

Cutting Away the Fringe:
Legitimizing the Fight to Stop Animal Suffering

By

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Abstract

A significant change in the status quo regarding animal suffering requires an overall change in public consciousness. It is possible, but in order for this to occur it will require identification by the public with the issue--with the messenger being as important as the message.

While attitudes appear to be slowly changing, the U.S. general public is still a long way from supporting the overall effort to stop animal suffering. There are many reasons for this. Chief among them appears to be a systemic problem of institutionalized ignorance, compliance by a public reluctant to change their behavior or face the discomfort associated with acknowledging social dissonance, and the perception that animal issues are oftentimes less than credible concerns because they have been taken up by the marginal "fringe."

It is argued here that: 1) forces both internal and external to the animal welfare/rights movements have pushed animal consideration to the fringe, 2) That acceptance of animal suffering as an important issue by the general public is a major shift that will only take place if the public identifies with the messenger as 'like them' in values or at least as a credible "non-fringe" source, 3) That the above requires reevaluating the methods and strategies used by those people and organizations advocating improved treatment of animals.

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Using a variety of philosophies, strategies, and focus areas, there is a major effort by numerous organizations across the country to improve the treatment of animals and to shift both public policy and public attitudes away from animal exploitation and animal suffering. However, there are deep and persistent forces at work to perpetuate the commercial use of animals. These forces are both institutional, originating from the many parties that profit from the use of animals, and social, stemming from social norms that reinforce the resistance of consumers who benefit from animal exploitation. Therefore, making major changes in the treatment of animals by society requires nothing less than a dramatic shift in public consciousness.

Although it is probably widely recognized by those fighting on behalf of animals that a change in public consciousness is necessary before the general treatment of animals improves, there has been little discussion or understanding of what this implies. Effectively working to change public consciousness requires an understanding of the psychological and sociological forces that cause people to resist such a change, and how to overcome that resistance. More work and discussion is needed at the strategic level at understanding how to change public consciousness. This paper is one attempt to address the current vacuum surrounding this issue.

Barriers to Public Consideration of Animal Suffering

Consideration of animal suffering by the general public faces numerous barriers. These barriers come from institutional and social psychological barriers to change, intentional efforts by those who profit from the commercial use of animals, and unintended consequences of the actions of those trying to fight against animal exploitation.

Social Psychological Barriers to Change

There are a number of social psychological sources of resistance to issues relating to animal suffering. Cultural and social norms are already in place that lend acceptance to activities causing animal suffering. Social identity theory suggests that when people identify with a social group, the norms, values, and common behaviors of that group will tend to be accepted by the individual (Hogg, 1992; Turner, 1991). This becomes salient when one considers that group identification with one's co-workers/place of employment and neighbors, most religious groups and indeed even being an American frequently involve engaging in beliefs and behaviors that support animal suffering. For the majority of the American public using animals as a source of food, clothing and entertainment puts them in the "in-group" of the "us and them" equation. In short, it is those people who eat animals, buy the latest leather and fur fashions, regularly visit zoos and circuses, and purchase sundries tested on animals who are the norm. In American society perpetuating

animal suffering is one of the factors that strengthens most peoples' sense of "we-ness". In short, current societal norms that perpetuate animal suffering provide the motivation (and reduce uncertainty) sufficient to influence people to uphold these behaviors—even in the face of contradictory information. Rather than consider information contradictory to these social norms, according to social identity theory most people who identify with being an American for instance, own a frame of reference for "appropriate" attitudes, perceptions and beliefs one "should" hold (Hogg, 2001; Oldmeadow, Platow, Foddy & Anderson, 2003). The long and short of it is, the greater American public's attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and behaviors regarding animals and unnecessary animal suffering become their own self-perpetuating barrier to change.

Additionally, the average consumer often personally gains (for example if they enjoy the consumption of cheap, factory-farmed meat) by practices which lead to animal suffering. This self-interest factor causes another major barrier to getting people to give serious consideration to the suffering of animals.

The fact of the matter is, that from "pest" eradication and habitat destruction to products tested on animals and the direct consumption of animal parts, practices that result in the suffering and death of animals are so widespread in the industrial economy that it takes a major shift in lifestyle to avoid these products and practices. Therefore, if an individual decides to forego just one type of product or practice because of its harmful effect on animals, they will likely be faced with dissonance caused by the possible ethical inconsistency of their behavior. Often, it will be much easier to psychologically bury the concern over the troubling animal practice than to take on the much more extensive issue of animal suffering in general. This potential barrier to change caused by inconsistent treatment of animals by society at large has been labeled "social dissonance" (Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2002).

