

PhD: Making Sense of Popular Food Media

This project aims to understand how people make sense of television food media focusing on the public impact of Jamie Oliver's 'Ministry of Food' TV series in Rotherham and Tunbridge Wells.

Aims

- To understand how people make sense of television food media and celebrity chefs
- To understand the role of food TV in shaping the way we think about food
- To understand how people in different places engage with food television



Methods:

This study was carried out in two towns, Rotherham, South Yorkshire and Royal Tunbridge Wells, Kent. These two towns were picked in order to investigate the stereotypical contrasts between north and south. Rotherham was also chosen because Jamie Oliver made a television programme there and therefore was a good place to go to ask people about the effect of 'reality TV' production in a particular place. Tunbridge Wells provided a location outside of Rotherham that could provide the 'outsider' perspective on these shows.

- **Focus groups** were carried out in each town with a range of different groups. These were designed to observe how celebrity chefs and food TV enter into 'everyday' conversation.
- **Interviews** were carried out in each town to explore people's personal feelings and observations relating to Jamie Oliver and a range of connected topics.
- Experimental **participatory videos** were made that formed a response to Jamie Oliver in some way.

Findings:

- Residents of Rotherham were more concerned with being **negatively stereotyped** by distant audiences than by the health concerns raised by Jamie Oliver.
- Many Tunbridge Wells residents watched reality TV because they **enjoyed being disgusted** by 'shocking imagery'.
- Jamie Oliver's food television has caused some **embarrassment, anxiety and anger** amongst some people in Rotherham.
- People are more concerned about being viewed as **immoral, impoverished or stigmatised** as 'bad parents' than they are about **healthy eating**.
- People in both towns concluded that **reality food TV** such as 'Jamie's Ministry of Food' did not offer a reliable guide to the way people eat.
- People use food media and celebrity chefs as **common resource** when they talk to each other about how and why they eat what they do.
- When asked to reflect, most people strive for **balanced judgements** of food media, however most report that successful 'reality' food media 'works' as entertainment when it is **sensational and extreme**.
- Those using a video camera to make response to Jamie Oliver, did so in highly diverse ways but often **repeat the conventions** of Jamie Oliver's media to make very different points.
- All of the videos are **'in conversation'** with Jamie Oliver's series to some degree because audiences are compelled to draw the links.

