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Including the animal standpoint in critical public relations research

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that adopting critical animal studies perspectives in critical public relations can not only be very fruitful, but that it is also a necessity if the aims of the latter are to be achieved. To this end, this text introduces the challenges and opportunities that the field of critical animal studies brings to critical public relations studies. First, a short explanation of what critical animal studies is and why it can contribute to critical public relations studies is provided. Then the main fields of research where this contribution can be most relevant are discussed, including ethics, discourse studies and political economy. The final aim of this theoretical paper is to expand research within the field of critical public relations by including a critical animal studies approach. Eventually, the authors suggest that embracing the animal standpoint in critical public relations is an essential step to furthering the study of power, hegemony, ideology, propaganda or social change and to accomplishing the emancipatory role of research.

Keywords

Animal ethics, animal rights, anthropocentrism, critical animal studies, critical public relations, speciesism, persuasion industry

Introduction

Today, there is a wide consensus regarding the fact that we should not harm life on the planet, including of course not harming other animals (Eurobarometer, 2007; O'Gara, 2019). People get very upset when facing images of polar bears starving because of climate change, of poachers hunting endangered species of felines like the amur leopards in Russia or the Asiatic cheetahs in India and Iran, or of farmers abusing helpless farmed animals like piglets or calves as disclosed by undercover recordings –or fishes in toxically and stressing cramped aquafarms. However, our behaviour as humans often contradicts this genuine concern. The global warming that is leaving polar bears without their natural habitat and resources is mainly human-caused (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2019). The endangered felines are on the verge of extinction because of a combination of factors, all caused by human behaviour, including some people still eager to own feline skins and the increasing human urbanisation that gradually reduces felines' habitat. Finally, the vast majority of people still don't connect the dots (Caviola et al., 2019; Joy, 2010) between their diet and the inevitable abuse nonhuman animals experience because of our addiction to animal-based food.[1]

As with climate change, there is an 'implicatory denial' (Cohen, 2001) of what it is needed to change our widespread harming of other animals. Following Cohen's (2001) definition, an implicatory denial refers to the fact that we acknowledge that there is a problem and the cause that produces it, but we deny the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow if any real change is to be made. It is superfluous to stress the key role played by persuasive communication and the persuasion industry in the implicatory denial that prevents us from stopping harming other animals. In spite of this, this area remains very under-researched in academia.

In this paper we argue that adopting the critical animal studies (CAS) perspective – that is, including a critical animal standpoint – in the critical public relations field can not only be very fruitful, but is also a necessity if the aims of the latter are to be fulfilled. To this end, this text is devoted to introducing the challenges and opportunities that the field of critical animal studies brings to critical public relations

studies. To do so we will first provide a short explanation of what critical animal studies is and why it can contribute to critical public relations studies. Then, the main fields of research where this contribution can be more fruitful are discussed, including ethics, discourse studies and political economy. These three areas involve some of the more relevant research objects in communication studies (normativity/duties, content/texts and organizations/structures, only audiences/ reception being left aside; McQuail, 2010) and serve to our purpose here to encourage expanding research within the field of critical public relations by including the animal standpoint. Because of the CAS approach discussed here, the theoretical framework thus illuminating this paper is non-anthropocentric and, more particularly, non-speciesist – that is we accord other sentient beings different than human equal consideration and respect (Dunayer, 2004). For this reason, this paper can be considered an attempt to advance the theory merging critical animal studies and critical communication studies.

Critical animal studies and critical public relations

As philosopher Best (2014) argues adopting the animal standpoint is essential for a proper understanding of power relations in society, that is to rethinking the dysfunctional order that structures our relationships to one another, other species and the world:

> If we look at history from the animal standpoint, that is, from the crucial role that animals have played in human evolution and the consequences of human domination of nonhuman animals, we can glean new and invaluable insights into psychological, social, historical, and ecological phenomena, problems, and crises. (p. 1)

When we use here the concept of 'animal standpoint' (Best, 2014), we do not merely refer to an individual animal perspective or point of view, but a theory whose main thesis is 'that animals have been key determining forces of human psychology, social life and history overall, and that the domination of human over nonhuman animals underpins the domination of humans over one another and over the natural world' (Best, 2014: 13). Critical animal studies (CAS) offers a perspective that can help introduce this standpoint into academic research. CAS argues for an engaged critical academic praxis that provides a deconstruction of the binary opposition between human and nonhuman animals with the purpose of dismantling structures of exploitation, domination, oppression and power. The aim of CAS is to promote ethical reflection on the way humans treat nonhumans, and to do so from a perspective grounded in intersectionality and the critique of capitalism.

The principles guiding this approach were first defined in 2007 (Best et al., 2007) and the discipline is currently on the rise, as recent volumes show (e.g. Best, 2014; Nibert, 2013, 2017a, 2017b; Sorenson and Matsuoka, 2018; Taylor and Twine, 2014), including a critical animal and media studies approach developed recently by merging critical animal studies and critical media studies and which is the theoretical area that this paper contributes to expand (Almiron et al., 2018; Malamud, 2012; Merskin, 2018; Molloy, 2011; Parkinson, 2020).

Although CAS is often equated with animal studies (AS) or human-animal studies (HAS), these terms are not synonymous. CAS includes a non-speciesist, animal liberationist stance complemented with the necessity of political engagement and support of direct action that is not found in either AS or HAS, nor in traditional academic circles in general. In particular, a non-speciesist, animal liberationist stance means that while the supporters of CAS acknowledge the important contributions made by AS or HAS, they claim that the latter lack full moral engagement and acknowledgement of the animal industrial complex (Noske, 1997) – the political economy of the exploitation of other animals and the power relationships and interests behind their institutionalised exploitation.

