central to farming status (Riley et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2019).

In addition to the volume and time-consuming nature of their tasks, farming tweets aslo revealed their multifarious nature:

> *Good to catch up with NFUers and talk about farming and different job titles we have as farmers – Jack of all trades!* (Farmer 15)[5]

> *Getting up at 5 am to complete paperwork, before a full day's work, then putting the kids to bed, and late finish before starting all again* (Farmer 40)

[5] 'NFUers' refers to members of the National Farmers' Union.

For farmer 40, the construction of a professional identity was apparent – again using time-stamping to highlight not only the length and busyness of their day, but also to reveal the need to juggle multiple tasks within this – something more squarely reinforced by farmer15 within their reference being a 'Jack of all trades'. It is such reference to the multiplicity of farm work and the blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure and home and work which perhaps distinguishes agriculture from many of the WOL practices that may be seen in other work (such as that reported on by Sergi & Bonneau (2016)). Two things are important here. First, is the unpredictability of working patterns. Whilst an overview analysis of tweets shows there are clear, and often monotonous, daily and weekly routines, these varied considerably from farm to farm, with no strict industry standard on how work should be performed, the order in which this should be undertaken, or at what times the task should be completed. Second, and interrelated, the approaches taken by farmers to work varied. An example cutting across these was presented in the tweet of Farmer 49 and the subsequent response from another farmer:

> *"and we're off! Reckon the weather will hold and the grass looks ready in the top meadows. It's go go go for first cut silage. Have your tweeters got your choppers out? 😉"* (Farmer 49)
>
> *[reply] "wow, bare as a table here…good couple of months before we get cutting on this land. All bales here to avoid pollution"* (Follower 49a)

In addition to highlighting how the geographical variations and context-specific nuances of farming see the same practices performed in different ways – in this case a later cutting date due to wetter land and grass baled rather than pitted to avoid polluting water courses – the exchange offers an insight into the roles Twitter might play in farmers' documenting processes. The exchange is just one of several examples where Twitter was used as a space of

comparison, with other examples highlighting how this may extend into information sharing and offering feedback as well as critique. The reference to ‘reckon the weather will hold’ and the ‘grass looks ready’ also point to how WOL practices can be used to share tacit, practical, knowledge. Research on farming knowledge(s) has highlighted the complex interplay of more standardised, codified, scientific knowledge with more experiential or tacit understandings, with the suggestion that the latter are often hard to access given their often individualised, context-specific and non-verbalised form (Riley, 2008). Tweets, particularly through embedded pictures, allowed a materialisation of those more context-specific forms of understanding, and enabled it to be observed beyond its specific context and contrasted with these knolwedges associated with other geographical locations.

Farmers expressing through social media

Whilst the previous sections considered how work itself was documented and presented on Twitter, there was also evidence of farmers using the platform for *expressing* (showing particular feelings and emotions) and also *thinking in a reflective matter* (stepping back and thinking to share considerations their audience) and, in this way, Twitter providing the farmers with a “cathartic space” (Sergi and Bonneau, 2016). This expression and reflectiveness took the form of both more general reflections on farming life – such as tweets expressing “blessed to live in this place” (farmer 3) or “happy to be farming here today” (farmer 42) – and more specific expressions relating to the everyday activities that they were undertaking. It has been suggested that there may be a ‘positivity bias’ (Reinecke and Trepte, 2014) in the material people present on social media, and whilst this was evidenced in our analysis of farming tweets, it tended to be restricted more to when farmers made reference to personal emotions and actions. Where more negative emotions were expressed, these tended to be less personalised and more focused on contextual factors which were, in large part, out of the control of the farmers. As noted in the previous sections, these might include

