The Emotional Politics of Images: Moral Shock, Explicit Violence and Strategic Visual Communication in the Animal Liberation Movement

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Abstract

Animal liberation activists regularly use visual communication to get their message across to the public. Explicit violent images are considered a potential tool to bridge the moral gap between activists and audiences. However, there is a strong debate regarding the effectiveness of different visuals. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by examining to what extent these images may be effective means of raising awareness of speciesist beliefs and attitudes, as well as promoting changes in them. To this end, this paper reviews the most outstanding research on anti-speciesist visual communication strategies from an interdisciplinary approach, focusing on the concept of moral shock. According to the review, it seems reasonable to conclude that animal liberation activists can benefit from the strategic use of moral shock, but given the difficulty of drawing clear conclusions on the topic, more research on the issue is needed to obtain more accurate results.

Keywords: advocacy; animal liberation; emotions; moral shock; speciesism; strategic visual communication.

Introduction

The streets of the city are full of people walking all over the place, meeting their friends, going to the theatre, cinema, or simply buying stuff. In a corner of the square, a group of animal liberation activists hold signs and computers showing several pictures and videos of nonhuman animals living within animal exploitation industries: an encaged sow is lying on the floor, unable to move. She is squashing her own baby, couched inside her body while trying to nurse. The sow's gaze, while she tries to spin around, is heartbreaking. A conveyor belt walks to the abyss a group of tiny newborn yellow chicks, who will be ground up alive because they are not profitable to the egg industry. A group of fishes are taken out of the water in fishing nets and are put in a plastic box full of ice, where they will agonize until their last minute of life before completely freezing. These are just some possible images that disclose the reality behind the walls of farms, aquaculture facilities, and slaughterhouses around the globe. This group of animal advocates may be in any city, using the power of visuals to break up the silence, raise awareness, and promote social engagement with the animal liberation struggle.

Nonhuman animals are one of the most oppressed collectives in contemporary societies of the Global North. The domination that suppresses their bodies and lives, however, is generally normalized. The ideology promoting this domination is called speciesism, which can be defined in a moral sense as "the unjustified disadvantageous consideration or treatment of those who are not classified as belonging to a certain species" (Horta, 2010, p. 1). It can also be described in a structural sense because it organizes all levels of the social structure: political, economic, ideological, and symbolic, cultural (Nibert, 2002). Anthropocentrism is the moral paradigm that places human beings at the center of importance, validity and consideration above other animals. Anthropocentric speciesism justifies human supremacy based on species membership alone. This oppressive idea has great similarities to other historical centrisms that reflect the configuration of power relations in a binary, speciesist-anthropocentric, colonial-Eurocentric, and heteropatriarchal-androcentric world (Ávila Gaitán & González, 2015). The social devaluation of certain subjects who have been left to the margins, gives rise to systems of oppression such as racism, speciesism, ableism, classicism, sexism and environmental injustice, among other power structures. All these systems of power, far from being

independent or isolated, are strongly interconnected (Adams, 1990/2010; Nibert, 2002; Hribal, 2010; Ko & Ko, 2017).

In this context, media and communication play a primary role in both reproducing and challenging systemic ideologies. For Fuchs (2011), "communication refers to a symbolic interaction process between human subjects, whereas a medium is an artefact/object/technology that enables communications" (p. 75). Throughout this process, considered by Freeman (2014) as not neutral, conventional media plays a central role in the perpetuation of the speciesist ideology, which is based on human supremacy, the instrumentalization of other animals, the reproduction of the human/animal binary and the distorted representation of nonhuman animals and their relations with humans (Nibert, 2002; Khazaal & Almiron, 2016). Animality is frequently represented in hegemonic and institutional art and visual culture as a means to reinforce human supremacy by underlining the differences between human and nonhuman animals or as a means to create interest and empathy towards a human being, as shown by Kean in her research on animal representation in urban commemorative sculptures (Kean, 2011, p. 61).

Media and hegemonic discourses generally represent nonhuman animals as mere resources for human means; the relevance of their lives and bodies is measured by their capability to satisfy human necessities and pleasures, instead of considering the inherent value of their lives in themselves (Freeman, 2009b). Even when nonhuman animals' capacities of feeling and having particular and complex emotional lives are thoroughly documented (Bekoff, 2007), the media offers a distorted and caricatured image of nonhuman animals, suppressing their suffering, their individuality and specificity as unique beings by representing them as properties or goods. Through speciesist language (Dunayer, 2001), false advertising (Adams, 1990/2010), negative anthropomorphism (Parkinson, 2019) or commodification of their bodies, as well as the omission of the debate about the use and exploitation of other animals, media representations of nonhuman animals promote and reproduce this speciesist ideology (Freeman, 2009b; Almiron et al., 2016). Scholars J. Keri Cronin and Lisa A. Kramer (2018) defined this speciesist media imaginary as the "iconography of oppression" (p. 84). Through these distorted and violence-sanitized images of nonhuman animals, the dominant systems of visual culture normalize animal use and exploitation.