The concept of the animal industrial complex is not an intellectual abstraction, but the outcome of a very objective examination. Every year on this planet, trillions of other animals are confined, exploited, genetically modified, mutilated and have their lives shortened, solely for human interests (mainly for food, clothing, entertainment and testing) via industries (FAO, 2019). In nature, we already know that the human species is the primary cause of the current mass extinction of other species – the sixth mass extinction our planet has witnessed (United Nations (UN), 2019).

The plight of other animals is nevertheless not restricted to the harm produced by humans. Animals living freely in natural habitats also endure a wide array of forms of natural harm that makes life in nature far

less idyllic than we are led to believe, even without the intervention of anthropogenic climate change (Faria, 2016).

The understanding of the suffering and pain that other animals are capable of experiencing – of both human and natural origin – has been well established. Since Darwin (1999 [1859]), evolutionary biologists, cognitive ethologists and social neuroscientists have provided evidence of the capacity of nonhuman animals for psychical and physical suffering, emotions, intellectual lives and consciousness (Panksepp et al., 2012). Scientific understanding paved the way for the ethical grounding of animal defence. Sentience – the capacity to suffer – has been a crucial component of contemporary Western thought since the English utilitarian philosopher Bentham (2007 [1781]) explicitly stated that the question with other animals was not 'Can they reason?' or 'Can they talk?', but 'Can they suffer?' This premise has grounded reflections defending the rights and interests of animals since the psychologist Ryder (1975) and philosophers Singer (1990 [1975]) and Regan (1983) founded the contemporary field of animal ethics, acknowledging that nonhuman animals have inherent value as sentient subjects of a life, deserving of having their major interests (in well-being, autonomy and life) considered by humans.

In this respect, the concept of sentience has evolved to encompass an increasingly expanded and more accurate view of animal agency, mostly under the light of cognitive developments by ethologists and of reports by activists. Regarding the former, research on animal cognition – about the mental capacities of animals or how they think, solve problems, understand concepts, communicate and empathise – have shown that the lives of nonhumans are richer than ever understood before. Ethologists like Bekoff (2007, 2013), Safina (2015) or De Waal (2017) have collected ample evidence in support of nonhumans' rich emotional and cognitive lives. Bekoff's research for instance shows that emotions have evolved as adaptations in numerous species, serving as a social glue to bond nonhumans, as catalysts and regulators of social encounters and as a measure of protection (Bekoff, 2007, 2013). In 2012 a prominent international group of cognitive neuroscientists, neuropharmacologists, neurophysiologists, neuroanatomists and computational neuroscientists produced the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness to reassess the neurobiological substrates of conscious experience and related behaviours in human and nonhuman animals. (Panksepp et al., 2012). Although it was commonly agreed before that date that consciousness in nonhumans was 'real and significant'), and that emotional awareness was an old common quality among all animals, human and nonhuman (Dawkins, 2008: 124). Cognitive research has also shown that there is no moral gap between humans and nonhumans, since 'animals have a broad repertoire of moral behavior' and 'their lives together are shaped by these behavior patterns' (Bekoff and Pierce, 2009: X). With regard to their agency, the work of Hribal (2010) on animals' resisting their fate has proven an awesome resource for checking nonhuman animals' autonomy. Therefore, the idea that human interests are above those of other animals is no longer defensible from either an ethical or a scientific perspective. In fact, those who work more directly with nonhuman animals (farmers, trainers, veterinaries, animal rescue and animal sanctuaries' staff, etc) can generally recognise better their feelings, their personalities and moods (as it is reflected, e.g. at Loockwood's (2018) short documentary *73 Cows*).

Furthermore, the exploitation of animals in general, and particularly for food, has a tremendous impact on human welfare because of the impacts of the human diet on global justice, the environment/climate and human health. First, the consumption of animal products has been related to human hunger (Lewis, 1994; Popkin and Du, 2003; Rifkin, 1993; Singer, 2009; Weis, 2013). Singer (2009), e.g. claims that the fact that much of the food that could be eaten by humans is fed to farmed animals is the primary cause of 'the food crisis' (p. 122). Weis (2013) similarly claims that 'the meatification of diets' is 'a vector of global inequality, environmental degradation and climate injustice' (pp. 81– 82). By consuming more human edible protein than they produce, livestock detract more from the total food supply than they provide; in general terms, raising animals for food is extremely wasteful of land, grain, water and energy (Mekonnen and Gerbens-Leenes, 2020; Ranganathan et al., 2016). Because in many areas the land that is used to farm animals includes both grazing and arable land, it has been estimated that the animal agriculture sector occupies around 80% of all agricultural land (Ritchie, 2017). This produces monocultures and deforestation (FAO, 2018), which can jeopardise food sovereignty in many developing regions, as is the case, for example, with the soybean industry in Argentina (Frayssinet, 2015).

If the waste involved in meat production were not enough, the UN has found that animal agriculture is a primary producer of global warming gases and the primary cause of deforestation, species extinction, biodiversity loss, grassland destruction, waste disposal, energy consumption, soil erosion and water pollution (Gerber et al., 2013; IPCC, 2019; United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), 2012). The UN has related the consumption of animal products to a number of lifestyle diseases and important

human illnesses, including several types of cancer, heart disease and diabetes. More plant-based diets could reduce global human mortality by 6–10% and food-related greenhouse gas emissions by 29%–70% (Springmann et al., 2016).

The relevance of all of this – that is, of the scientific and ethical claims that lead to the moral consideration of other animals and the impact of human exploitation of other animals on the environment, justice and health – to critical media and communication studies has already been justified elsewhere in the fields of journalism (Freeman et al., 2011) and the political economy of communication (Almiron, 2017), and for critical media research in general (Almiron et al., 2018). In these works, it is argued that if true egalitarianism, compassion and solidarity are to be developed, media and communication research must expand beyond the narrow views of humanitarianism and social justice that exclude other species by deeming them morally irrelevant. In fact, decentring humanity to embrace a truly egalitarian view is a natural step in any field driven by moral values and concerned with the inequality triggered by power relations. This is the reason that the CAS perspective is so well suited to contributing to the field of critical public relations.

