Supervet Live Tour: Do audiences want a performer, preacher or prophet?

In September 2018 I joined thousands of others in Nottingham's Motorpoint Arena to watch Professor Noel Fitzpatrick's '*Welcome To My World'* Live Tour. The show, which then travelled to over 10 UK cities, involved personal stories recounting a celebrity veterinarian's career journey: From humble childhood in rural Ireland, through veterinary education in Dublin, to eventual owner of a large orthopaedic practice in Surrey, made famous by TV programmes The Bionic Vet (BBC) and Supervet (Channel 4). As part of the live show, stories are accompanied by digital graphics, in a stated attempt to introduce the audience to his 'world'.

The UK veterinary profession has started to consider both the beneficial, and potentially problematic, impacts of TV vets on professional practice (Lamb 2018). This debate should be welcomed. However, the aim of this article is different. Rather than focusing on the ethics of clinical practice, I want to focus on the public to ask; how can we best understand the unique phenomenon of one veterinary surgeon filling a 10,000 seat arena on a Saturday night?

The first explanation is simple: Audiences like seeing people they feel they know from TV. In this analysis, audiences may have experienced *Welcome To My World* as a *performance*, and enjoyed it as another example of commercial entertainment. In exchange for around £40 a ticket, the audience laughed, cried, and gasped their way through the two hour show. There was spontaneous clapping, with whole families on their feet for a standing ovation. Queues also formed at the merchandise stand, suggesting some were willing to pay more than the ticket price.

[Image by Pru Hobson-West]

The key mistake, though, would be to dismiss this phenomenon as 'mere' entertainment: Indeed, the profession should take note of existing research on human medical drama that confirms that, even with fictional shows, there is a real world impact on public views of

technology (Harris and Willoughby 2009), and future career choice (Van Den Bulk and Buellens 2007).

The second explanation is that audiences are there to be inspired. In the interval toilet queue a teenager told me: '*It's awesome. Mum has cried all the way through'*. When asked why she replied '*He has gone from nothing to save millions of animal lives'*. The show is a classic rags to riches story, of Fitzpatrick being bullied as a child, and overcoming adversity. We like these stories because they give us hope for our own lives. But what is striking about the show is the almost religious overtones. Nottingham Arena thus functioned as a kind of spiritual space. Arms aloft, in the spotlight, some may have seen Professor Fitzpatrick as a kind of *preacher*. For example, in explaining the history of human-animal relations, he claims that *'man's best friend has rescued us from the rubble'*. The implication is that animals will save us. In a society where organised religion is less popular, this secular 'hero worship', as the *Irish Examiner* dubbed the show, becomes more understandable. Likewise, in elevating animals as morally superior to flawed humans, Fitzpatrick is tapping into trends identified by social scientists, that when humans feel alienated from each other, we turn to animals and particularly pets (Nast 2006).

A final interpretation is that the audience experienced the show as a form of *prophecy.* Whilst the first half concentrated on his personal background, the second half focused on the history of veterinary surgery, and the 200 year old separation of human and animal medicine. As he passionately described, Noel Fitzpatrick's vision is to end this separation and create 'One Medicine'. But the specific claim in the show, directed at regulators and industry, is that naturally occurring disease can be a better model than experimental animals: *'We don't need to take another animal's life to know what I already know'*. To be clear, the show did not did argue for or against animal research. Nevertheless, for a veterinary surgeon to raise this sensitive topic in such a public setting, is still highly significant: Animal research is built on a complex social contract between society and science, which is challenged by multiple factors (Davies *et al* 2016). Fitzpatrick is entering this debate, not in this case in private meetings with policy makers, but with a microphone, using these shows to encourage animal lovers to help realise his vision of the future. Like politicians who give speeches, the aim appears to be to persuade in order to achieve social and political change.

In summary, audiences attending the SuperVet live tour may have experienced the show as a form of entertainment. Even so, this performance is likely to have real world consequences for relationships in veterinary practice. Audiences may also have experienced the show as a kind of spiritual preaching, and seen Fitzpatrick as a contemporary leader to be followed, in uncertain times. Others may remember the prophetic aspects of the show, and feel enrolled in a vision of what future animal research and veterinary medicine might look like. Careful empirical work with clients is needed to fully evaluate the potential impact of these three roles. In the meantime, whilst some in the UK veterinary profession may have missed the show, this is one showman whose arguments require more detailed, open and public debate.

References

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