In addition to these factors, there is the general tendency of people to prefer not to change and instead accept the status quo. Dramatic change requires a strong motivation. The fact is that even if the logical and ethical argument for behavioral change is theoretically strong, all the motivations for changing behavior out of consideration for animal suffering are generally altruistic. There is little to personally gain from such a change in behavior. Therefore, the individual has a strong motivation to mentally suppress any evidence or arguments that would compel change. Since the prevailing institutions, as discussed below, also have a strong motivation to suppress evidence of suffering, the individual's desire to avoid having to consider change is easily fulfilled.

Institutional Barriers to Public Change

Researchers in political science and economics have made a strong case that institutions can be resistant to change. On the political science side, arguments for institutional inertia have been made by March and Olsen (1989) and later by Pierson (2000), among others. The argument is based both on the inherent resistance of both norms and formal rules to change, and the growth of practices by both state and societal actors who have a

stake in preserving the status quo and therefore resist change (Banchoff, 2002). Clearly, the norms, rules, and practices that surround animal exploitation have resistance for these same reasons. There is inherent resistance to change in any set of rules and norms. In addition, there are a number of powerful stakeholders with a vested interest in preserving the status quo. For example, besides the obvious interest of farmers and ranchers in factory farming, regulators have close links and a vested interest in the industry, as do many politicians due to the industry's political influence. Restaurants, grocery stores, feed suppliers, producers of antibiotics, universities with large agriculture departments, and a variety of other institutions all have strong interest in preserving the status quo regarding factory farming.

Taking a slightly different approach, Nobel Laureate Economist Douglass North (1990, 1991) argues that institutions exhibit a large degree of path-dependence. His arguments expand in part on prior work by Arthur (1989) and David (1985) demonstrating that self-reinforcing mechanisms in economics can lead to "lock-in" to a particular evolutionary path, regardless of whether the path is the most efficient long-term. Although institutions can and do occasionally change, North's work suggests that there can be considerable resistance to institutional change. Again, his reasons apply to animal exploitation practices as well as other economic institutions.

In addition to these theoretical institutional barriers, there is another institutional barrier that is particularly acute for the topic of animal suffering. The public does often have a strong sympathetic reaction to the suffering of animals. However, the average American has limited exposure and knowledge about the issues surrounding animal suffering. Much of the reporting from the print and television media focuses on positive-oriented pieces about animals punctuated by the occasional report of abuse to companion animals. There is little information from the mainstream media about the horrors associated with factory farming, vivisection, the fur industry or animal testing of household products. This "institutionalized ignorance" (Frank & Carlisle-Frank, 2003) stems in part from members of powerful organizations like the cattleman's association, biomedical researchers, the fur industry and other large organizations that benefit from the use of animals. These organizations wield considerable power vis-a-vis buying media advertising space as well as lobbying and financial support of political candidates. Contrary to the ideals of free market proponents, there are actual laws in place and proposed specifically limiting public access and free speech regarding animal industry markets and processes.

Difficulty Relating to the Radical Fringe

Avoiding the conflicting attitudes and dissonance most Americans have about animals appears to be the preferred choice by many (Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2002). While recent polls (Gallop, 2003 & Plous, 1998) indicate that an increasing amount of Americans agree that animals should not suffer under certain circumstances, there remains a generalized void when it comes to significant changes in behavior with regard to stopping animal suffering. We argue that one of the primary reasons the void exists is because the

current "face" of those working on behalf of animals may be perceived by mainstream society as a "radical fringe"--people and issues they cannot understand and more importantly, they cannot relate to.

This is not to imply that those groups most effective at gaining media attention have not done any good. Indeed organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have done an impressive job at bringing the issue of animal suffering to the public eye and they have no shortage in the number of members who support them. The problem is that many of the tactics so effective in garnering media attention are likely too far removed from anything the general public can relate to. Not only are the important issues surrounding animal suffering lost on the mainstream but just as important, because the face of animal issues may be viewed as the fringe it risks the public dismissing consideration of animal issues all together. This problem has been compounded in recent times as groups such as Stop Huntingdon's Animal Cruelty (SHAC) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) have grabbed media attention linking animal issues with what has now been labeled "domestic terrorism".