Critical work in public relations has been blossoming since the end of the 1990s, drawing on the same sources shared by all critical communication studies: the critical theory of the Frankfurt school and the need to challenging current assumptions, to alter boundaries to produce paradigm shifts and produce a critique of mainstream theories, policies and practices (L'Etang, 2005). In this sense, critical public relations (CPR) is essentially about *power*. As Motion and Weaver (2005) put it, 'the task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission' (p. 50).

CPR's main aim is to challenge the dominant paradigm in public relations. And this is done from the margins, 'geographically, ideologically and methodologically', as stated by L'Etang (2005: 523). In *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Public Relations* Heath and Xifra stress that the aim of the field is to go beyond the simple criticism of public relations and to aspire 'for a social critique that leads to human and social emancipation' (Heath and Xifra, 2016: 200). However, human and social emancipation through communication practices cannot be undertaken if we continue to reproduce what could be the most common bias in the social sciences and humanities: the positioning of humans at the very centre of meaning, value, knowledge and action – and the consequent devaluing of, or even obliviousness to, the effects of our actions on the rest of life on the planet due to this alleged human superiority.

In this respect, it is worth remembering that the object of study in critical communication studies is not the human being itself, but the communication processes by which humans interact and, more particularly, how these processes prevent or perpetuate domination and oppression. The violence and commoditisation forced onto other animals must therefore be recognised as a social phenomenon inasmuch as the social in a human society cannot be restricted to only some selected human deeds. All our actions make the *social*. For these reasons, the ethical, political, economic and social implications of our exploitation of nature and other animals must also be considered part of the *social* – and therefore of interest to communication studies of all sorts.

The harm experienced by other animals because of human behaviour is nevertheless a research gap not only in public relations studies in general, but also in the critical approach to public relations. And yet CPR could be much enriched by CAS, as both perspectives share not only common critical ground, but both also work from the margins – in the case of CAS, also methodologically and ideologically.

There have actually been some claims from CPR studies that suggest the field could benefit from adopting a critical stance towards how humans treat other animals, – for instance, the claim that CPR must explore how public relations serves some classes more than others and in what ways (L'Etang, 2005). Interestingly, the entanglements between human and animal oppression can also be considered as class issues (Hribal, 2012; Nibert, 2002). There are some differences or 'levels' of the class category with regard to nonhuman animals' treatment that need to be acknowledged. These are essentially the outcome of non-anthropocentric speciesism – that is, the type of anthropocentrism that discriminates amongst different nonhuman animal species. In this respect, depending on where you live, it is not the same in the human hierarchical mindset to be a dog or a cat than to be an exploited animal within the meat industry. However, both groups of animals, those considered companions and those farmed, can be equally seen as properties or resources and experience suffering (also in the case of companion animals, for instance

through abandonment, neglection, domestic violence or selective breeding that creates physical disabilities by deliberately manipulating the appearance of the bodies to produce or accentuate physical characteristics that are considered aesthetically pleasing to humans, like the flat face of a Bulldog or low-slung eyelids of a Bloodhound). Both groups of animals, farmed and companion animals can also cooperate with human animals and develop more equal and respectful relationships when their integrity and interests are taken into consideration (non-instrumental relationships), for example, farmed animals in animal sanctuaries helping the soil to oxygenate by walking on it or companion animals emotionally supporting their human families. But going back to the class issue.

In fact, the social class where we position other animals is so low that we do not even want to recognise it is a class. Yet the class relationship has been expressed historically, from slave narratives to the current experiences of refugees, when it is stated that they are treated worse than or equal to ‘animals’ (Hribal, 2012). Certainly, the concept of class helps us see the strong role that political and economic interests play in such entanglements. It is also significant that the system is supported by state and economic institutions. As Nibert (2002) puts it, ‘the horrid treatment of other animals and devalued humans over the ages was conditioned by economic arrangements and validated by political and ideological systems that supported the oppression’ (p. 31). Black feminists, ecofeminists and critical race scholars, following Crenshaw’s (1989) seminal conceptualization of ‘intersectionality’, have also introduced the intersectional analysis of the human-nonhuman animal relations, underlining the limitations of the binary thinking, the problem of animalization of those considered ‘others’ and the close relations between white supremacy and human supremacy, among other important issues (Deckha, 2012; Kemmerer, 2011; Ko and Ko, 2017). The entanglements between human, animal and earth abuse is what leads critical animal scholars like Best (2014) to assert that ‘human, animal and earth liberation movements are different components of one inseparable struggle’ for total liberation (p. xii).

Therefore, addressing how humans treat other animals not only fits into the aspirations of CPR, but is actually mandatory to the field if a real human emancipation (suppression of all types of violence) is envisioned.[2] In what follows, this paper attempts to contribute to the critical work in public relations by discussing ways in which the critical animal studies approach can be incorporated into CPR’s work on ethics, discourse and political economy, including the discussion of some early works.

Ethics

CPR authors stress the need for reinterpreting public relations ethics in order to add deeper reflection in both academia and the profession. The aim is to overcome the superficiality of codes for guidance, which make practitioners and scholars rely on external guidance devoid of deep reflection (Fawkes, 2012). This request for deeper attention to the ethical dilemmas in public relations has been also addressed from feminist (Tilley, 2015) and poverty (Thompson and Weaver, 2014) representation perspectives and is furthermore aligned with the cross-disciplinary spirit of critical public relations (L’Etang, 2016; L’Etang et al, 2016). These dilemmas, of course, also include our treatment of nonhuman animals. Some early works are already available regarding how public relations must ethically embrace this issue as shown below.