As a consequence, the animal liberation movement faces the challenge of "[enabling] target audiences to perceive problems [related to nonhuman animals] as severe and unresolved by authorities, creating a sense of urgency that motivates social intervention" (Freeman, 2014, p. 69). Aaltola underlines the power of images for nonhuman animal advocacy: images are an alternative to words, "as they communicate the physical form and emotive gestures of the animal, and leave the door open for emotions and forms of understanding which usually escape analytical reasoning and propositional language" (Aaltola, 2014, p. 20). Philosopher Kathie Jenni (2005) also considered this emotional dimension when she held: "Images are catalysts for 'the unfolding of compassion.' They do not by themselves produce either feelings of empathy or the disposition to help that compassion involves, but they promote a necessary condition for both: vivid awareness of individual suffering" (p. 6). Cronin and Kramer argue that artistic interventions and photographic images can interrupt the systemic iconography of oppression and challenge the speciesist status quo (Cronin & Kramer, 2018, pp. 84, 86). When advocating for animal liberation and trying to influence people's behaviors, activists find in visual communication a potential source of opportunities to subvert socially normalized speciesism.

The visual representations of nonhuman animal realities from an antispeciesist gaze are diverse and varied and there is a strong open debate regarding the effectiveness of different types of visuals within the animal liberation movement. This paper contributes to the discussion by examining the extent to which images of explicit violence towards nonhuman animals may be effective means of promoting change in speciesist beliefs and attitudes and aligning society with the animal liberation movement's goals. To this end, this paper conducts a literature review compiling the most outstanding theoretical studies and the empirical research on animal advocacy communication strategies available to date. Currently, there are more theoretical discussions of violent images and moral shock, but not a lot of empirical research in general and focused on animal advocacy and visual communication in particular, as well as research on complementary visual communication strategies used to persuade in activism which are also applicable to the animal advocacy movement. This review focuses on the concept of "moral shock" (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995) because studies have shown that visuals including explicit violence trigger an emotional impact in audiences and have the potential to create changes in moral perception and

modify speciesist beliefs and attitudes.

While this paper explores the explicit violent imagery and moral shock tactic possibilities towards individual attitude and behavioral change, the moral shock strategy is not limited to creating change at an individual level and can also positively promote structural change. For example, undercover investigations in nonhuman animal exploitation centers which show explicitly how these nonhuman animals are subjected to exploitation and direct harm within the animal industrial complex have received large media coverage and have helped to prompt social discussions and raise public awareness on animal exploitation issues. This fact has facilitated shutting down animal exploitation centers or motivating some banning or regulations within certain industries in some cases.

During this paper the term "animal liberation movement" and "animal advocacy movement" will be generally prioritized and used to refer specifically to the anti-speciesist and abolitionist branch, the aim of which is the end of any animal use. In the case of the referenced studies, the concept coined by the authors—generally, "animal rights"—will be kept. For the literature review, all the empirical research found was included, done from diverse ideological perspectives of the animal advocacy movement. I use movement in singular as an umbrella concept, but not with universalizing intentions of the broad cultural, ideological and organizational diversity within international animal advocacy.

The article is structured as follows: first, the paper explores the distinctive traits of animal liberation activists and some of the most relevant approaches to communication strategies in these communities. Second, the concept of moral shock, its theoretical background and some of the main empirical studies are examined while approaching other visual communication strategies and considering the important relations between communication, emotions and social change in the case of the animal liberation movement. Third, the primary empirical studies on anti-speciesist visuals are presented. Finally, the last section discusses the main conclusions drawn from this review, explores the contributions of philosophers and social scientists on the risks and opportunities of using moral shock, outlines some ethical concerns for communicators, and highlights the need for more empirical research on the topic.

Activist Communities and Communication Strategies

Before addressing the extent to which visuals portraying explicit violence are effective, it is useful to explore the general strategies and profiles of the activist communities provided by the literature. These studies, briefly discussed below, shed valuable light on the composition of the collectives and associations and certain common characteristics of animal liberation activists' profiles, and some of their main communication strategies.

Regarding values, studies show that the animal liberation movement is mostly feminized (Gaarder, 2011) and not generally affiliated to a religion (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995, p. 502). Animal liberation activists generally share values and identities, such as their more holistic approach to other power structures (Taylor, 2005) or their common visceral disgust and developed moral aversion to nonhuman animal use and exploitation (Herzog & Golden, 2009). They use strategies such as networking (Cherry, 2006) to reinforce their shared beliefs and moral shock (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995) to bring their message of respect toward nonhuman animals to their audiences. They also increase their perceived efficacy and make their activism sustainable by fortifying strategies such as seeing the positive, thinking cumulatively, celebrating victories, and claiming credit (Einwohner, 2002).