exasperation and anger at the unpredictable weather, or frustration at the paperwork required within current farming legislation. A quite particular example, but one often referenced amongst the livestock farmers considered, was the expression of emotion conveyed in tweets around experiences of TB testing (a regular occurrence within the UK).[6] This example serves as a useful one not only for considering farmers' expression and reflections on Twitter, but also in revealing some of Twitter's particular affordances. The nature of TB testing – where cattle are given injections of two types of tuberculin, and reactions to these assessed three days later – lends to the storytelling approach noted earlier, whilst the real-time nature of Twitter allowed a more open-ended story to be told as tweets associated with the tension and anxiety of the initial injection were presented, with a level of suspense before the conclusion of the story in the form of the test results – which might either be one of relief or despair. Considering the emotive example of TB testing offers an insight into two aspects of farmers' use of Twitter to which the paper will now turn. First, how the platform may offer a space of support, and second, how animals might form an important part of how farmers present their work on Twitter.

In relation to the theme of support, Twitter's dual characteristics of being able to transcend spatial boundaries and allowing didactic communications, meant that farmers were able to share their TB testing experience with a wide audience and to gain responses to this. This was most apparent where animals tested positive for TB and needed to be culled – an instance where farmers used Twitter to present some of the harsher realities of contemporary farming.[7]

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[6] All registered keepers of cattle, buffalo or bison are required, by law, to have animals tested for Bovine TB, with testing frequency depending on the regional risks in their area. Tests are also needed in order to move cattle off the holding, if this falls outside the aforementioned test periods https://www.gov.uk/guidance/bovine-tb-testing-intervals-2020

[7] Over 3000 new cases of TB were reported in Great Britain in the period August 2019 to 2020 (that is, herds which previously had no recorded cases), with a total of 27,360 cattle slaughtered for TB control purposes https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944587/bovinetb-statsnotice-monthly-11nov20.pdf

The responses to these tweets, by followers, showed evidence of what Brownlie and Shaw (2018) have referred to as 'empathy rituals', and this was seen to take different forms. In most cases in the sample, there were examples of what Brownlie and Shaw (2018) refer to as 'accommodating', whereby the responses to negative emotions encourage more positive responses from followers. Most often, these included general words of encouragement, such as "keep going, you're doing great" (follower 12A) and "thanks for sharing this with us. Important to know what you farmers go through. Things will get better" (follower 12B). Such responses tended to be from a non-farming audience and served to accommodate the negative emotions and, importantly, attempt to provide an emotional transition by both encouraging positive thinking, thanking the farmers for their sharing, and offering reassurance of how their work is valued.[8] Similar processes of accommodation were apparent within responses from those overtly identifiable as farmers, with replies such as: "we had lots of positive cases last year, we're clear now, you'll get there too"[9] (follower 12C) and also more practical, forward-looking advice: "there's a herd dispersal at home farm, good range of ages likely to be for sale if you're after replacements" (follower 12D). These responses illustrated how accommodation was extended, here, to include emotional transitions which were based on shared personal experience – both through practical advice on restocking, as well as personal testimony on how their business had survived negative tests. Collectively, these examples illustrate how Twitter might provide farmers with support – something celebrated in the tweet of farmer 22 noting "thanks to all the Twittersphere for your support. Really helps me get through the day" – and how this may be layered from the less proximate (geographically *and* occupationally) to those such as follower 12C, who have occupational but not geographical

[8] It was not possible to conclude that these Twitter users were not farmers, but their profile and posts led to this conclusion.
[9] Referring to the TB-free tests required in order for the farm to be classed as free to move animals on and off their farm.

proximity, through to follower 12D, who is able to offer direct, material, support in light of their combined occupational and geographical proximity.

In addition to highlighting some of the affordances of Twitter in relation to support, the example of TB also showcases the way that animals are drawn on, and into, farmers' use of Twitter. For the specific case of TB testing, pictures of animals to be culled were commonly presented, with accompanying narratives – often quite detailed – which pointed to their individual qualities, characteristics and biographies (Figure 9). Such tweets presented both the way that animals may be sentient beings and offered a challenge to the popular discourses which reference factory farming and positioned animals as 'machines' (Wilkie, 2005). A clear trend running through the sample was the anthropomorphizing of animals in tweets, often accompanied with humorous commentary and comparison. In the case of Figure 10, for example, an image of contented cows is paralleled with Friday night revelers. This serves to both highlight, implicitly, the good stockpersonship of farmers and also draw contrast between farming and other occupations where Friday night equates with leisure time.