Freeman and Merskin (2013, 2016) have produced what is probably the first attempt to incorporate animal ethics into public relations codes. In spite of the many limitations of deontological approaches, Freeman and Merskin call attention to relevant issues in order to amend the anthropocentric bias with which practitioners usually interpret codes of ethics – and according to which the same codes were elaborated. If we compare the code of ethics of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2019) with Freeman and Merskin’s recommendations, we can identify core issues that open doors not only for professional codes to ethically catch up with the moral progress of society, but also for more in-depth ethical reflection on the part of scholars.

First, an essential general idea behind PRSA’s core values is the idea that public relations should serve the *public interest* and should not be used against it. Remarkably, evidence show that the public interest cannot be achieved if we do not stop harming other animals and consider their interests as well: in the previous section we reviewed the consequences on human health, justice and the planet that result from the way we treat other animals. However, the list of entanglements between human and nonhuman animal suffering is much longer. The links between the violence we inflict on other animals and male violence (Adams, 2008, 2013), violence against children (Ascione, 2004; Ascione and Arkow, 1999), economic violence (Nibert, 2013, 2017a, 2017b), mental disorders (Dillard, 2008; Richards et al., 2013) and crime

(Fitzgerald et al., 2009) have all already been well documented. There is no way that public relations codes serve the public interest if PR practitioners do not consider animal sentience and the ethics of our treatment of animals, because of the moral progress of society and the tight interrelationships explored in this work.

The knowledge and acknowledgement of this reality – the plight of other animals and its entanglement with human problems – is also a must for other important ideas behind PRSA's core values to be effectively, not just rhetorically, achieved. The *advocacy, honesty* and *fairness* values, for example, are clearly related to the requirement for PR practitioners to be responsible, to aim to support informed public debate, to adhere to accuracy and truth, and to be fair with everybody, not just their clients.

The PRSA's code includes other interesting ideas that already encompass the argument that the PR practitioner must be aware of the reality of nonhuman animal suffering and is accountable for this awareness. Hence, the core value related to *independence* reminds us that we are accountable for our own actions, while the core value about *expertise* stresses the need for building mutual understanding, credibility and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

In alignment with these ideas, Freeman and Merskin (2013, 2016) suggest specific ways to attend to nonhuman animals' interests in public relations and other media. Their specific style guides are based on professional ethics codes for journalism, advertisement, public relations and entertainment media and are available at animalsandmedia. org. For public relations in particular, these recommendations include engaging in two-way communication with animal and environmental defence organisations in order to listen to and address their concerns; being fair with these organisations and with anyone with fewer resources and a smaller voice in the public sphere; considering the interests of nonhuman animals and even considering them stakeholders or moral claimants; being upfront about the level of cruelty-free practices the organisations represented by PR practitioners are yet to achieve; and using appropriate language, that is, language that acknowledges that animals are sentient individuals and not objects.

Consequently – and ideally – PR practitioners should not foster interests that prevent them from acting in accordance with responsibility, truth, accuracy, honesty and fairness regarding the reality of nonhuman animals and its impact on humans – that is, the harm experienced by other animals because of our treatment of them as commodities and resources. In this respect, the core values of *expertise* and *independence* are of para- mount importance. Both are crucially required for PR practitioners to be aware of the magnitude of this harm. This is why Freeman and Merskin stress the necessity of interacting with, listening to and addressing critical stakeholders who can better provide a voice for other animals (e.g. animal defence organisations, animal rescue organisations ethologists, animal ethicists, critical animal studies scholars, etc.). Likewise, *independence* is particularly important, for PR practitioners are accountable for their actions, regardless of who they are working for. Thus, working independently means that they should not adapt ethics to clients' interests, but rather convince clients that adapting to ethics is in their own best interest.

Likewise, the five TARES principles for ethical persuasion (Baker and Martinson, 2001) articulate the moral duties of PR practitioners. These principles are (i) truthfulness (of the message); (ii) authenticity (of the persuader); (iii) respect (for the persuadee); (iv) equity (of the appeal) and (v) social responsibility (for the common good). All five of the principles allow – and even encourage – PR professionals to adopt the critical animal standpoint. In fact, Freeman's (2009) critical analysis of the TARES principles from the lens of the social movements' organisations and their advocacy challenges led her to argue for the flexibility of these principles to privilege social responsibility over respect for audience values in the case of activist campaigns serving as ideological critique.

Similarly, Baker (2009) invites PR practitioners and advocates to consider *power* and the principle of *social responsibility* when facing professional moral dilemmas. Interestingly, Baker mentions Rawl's (2005 [1971]) *veil of ignorance* exercise: 'In this exercise, when a decision is to be made, one imagines everyone who will be affected by the decision to be standing behind a veil of ignorance in an 'original position' where everyone is equal in value, humanity and power' (quoted in Baker, 2009: 127). As is well known, Rawl's exercise asks a decision-maker to make a choice about a social or moral issue assuming that they have enough information to know the consequences of their possible decisions for everyone, but not knowing, or not taking into account, which is his or her position in life. This exercise should not exclude nonhuman animals' positions from the account.

In short, public relations codes need to be interpreted in the light of the ethical progress experienced by society and the consequences of this progress – the acknowledgement of other animals as sentient beings who deserve moral consideration and the many harms, on humans and nonhumans alike, that result from neglecting this moral consideration.

Parallel to this early thought on public relations codes, a few other works have already begun ethical reflection on public relations and our treatment of other animals that transcend deontology. These works reflect on strategic communication and the animal rights movement, arguing for the need to include an ethical perspective that can be relevant for critical public relations (Freeman, 2014; Joy, 2017).

Mostly focused on advocacy, these early reflections primarily introduce animal ethics values into the PR decision-making of animal advocates and discuss the efficacy of ethical frames for the animal rights movement. These deliberations can be fertile soil for inspiring PR practitioners and scholars to reflect on the idea of the moral consideration of animals being not only necessary for the ethical or pragmatical reasons developed above, but also because of their efficacy in the persuasion process. This is precisely what Kemmerer (2019), Fernández (2019) and Almiron and Tafalla (2019) undertake for climate advocacy, arguing that stances that take into consideration animal ethics (such as ecofeminist theories in the case of Kemmerer, moral shock in the case of Fernández and egalitarian, non-speciesist ethics, in the case of Almiron and Tafalla) can prove to be effective communication strategies for persuading stakeholders to overcome climate inaction.