In short, for many mainstream Americans exposure to animal-related issues has been reduced to high-impact media sound-bites about attacks on the homes and property of tangentially-related business associates of a biomedical research laboratory and caged naked women protesting fur. Not only are the majority of society lacking the crucial "middle part" to help them make the connection between their consumer choices and animal suffering, but they are left with reluctance to publicly support the message of organizations whose actions may often be seen as radical. In general, people tend to respond more readily to a message from someone they perceive as within their group (Wilder, 1990). In fact, Goethals & Nelson (1973) found that when advocating changes in peoples' personal values or way of life, messengers seen as similar were found to be more persuasive. Publicity-seeking efforts and direct action from within the movement has further reinforced the public's perception of a radical extremist movement. Societal norms have reinforced this perspective. In short, we argue that the current face of those garnering attention for animal issues is seen as "fringe" by the greater American public.

Implications for Going Forward: Enhancing the Efforts to Gain Support of the Mainstream

Getting the public to make the major shift required to change their lifestyle requires identification with the cause and goals of the movement to stop animal suffering. This requires the public's identification with the issues as opposed to viewing it as a "fringe" effort. Activities that bring animal issues into the media spotlight but that simultaneously make animal activists appear to be on the fringe of society can be counterproductive since they prevent people from identifying with the causes the activists are trying to advance. Without identification, the major shift required to get people to change perspectives and behaviors regarding animals is unlikely to occur (Turner, 1991).

In addition, although efforts to change laws have value, rule changes alone will not address the problem. As North (1993) points out, formal rules can be changed much

quicker than informal norms, but “it is the norms that provide the essential ‘legitimacy’ to any set of formal rules”. North goes on to conclude “...it is essential to change both the institutions and belief systems for successful reform since it is the mental modes of the actors that will shape choices.” (pg. 7)

One of the key strategies for reaching all those members of the public who find it difficult to understand or relate to the primary news-makers in the animal movement is to offer up a "credible source". A credible source is particularly important when advocating a position very different from the recipient's (Aronson, Turner & Carlsmith, 1963). Namely, for scholars, researchers, educators and other experts in the animal arena to develop a strategy for presenting a united "expert voice" to the public about issues surrounding animal suffering. Such an effort would require a well thought-out, well-orchestrated strategy embedded in a genuine spirit of cooperation, to be the voice for those who cannot speak. In short, going beyond efforts to make headway in the academic arena and stepping in to the public arena as the professional, expert voice of reason can go a long way to win the attention of the greater public.

Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Building a Case for Social Change

There is some validity to the argument that a "voice of reason" is already out there, so what can an "expert voice" possibly hope to achieve? After all, moderate organizations like the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and, (while arguably less moderate) The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) among others have already made some strides at educating and enlightening the general public. However, there are significant changes in public attitude and behavior yet to be made. As a society we are still a long way off from eliminating unnecessary animal suffering.

Developing a strategy for carrying out a cohesive, concerted effort to lend an "expert voice" to the general public, we argue, can make great headway at lending credibility to animal issues. All professionals with expertise in animal-related issues are needed to join together to bring their work and findings directly to the public. Scholars, researchers, academicians, and experts from other fields in animal-related issues are needed to go beyond presenting their findings and theories in professional journals and conferences. Such works should also be sent in the form of press releases to local, regional and national media sources, in the form of letters to the editor to local and national newspapers, as speaking engagements to the general public at local clubs, organizations and other community venues, and through conducting local television and radio interviews.

This is not a new idea, of course. Organizations like the Fund for Animals and PETA routinely write Letters to the Editor as a vehicle for educating the general public. Academic researchers who have written books on animal-related issues have also had success garnering attention from the general public--at least one researcher recently had an article featuring his work and upcoming book published in his home-town newspaper. Organizations like Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PsyETA)

routinely send out press releases to the media featuring current research findings of authors published in their journals and FIREPAW, Inc. submits press releases and letters to the editor as well as conducting interviews with the media on an ongoing basis. While these efforts are making headway, this is not enough.

There remains a need for a cohesive group of professionals representing an "expert voice". With so few professionals making an effort to reach the general public it makes it too easy for media sources to toss aside the handful of press release they receive. What is needed is a tactical, committed strategy by experts on a variety of animal-related issues to take their work directly to the public. There is an equal need for department chairs to recognize efforts of scholars to orchestrate social change through channels other than the academic arena. Only through demonstrating a united front and strength in numbers can we catch the attention of the media and the general public and begin to legitimize the fight to stop animal suffering.

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