In addition to expressing emotion relating to, and reflecting upon, their specific practices, farmers' tweets also served (both explicitly and more implicitly) to police the moral boundaries around what were considered appropriate activities and behaviours within the countryside. The tweets observed can be categorised into three groups, which may be called 'crime and vandalism'. 'acts of negligence' and 'improper use of the countryside'. Within the first of these, Twitter was used to simultaneously express personal emotions and also promote vigilance in the report of, and reflection on, particular acts of crime or vandalism. Acts of negligence involved the reporting of, and expressing opinions around, less targeted and more minor offences – often as a result of negligent acts – such as leaving gates open or straying

from footpaths. In Figure 11, emotive language and pictures are used to reflect on the harm caused to a sheep by a dog attack – showing the anguish of both the owner and the animal, and anger at this negligent behaviour, something which was also seen in the less emotive examples of littering:

> *What is wrong with people just pick your fecking litter up... imagine being one of those folk who think it's alright to throw something on the floor like WTF* (Farmer 16).

Whilst the examples within which farmers were directly impacted by the crime tended to be more emotionally charged, they sat within a wider collection of tweets which involved promoting, and educating on, the proper use of the countryside. Examples included both specific pictures, and short video messages, which reminded a more general public about adhering to the countryside code (Figure 12). Twitter has been referred to as a public relations tool (Lovejoy et al., 2012) and the farming tweets extend this understanding in showing how, in addition to being used to advertise particular goods and services, tweets serve a more general function of communicating a countryside conduct from the inside, with farmers emotions serving to underscore these concerns.

Conclusions

This paper has explored some of the ways that farm work may be (re)presented on social media. For our broader understanding of representations of the rural, the analysis of Twitter presented here offers several insights. Twitter's affordances of immediacy and being able to transcend space mean that it offers narratives of rurality that are distinct from those representations – such as art, literature and television – which have been seen to infuse many

of the ongoing popular discourses of rurality. Whilst the televisual, for example, may purport to present the 'realities' of rural living, there may be a level of editorial control and a defaulting back to more idyllic topes (see Peeren and Souch, 2019) – that social media may transcend. Related to this, social media offer a more broadly sourced, grassroots, depiction of rurality that does not rely on the expertise or social status of individuals, television presenters or artists who have, in the past, been entrusted to represent rural areas to the wider public.[10] As such, Twitter offers the potential for more individualised and everyday representations of rurality and to get close to some of the associated lived realities. The potential volume and frequency of farmers' posts may allow a deeper insight into the everyday and quotidian aspects of farming life than those which are summarised in popular written accounts of farming life (such as James Redbank's *Shepherd's Life* (2015) or Amanda Owen's *A Year in the Life of a Farmer* (2016)). Twitter's immediacy - which, as the paper has seen, allows representations in real time - arguably offers a more dynamic representation than those offered in television, films or reports, for example, which are constrained through conventions of formatting and packaging. Important, here, is that Twitter's ability to present open ended and more incomplete stories, which may (or not) be revisited and re-lived over time, offers a more dynamic and immediate representation of the countryside and one through which a peopled and living landscape is foregrounded. Whilst the positivity bias noted in broader social media analyses was evident for the case of farmers – which may, in turn, reinforce more idyllic representations of rurality - the paper has seen that Twitter may too offer a window to some of the countryside's harsher, lived, realities. In this sense, social media may offer a useful source through which future research might seek to explore more of the emotional geographies associated with agriculture.

[10] Twitter does have a fair use policy surrounding themes such as 'hateful conduct', 'private information' and the use of 'sensitive media' - see https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/fair-use-policy - and may, following request from third parties, remove content considered illegal.