The field of ethical thinking in the critical public relations area is thus not only a vast, open domain ready to be expanded by means of the critical animal standpoint, but a very essential area upon which discourse and political economy analyses of non-violence and emancipation can be firmly built.

Discourse and rhetoric

The inclusion of critical animal perspectives in analyses of CPR rhetoric is directly connected with the search for meaning and power of discourses in public relations (Motion and Leitch, 2016). Interestingly, the pertinence of the sort of critical discourse analysis carried out by Motion and Leitch for CPR is also raised by CAS scholars. For instance, Stibbe (2001) reminds us that how we treat other animals depends on the 'implicit consent of the population', that ideological assumptions embedded in the everyday discourse of the animal industries 'manufacture and maintain this consent', and that critical dis- course analysis is one of the most suitable tools for unveiling how language contributes to the perpetuation of violence against other animals – as equally usefully as it is for countering racism or sexism (p. 145).

So far, only a few works have addressed how public relations shape language and discourse concerning our treatment of other animals. The most comprehensive attempt to date is Dunayer's (2001) *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*. In this seminal work, the American author scrutinises English language forms that refer to nonhuman animals and unveils the profound influence that corporate rhetoric has had in perpetuating speciesism – later defined by the author as 'the failure to accord any sentient being equal consideration and respect' (Dunayer, 2016: 91). Dunayer's *Animal Equality* is about language and animal rights, not about public relations, yet the author's search for the roots of speciesist language points once and again at lobbies and persuasive corporate rhetoric. The point made by the author is not just that PR and marketing language objectifies other animals by referring to them as *anything, it* or *which* in order to justify exploiting them, it is also that all the euphemisms used by the industry to conceal the violence behind this objectification have been to a large extent transferred to common language.

After Dunayer's inspiring volume, some works have addressed to varying degrees – only a few fully – the topic of public relations narratives – mainly those deployed in the agribusiness, vivisection and entertainment industries. Their initial results extend Dunayer's work and point out gaps, intersections and further directions for more research on public relations narratives including a critical animal standpoint. These early works include, for instance, the unveiling of the intersections between speciesist discourses and sexism in the persuasive strategies of the agri-food industry (Adams, 2013); the specie- sist discourse of the vivisection industrial complex and the manufacturing of consent for the latter (Almiron and Khazaal, 2016); the creation of a speciesist discourse coalition by the agri-food business (Hannan, 2020); the ways and extent to which the very animal advocacy organisations counter or reinforce speciesism (Dunayer, 2016); how some public relations activities such as pasture releases and open farm events embody, shape and legitimize certain values and ideals perpetuating speciesism through the rhetoric of new carnivorism/happy meat (Linné and Pedersen, 2016); the manufacturing of consent for orcas in

captivity trough public relations (Almiron, 2017); the power of digital activism in animal advocacy as represented by the PETA/SeaWorld controversy (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre, 2018), the rhetoric of denial promoted by the animal agriculture lobbies (Hannan, 2020) and the growing manner in which animal agribusiness has been able to utilise the strategies already used by climate change deniers in order to distort the debate on livestock production and its environmental effects (Stãnescu, 2020).

In our view, three main themes that raise relevant areas for future CPR inquiry emerge from this early research.

In the first place, the objectification of other animals through language seems to be not only a relevant issue, but a trait common to the public relations rhetoric used by all industries exploiting other animals. The objectification of nonhuman animals serves a main purpose most of the time: to distinguish between first- and second-class beings. The animals whose use we need to justify by referring to them as objects are *units managed* as *resources*, or *machines* from which we extract *products* or *services*. On the other hand, the animals that we want to avoid exploiting (human subjects whose abuse may occur for some, but which is not socially sanctioned) are referred as *individuals*, their *pain* is acknowledged and their *interest* in not *suffering* is protected. Language helps to perpetuate this Cartesian, dualistic idea separating *our species*, the rational-minded humans, from *the rest*, the non-rational-minded others.

The objectification of other animals serving to reinforce a human supremacist view needs much more scrutiny to be fully understood and dismantled. It is already clear that language not only perpetuates a false dualism between superior and inferior beings, but that, in so doing – and here a very relevant field of intersectional research unfolds – it also perpetuates other discriminations (such as sexism, homophobia, transphobia, sizeism, racism, ableism, ageism or classism). This is because speciesist language is also used to degrade women, trans and non-heterosexual people, fat people, human races- other-than-white, disabled, poor and old people, amongst others. We need only consider how words depicting animal traits, or animals themselves, become insults in any language when applied to humans.

Anti-objectification research can also be focused on directly assisting the animal advocacy movement to expand the reach of animal ethics discourse within society. In particular, it could take advantage of digital media and of the new knowledge of ways to foster discourse coalitions in society, in this case by creating a counter-discourse coalition, that is, an alternative prominent discourse that counters the speciesist mainstream one.

The second main theme worthy of further inspection is a pervasive frame found in the persuasive communication efforts of industries using other animals. This frame follows what Joy (2010) has deemed as central in what she calls the ‘carnist’ ideology: the fact that consuming and using other animals is promoted as *normal*, *natural* and *necessary*. Unveiling the forms in which the public relations industries construct the *normal*, *natural* and *necessary* – for instance, to keep people drinking cow’s milk, visiting zoos or accepting slaughterhouses and vivisection without giving a second thought to what they are actually doing – is of paramount relevance to raising awareness amongst the media, the political class and public opinion about the degree to which their conventional ideas are influenced by business interests. For the common sense related to our exploitation of animals is usually a construct of vested interests.