With regard to recruitment and communication strategies used by the animal advocacy movement, Jasper and Poulsen stat that "the success depends primarily on affecting nonstate actors (including the public)" (1993, p. 656). Jasper and Poulsen also conclude that "previous contact with someone in the movement is the most important factor explaining an individual's recruitment" (1995, p. 495). However, as will be pointed out later, moral shock is also an important strategy for recruiting strangers.

In their effort to broaden the animal liberation movement, activists must face some strategic choices related to the "Extension Dilemma" and the "'Reaching Out or Reaching In' Dilemma" (Jasper, 2004). The former refers to the tension between the expansion of those considered allies in a social struggle with the risk of losing focus in the movement, and the latter to the choice of which audience a social movement intends to reach: those who are already sympathetic to the movement or the uninitiated (Jasper, 2004). Other possible dilemmas are related to authenticity—if it is better to present the message in the most ideologically-authentic way or if it is more effective, for pragmatic reasons, to adapt activists' appeals to "better fit the audience's interests and values, even if they are discriminatory or self-interested rather than aligned with the SMO [Social Movement Organization]'s anti-

discriminatory or altruistic guiding values" (Freeman, 2009a, pp. 19-20). If the aim is to achieve effective communication, animal liberation activists need to guide their moral outrage while trying not to increase the "moral chasm" (Jasper & Nelkin, 2007, p. 230) that distances them from their potential audiences.

However, effectiveness may not be directly connected to a less radical discourse or strategy. Karagianni and Cornelissen (2006) show an enormous diversity of political tendencies and aims inside anti-corporate social movements that already share values and goals. The animal liberation movement has also been considered an anti-corporate movement because of its targets and strategies (Jasper & Nelkin, 2007). Following Jahn, Hong and Park's research, the public attitude toward radical and moderate activists does not vary significantly, because the "public perceives them as activists together" (2013, p. 120). However, "the public support toward activists could differ by the communication strategies the activists decide to utilize" (Jahn et al., 2013). This confirms that efforts must be put into adapting the messages to different audiences rather than looking for a universal strategy.

As shown by Jasper (1998), social movements—and all forms of social life—are pervaded by emotions. It has been shown that emotions relate more to activism than cognitive agreement alone, for the latter does not result in action (Jasper, 1998, p. 413). As upheld by Wisneski and Skitka (2017), there is agreement in the moral psychology field on the strong association between morality and emotion. It follows then, that the animal liberation movement needs to consider emotions as a central issue in its communications strategies. In this effort, it is relevant to keep in mind the context where the communication takes place and to consider that emotions are culturally constructed, as cultural norms shape what will be labeled as normal or deviant and sustain different cultural backgrounds of shared assumptions (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Jasper, 1998). The same authors revealed that personal and moral proximity to the audience also conditions the persuasive communication approach. Einwohner (1999) included activists' identity and audience's perceptions on activists' gender, class, and race as factors that shape social movement outcomes and increase or reduce the effectiveness of a campaign. These identity markers, interactive between activists and their audiences, influence the perception of a campaign and whether it is framed as an important and necessary social issue or as an illegitimate one. The researcher examined an anti-hunting campaign and an

anti-circus campaign carried out by the animal rights association Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) composed by predominantly middle-class female activists. As Einwohner concludes:

> Interactions between PAWS activists and their targets are shaped by ideas about class and gender, but in different ways. In the hunting campaign, activists are evaluated in terms of class and gender, which become a source of illegitimacy and a basis for hunters' dismissal of the activists' claims. Circus patrons do not use class and gender to the same extent when evaluating the activists' claims; however, when it does arise, patrons actually use gendered assessments as a justification for, rather than a dispute of, their anti-circus stance (p. 70).

More recently, Faunalytics' Animal Tracker survey (2019) gives room to important information about animal advocates and social attitudes towards animal advocacy (demographic analysis of allies, neutrals and adversaries) in the U.S. This research can be helpful to target audiences while taking into account Einwohner's concerns about the relational character of activists and audiences identity markers.

Effectiveness, Emotions and Moral Shock

In this article, effectiveness is understood in relation to the ability to generate changes in speciesist attitudes—including the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels—of the recipient of a visual message. In research on communication strategies and social movements, framing has been the main tool used to analyze how activists define the problem, offer a solution, and suggest the desirable strategy or action to reach their goals of social, environmental, and interspecies justice (Benford, 1993; Jasper, 1998; Freeman, 2014).