Whilst the notion of working out loud offers a useful framing for considering the discursive and material elements of farmers' Twitter practices, the analysis presented here offers suggestions on how Sergi and Bonneau's (2016) framework might be extended. At a broad scale, the analysis highlights how tweets commonly cut across their six categorisations – with individual tweets evading clear categorisation as they illustrate elements that adopt more than one of these practices. The farmers' tweets also illustrate how *documenting* is not simply limited to recording achievements, but also situating these – often literally within (re)tweets – alongside the same patterns or events of previous years, given the cyclical nature of the farming calendar. Although there was clear evidence of *teaching* within farming tweets, it was not simply focused on allowing others to 'replicate these practices' (cf. Sergi and Bonneau, 2016), but highlighting the manifold approaches to the same farming practices which result from geographical and cultural differences. Whilst Sergi and Bonneau (2016) note the importance of the spatial nature of *contextualisation*, the evidence presented here shows how Twitter may also allow a temporal contextualisation as farmers seek to offer their followers insights into the multiple temporalities of farming life, not only relating to the unpredictable nature of farm life – something which distinguishes the cases considered here from those discussed by Sergi and Bonneau (2016) – but also the longer, generational, time horizons within which current practices are inextricably intertwined.

The paper has seen that farmers assemble a range of sources – including the non-human – in (re)presenting the countryside and revealing the nature of their work. At one level, this may highlight the potential value of social media as a tool to communicate with a non-farming audience – both in communicating where food comes from, as well as educating on particular practices of farming. At another level, it is clear that social media facilitates engagement with

other farmers. As work on farming identities have shown, it is often the material (and visible) traces of farming which are used to assess a farmers' standing – and it is seen that social media allows the practices themselves to be shown to others and, as such, the skilled work of farming to be appreciated beyond the usually geographically proximate audience. As hinted at in this paper, social media offer the potential for dialogue – in the form of retweets and comments, and hence future analysis may also give fuller attention to how individuals may learn new practices or seek feedback on their own practices, through social media. Moreover, the paper has highlighted how such peer-to-peer exchange is not just limited to information sharing, but might also provide a crucial source of emotional support.

Discussions of the 'armchair countryside' (Bunce, 1994) and the more recent 'desk-chair countryside' (Sutherland, 2020a) have noted how representations of the rural may be consumed by, and directed toward, an audience geographically and culturally distanced from rural areas. The analysis presented here shows how social media is an extension of this, with farmers able to speak directly to wider public(s). Within this, farmers' depiction of their skills and busyness are both implicitly and explicitly directed toward highlighting the role that farming plays within wider society. Heightened particularly in the context of the COVID pandemic, Twitter was used to make the connection between the renewed importance of food provision and the raised appreciation of the British countryside as a space of recreation. For others, this was extended to not only make visible the work of farmers, but to utilise the affordances of social media to shape and police what were seen as appropriate, or transgressive, acts in the countryside.

Beyond the specific case of farming, our methodological approach is instructive too and will, we hope, offer a route map for future studies. The paper has shown how social media may be

analysed not just in terms of broader trends and the big data it may offer, but may too give an insight into the more individual and everyday. For analytical clarity, we have focused on the platform of Twitter. This is, of course, just one social media platform, and there is future potential to explore both how other platforms may offer different affordances, and how this may lead to subtle variations on WOL practices. The paper has shown, too, that social media can augment more traditional qualitative methods, offering many of the insights that may gleaned from in-depth interviews, for example, but offering the practical advantages of allowing a broad range of perspectives to be incorporated in short (and cost-effective) time period. Alongside this, the potential immediacy of social media posts offers a picture of naturally occurring representations and performances in near-real time similar to more ethnographic approaches and, given the affordance of persistence, the ability to reflect on these posts after the event. The paper has opened up several avenues for future research. Whilst the analysis here has focused on tweets themselves, future work could usefully seek to speak directly to those posting tweets to explore themes such as their motivation for engagement (as well as disengagement), how they censor (or not) their social media content and how they respond to, and reflect upon, their engagements through social media. Further attention too could be given to the content of tweets, tracing, for example the emergence, over time, of new ideas, new areas of political contestation and the reception of the forthcoming policy changes in agriculture.

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