In this respect, deconstruction of this frame might bring about important results also in the way society is organised because of the deep intertwining of animal exploitation with capitalism and the many problems human society experiences, including for example, the health and social justice problems and the environmental degradation mentioned earlier. For instance, the *necessary* aspect of our exploitation of other animals as professed by the public relation efforts of the animal industrial complex includes stressing issues such as their alleged benefits for human health, other animals’ health and the environment, but also claims that belong to particular ideological views such as the sacredness of consumer free choice and the rhetoric of scientific progress.

The third and final theme that we deem of interest for CPR research regarding language and rhetoric is a public relations discursive stratagem that represents a significant shift in the industry’s strategy. Due to both the global moral progress of society (increasingly aware of the need to stop harming other life on the planet) and the animal rights movement campaigns (accompanying and promoting this moral progress), in the last decade the discourse of the main industries exploiting animals has incorporated the adoption of animal welfare narratives that mimic animal movement concerns. The blatant incongruity of this strategy recalls previous ‘we do care’ persuasive strategies employed by powerful discourse coalitions in the

recent past, for example, those of the tobacco, oil and finance industries related to human health, environmental damage and economic austerity.

Unveiling the contradiction between exploiting beings as objects and at the same time claiming that they are respected as subjects is an obvious task for critical scholar to address in discourse studies. In this respect, there are also fertile grounds for researchers to reflect on how this animal welfare discourse can be used to transform the very corporate ideology, since attempting to cause business to adapt to its own rhetoric is far more advantageous than struggling against its attempt to keep business as usual, which goes against the moral progress of society and brings negative impacts on human health and the environment as well.

It follows, then, that critical public relations researchers should be able to suggest and promote alternative non-speciesist language, frames and narratives to their clients. But it also follows that this is of interest not only to commercial clients but to animal advocates as well, who often routinely perpetuate anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism through their campaigns. In this respect, the speciesist rhetoric used by public relations can be seen as a critical area for propaganda studies, since the use of speciesist language is not accidental, but aimed to conceal reality and to justify and promote a human supremacist ideology. This is mostly aligned with the vested interests that make up the third significant nascent field of research for CPR studies willing to incorporate the animal standpoint.

Political economy

Research on the political economy of public relations connected to our treatment of nonhuman animals is by far the least developed topic of all research fields, in spite of the fact that this perspective is essential to understanding ethics and rhetoric, as outlined earlier.

The political economy of communication (PEC) focus upon the structural power relations involved in capitalism or, in Mosco's (2009) words, in the 'power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources, including communication resources' (p. 2). As a critical approach, PEC has always been involved in a process of rethinking, renewal and, in particular, broadening of scope. From focusing mainly on media imperialism and corporate concentration in US and European old media, the field went on to experience the globalisation of its research. PEC now incorporates a commitment to the history of communication (particularly the history of resistance to dominant powers) and a variety of approaches to new media (including the continuities and discontinuities of capitalistic patterns). The field has also engaged with the disciplines on its borders (mostly cultural studies, sociology, economics and political science, but also environment studies). It has also used the analysis of class, gender, race, social movements, labour and hegemony (and counter-hegemony) as categories to describe the social relations of communication practices (Mosco, 2009).

Thus, the critical PEC approach is grounded in a normative-moral stance rooted in the cornerstones of traditional political economy. As summarised by Murdock and Golding (2005) and Mosco (2009), this foundational basis: (i) gives priority to understanding social change and historical transformation; (ii) takes into account the wider social totality; (iii) is oriented by social values and by conceptions of appropriate social practices; and (iv) merges research with praxis (that is, it is committed to the aim of improving the world and oneself). This means that political economists of communication contribute to critical communication studies by addressing the moral challenges of our time involving the power relations behind media, communication and culture.

However, the PEC approach has mostly reproduced the anthropocentric dominant view of humanities and social sciences, preventing scholars from addressing a most remarkable aspect that also shapes the quality or condition of being human: our relationship with the rest of life on the planet. The PEC approach is furthermore much underused by critical scholars in public relations, probably because of the dominance of the culturalist views in CPR in opposition to the overvaluation of positivist work in noncritical mainstream public relations research. This is, nevertheless, a field of study providing major scope for understanding our ethical and rhetorical choices.

Among the many topics that this perspective can address within CPR, the political economy of interest groups is especially important. Lobby groups and think tanks no longer try to influence policy makers alone, but also public opinion and the media as well. Nowadays, almost all of the major economic sectors have lobbying structures and 'front' coalitions that work to shape mainstream ideologies. Historically,

these have played a major role in institutionalising nonhuman animal exploitation (Nibert, 2013). Many profitable industries are either partially or fully based on the exploitation of other animals (e.g. agri-food, health, chemical and entertainment) or have a huge impact on animals and nature (e.g. energy, transportation and military). Interest groups work to influence society by directly lobbying stakeholders to influence decision-making, and by shaping and disseminating mainstream discourses. Decision-making at the media level can be strongly influenced when interest groups, for instance, work on behalf of companies that are advertisers or stockholders of the media companies. Alternatively, media discourses can be strongly influenced by the dissemination of specific narratives that apparently provide the scientific evidence demanded by news journalists because of the complexity of many topics. This heavy reliance on scientific research has fostered huge corporate investment into the use of think tanks that serve as lobby platforms disguised as research institutes. To unveil their true nature, a critical political economy approach to the study of interest groups and their public relations strategies is needed.

Some of the early discourse analysis mentioned in the previous sections also includes an incipient political economy approach to interest groups (e.g. Almiron and Khazaal, 2016 in that of the vivisection business and Almiron, 2017 in that of the entertainment industry) and very relevant research on the political economy of the European dairy lobby is currently being undertaken by Ruiz-Carreras (2019). Amongst the areas with the greatest potential for interesting results in this respect is the already mentioned discourse coalition approach.

Field and coalition theory authors (Medvetz, 2012; Plehwe, 2011, 2014) have revealed how neoliberal discourse has been able to succeed in areas such as economics and climate change thanks to the creation of think tanks and transnational knowledge-interest networks and coalitions. These actors in this new scenario have joined efforts with traditional lobbying, and there is a huge potential field of research to unveil the political economy of their rhetorical strategies. How influence expands through coalitions of interests deserves to be addressed not only from a discourse studies perspective but also from a materialistic one, that is one focused on discovering funding providers, financing, political/media/academic support and corporate alliances.

Introducing the animal standpoint in critical public relations

In 2011, a story about an escaped cow attracted considerable media attention. She had fled from a farm in Sicily (Italy) and, managing to escape the search organised to capture her, ran for 25 kilometres, following the course of the Agrò river until she reached the sea at the height of Santa Teresa di Riva, on the coast. There, in desperation to avoid her captors, she jumped into the water and began to swim towards the coast of Calabria, on the other side of the sea. She swam for 3 hours, only to advance 1 km, until a Coast Guard boat reached her. Even though she was exhausted, she kept fighting frantically to avoid being captured. Eventually she was dragged to the coast and her flight came to an end. Because so many people empathised with the courageous swimming cow and her desperate flight, a large-scale campaign was organised to save her life. It was a success and the cow's life was eventually spared; she was moved to a sanctuary and named Teresa, the name of the town where she bravely jumped into the sea (mention of this case can be found for instance in Horta, 2017).

Previous to her escape, Teresa had been living on a farm in the town of Castiglione di Sicilia, where several cows had shown symptoms of brucellosis.[3] Because of the risk of spread of infection, the owners had decided to kill the cows – likely following regulation recommending or forcing the killing of infected animals –, that is, to shorten their lives even more than usually. Despite the singular attention it received, Teresa's story is just one of billions of similar stories of farmed cows. The language we have used to depict her here – a cow *escaping*, *fleeing* and *desperate* – opposes the old view of nonhuman animals being only moved by their instincts – like Cartesian automats[4] – and reflects the critical approach adopted in this paper and supported by an increasing number of scientists and philosophers. Nowadays we know that the social and cognitive world of nonhuman animals, particularly of mammals but not only, is richer and more complex than we ever thought. And, more importantly, we know today that the old inferiorising categories we built to describe their lives are the outcome of vested interest, mostly our need to justify exploiting them.

In the case of cows, whatever the degree of exploitation that takes place on farms, cows' lives follow the same pattern everywhere. To produce milk permanently they must undergo a cycle of continued artificial insemination, pregnancies and separations from their calves almost immediately after each birth. The

genetic manipulation carried out on them over generations has resulted in a totally abnormal level of milk production that, together with continued exploitation, leaves them exhausted in just a few years. When production declines, they are sent to the slaughterhouse, in most cases having lived less than a third of their life expectancy. Consequently, milk production implies confinement, forced insemination, separation between the calves and the cow, physical manipulations such as filing or cutting of horns, medicalisation and health problems derived from confinement or the unnatural volume of induced milk (such as mastitis). The degree of suffering inflicted on these mammals to extract and consume their mammary secretions is one of the most intense in all animal agriculture. To fully comprehend this, it might be useful to consider the quantum leap experienced by how we address anthropomorphising animals.

Anthropomorphising – the assignment of human characteristics to nonhuman animals – was often assumed as incorrect in the past. However, since Jane Goodall challenged it in the 1960s by giving names to the chimpanzees instead of just numbers, and by observing and reporting on their unique personality traits (Goodall, 1999), the criticism of anthropomorphising has been abandoned as a paradigm by an increasing number of ethologists. These group of ethologists are particularly the ones contributing to the most extraordinary knowledge collected on nonhuman animal behaviour in the last decades. As authors like Parkinson (2020) and Meijer (2019) highlight, if wrongly produced and circulated, anthropomorphism can of course serve to create misunderstanding; however, the opposite is also true, if rightly used then understanding can flourish. The amazing knowledge provided by the works of ethologists like the already mentioned Bekoff, de Waal and Safina on the behaviours of other species, would have not been possible without this quantum leap; by abandoning categories created by humans for self-serving purposes, and observing animals with an open mind, liberated from these lenses. In doing so, anthropomorphising can be very useful to interpret other animals' actions. However, it must be noted that a number of results by these scientists doesn't anthropomorphise. In this respect, as Meijer (2019: 81) remembers, 'stating that other animals have intentions is not anthropomorphic, not because of its truth value as a judgement of the mental states of other animals, but because animal intentions are part of what gives the concept 'intention' its meaning'.

From this stance, it is easy to realise that cows like Teresa are not 'farm animals', 'herd animals' or 'milk cows' rather social animals with cognitive lives who are farmed, herded and milked by humans, that is turned into machines. To imagine what it might mean for rich cognitive and social animals to be treated as instinct-driven automats also helps to develop empathetic connections between humans and other animals, to get humans fully aware of what cows (or any other farmed animal) go through in their life. Furthermore, from the critical stance adopted in this paper, Teresa's and other similar escapes can also be interpreted as a fierce act of agency, which we ought to understand as a clear message to us.

This reality, however, runs counter to a parallel one created by public relations. In 2018, the global branding agency Summa (2018) published a report about the most empathic brands in Spain. At the top, in the first and second positions on the list were the two largest dairy companies in the world, Nestle and Danone. In the fifth position was another dairy company – Central Lechera Asturiana – followed in positions seven and ten by two meat companies (Casa Tarradellas and Campofrío). The mechanisms by which persuasive communication can bring consumers to empathise to this degree with the very corporations that are linked to the exploitation and death from which Teresa fled – with whom we also empathise so much – deserve to be examined by critical scholars of public relations from at least the ethical, discursive and political economy perspectives. Likewise, this effort must be carried out with a critical mind, aware of the self- deception promoted by the industry – which disseminates apocalyptic narratives of species extinction if animal exploitation comes to an end. The disappearance/conservation of species and the quality of life of individuals, once exploitation ends, is actually in our hands; that is, it is related to human's willingness to guarantee the habitat, protection and welfare conditions for nonhuman animals to flourish in a context of no exploitation.

The purpose of this paper was to encourage expanding research within the field of critical public relations by including the animal standpoint as defined in this paper – that is the attitude and practice of taking into equal consideration and respect the lives and interests of nonhuman animals. First, we have shown how the critical animal studies approach – grounded on a non-speciesist ethics – is not only compatible with critical public relations but also complementary. We have argued that by considering the contributions of CAS and the animal standpoint theory, the field of CPR is broadened and benefitted by truly including all stakeholders – human and nonhuman animals – involved in social relations. To illustrate this claim we

have examined three main areas of research within critical public relations where this contribution can be more fruitful: ethics, discourse studies and political economy.

Our attempt, of course, has several limitations. We have not been able to address in our analysis the different practices, regulations and social sensibilities that exist regarding our relationship with nonhuman animals. Therefore, we have not been able to show how, both the animal standpoint we suggest, and the concept of sentience used as a basis, enables to avoid any cultural relativism when conducting research merging CAS with CPR. The interest of any sentient being not to be harmed should always count more than the interest of humans in keeping their dietary or cultural traditions, for instance. Yet we understand that the elaboration on this is more a task for animal ethicists. Our analysis has also been limited in the scope of the potential areas of research discussed. We have only addressed research in three areas that, in spite of being amongst the most relevant, do not encompass all possible research in public relations in general and in CPR in particular (missing is for instance research on professional routines or on the impacts/reception of public relations). We also have missed to adopt a more constructive stance, more focused on solutions to the harms than in the harms themselves, because of the need first to problematise our treatment of other animals to sustain our case in this paper.[5] However, this is a very fertile area, since animal ethics has interestingly evolved from requesting no harm alone to incorporate the idea of assisting other animals in need. Because helping other animals has been mostly carry out by advocacy organizations so far, public relations practitioners seem to have here a natural field of action. Related to this, we have also not been able to address what are the different challenges that a researcher will face when incorporating the critical animal studies approach depending on whether we analyse a for profit or a non for profit issue. Finally, we have not been able either to point at the particular case of animals in nature, for which the critical approach suggested here allows unveiling the bucolised discourse that dominates Western society and hides the plights of free-living animals.

In spite of these limitations, we hope to have moved our argument forward: that including the animal standpoint in CPR means expanding the field of critical research with a new and fresh trend that could produce fruitful interdisciplinary results if connected to classical critical topics such as power, hegemony, ideology, propaganda or social change. Yet including the animal standpoint also means putting into practice the main tenet of critical communication research: the commitment of the researcher to the aim of improving society and oneself – that is, to critically contribute to advancing our duties in favour of justice, reparation, caring, peace and freedom to our human and nonhuman fellows, as well as our shared environment – and thereby fulfil the emancipatory role of research.

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Notes

1. In this paper we understand *harm* as the Merriam Webster Dictionary online: ‘physical or mental damage’, a synonymous of injury. We use the concept of *abuse* also with the same meaning. Here harm and abuse refer in particular to all the practices that physically or psychologically injure nonhuman animals. We recognise the multiple aspects and cultural differences of those practices, the considerable differences between smallholders/ small units and transnational industries, as well as the different regulations and welfare standards, but the analysis of that diversity is out of the scope of this paper. We will refer specifically to the industrialised, Western production systems. For a general discussion of harm and abuse on other animals in capitalism see for instance (Animal Ethics, 2020; Escobar, 2016; Nibert, 2017a, 2017b).

2. Of course, this is not to say we need to consider critical animal studies approaches in critical public relations only to advance human animal interests, as we advocate for the moral consideration of nonhuman animals for their own sake. We mean here that from an intersectional approach, the oppression of human and nonhuman animals is so entangled that it’s impossible to dismantle a system of oppression without considering its connections with the other systems of domination.

3. Following the World Health Organization (WHO)’s definition (2020): ‘Brucellosis is a bacterial disease caused by various Brucella species, which mainly infect cattle, swine, goats, sheep and dogs. Humans generally acquire the disease through direct contact with infected animals, by eating or drinking contaminated animal products or by inhaling airborne agents. Most cases are caused by ingesting

unpasteurised milk or cheese from infected goats or sheep. Brucellosis is one of the most widespread zoonoses transmitted by animals and in endemic areas, human brucellosis has serious public health consequences. Expansion of animal industries and urbanisation, and the lack of hygienic measures in animal husbandry and in food handling, partly account for brucellosis remaining a public health hazard'.

4. By 'Cartesian Automats' we refer to Descartes' mechanistic philosophy introducing the idea of a reflex to explain the behavior of nonhuman animals. While Aristotle created the division between instinct and reason, Descartes followed with the distinction between mechanical reflex and rational thought. Though humans may have instincts as well, the alleged lack of rational thought is what counts for nonhumans as a pretext for their instrumentalisation by humans.

5. Likewise, it is beyond the scope of this paper to figure out what the future of farmed animals may look like if a stop is put to exploitation, however we suggest developing the discussion through the work of Donaldson and Kymlicka (2011) in *Zoopolis*, where a political theory of coexistence with other animals is proposed. In particular, Donaldson and Kymlicka hold that relationships with other domesticated animals (both companion and farmed animals) should be mediated by cohabitation and the granting of a citizenship status as a measure for guaranteeing their rights. Also, political scientist Cochrane (2018) suggests ways of negotiating competing rights that may arise amongst nonhuman animals in a future of no exploitation, some of them already in place, by means of deploying a theory of global inter-species justice based on what he calls a 'sentientist politics'.

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