Following Snow and Benford (1992), frame is understood here as "an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (p. 137). With regard to framing, Jasper (1998) focused on the concept of "frame alignment," referring to the necessity of adjusting activists' and potential participants' frames—considering their beliefs, life experiences and self-narratives. Jasper, following Benford (1993), distinguished between three

types of framing: (a) diagnostic, the conviction that a problem needs to be addressed; (b) prognostic, the conviction related to the appropriate tactics, strategies, and targets, and (c) motivational, the conviction to get involved in activist activities.

In her research, Mika (2006) underlined four frame alignment techniques (Snow et al., 1986, pp. 467–72, as cited in Mika, 2006) that make the connection of animal liberation ideas with the ones followed by other social justice movements and facilitate the linkage between oppressions and liberation struggles: frame bridging, frame amplification, and frame extension. The author also emphasized the concept of frame transformation as the last goal of animal liberation activism. According to Mika (2006),

> frame transformation is based on the process by which new values are planted, old ones jettisoned, and contrary beliefs reframed, resulting in a transformation of frame. A phenomenon is reconceptualized so that what was once tolerable is now immoral and unacceptable (…). Animal rights groups, in particular, have often successfully used moral shock tactics to transform frames. (p. 920)

In Mika's study, the frame transformation is mainly represented by three PETA shocking advertisements:

> One simply states, in bold letters, "Meat is Murder." Another, which also has religious overtones, shows a sheep suspended by a single back leg, showering blood on a nearby wall, with the accompanying text: "Lamb of God. Choose Life! Go Vegetarian." Over the course of the focus group discussions what emerged as the most shocking ad is an image of emaciated concentration camp victims juxtaposed with chickens in factory farm cages with the caption, "To Animals, All People are Nazis" (Mika, 2006, p. 923).

Moral shock has been described by the coiners of the term as a stimulus or event that causes a sense of outrage which in turn leads individuals to react in response to it (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995).

At first, evidence on the effectiveness of moral shock seemed contradictory and of dubious accuracy. In their study of anti-nuclear and animal rights protests, Jasper and Poulsen (1995) noted a contrast: in the case of the animal rights movement, the "recruitment of friends" was mainly based on existing networks, while the "recruitment of strangers" was

produced primarily through direct moral shocks (p. 499). Generally, the shock was the result of new information "about something existing which has already done unseen damage" (Jasper, 1998, p. 409).

In 2007, Jasper and Nelkin also suggested that moral shocks had been used as a recruiting tool for protest movements because of their persuasive nature, even for people with no prior political interest; they can not only inform the recipient about realities in which others do something to animals but also cause viewers to question their own actions related to animal exploitation. More recently, however, Jasper noted that shocks "do not change people's underlying values; they only clarify or activate them" (2011, p. 293).

Wrenn (2013) researched the potentialities of using moral shocks as a means for the animal abolitionist strategy. Wrenn states that moral shocks have historically been used by the welfarist branch in the animal advocacy movement to motivate reform, while the abolitionists have focused more on narratives and logical-rational arguments. Wrenn holds that abolitionist anti-speciesism should introduce moral shocks to promote veganism because of its link with emotions and attitude-change (2013, p. 380). Even if explicit violence images allude mostly to the treatment and exploitation conditions of those animals, such visual contents can be framed in a broader abolitionist argument.

More recently, Wisneski and Skitka (2017) studied moral shock in the case of anti-abortion communication under the hypothesis that "exposure to graphic and emotionally charged images can increase the degree to which people see an issue in moral terms" (p. 147). They defended the unique effects of moral shock to morality, holding that moral shocks appear to moralize attitudes. Jasper had already pointed out, in 1998, that responses to moral shocks vary greatly in terms of the emotions that ensue (p. 409) and Nabi (1998) and Herzog & Golden (2009) have pointed to disgust as a key emotion for persuasion and attitude-change in animal advocacy messages.

Other essential communication tools the animal liberation movement uses to change speciesist worldviews are those related with boundaries of species and the moral community, which are frequently expressed through the use of moral shocks. Cherry approached Durkheim's concept of "symbolic boundary" and the idea of influencing the culture to generate social change, especially through the creation of collective identities and the dissoluteness or overstepping of symbolic boundaries that perpetuate

difference and oppression between human and nonhuman animals. She argued that the change in the cultural codes and the shift of symbolic boundaries should be considered as an aim—and not a simple consequence—for the animal liberation movement (2010, p. 472).

Cherry (2010) suggested two different strategies to fight against symbolic boundaries and to influence the cultural meanings of audiences: "boundary-blurring" and "boundary-crossing." Cherry holds that "boundary-crossing" describes typically individual-level processes in which a person moves from one group to another without changing the symbolic boundary within itself to displace symbolic boundaries instead of reinforcing them (2010, p. 468). The boundary crossing strategy is used by activists: (a) physically, when they use their human bodies (usually nudes) as nonhuman animal bodies, as in Animal Equality street performance for the World Meatless day (Animal Equality, 2012); (b) Iconographically, as pointed by Cherry, in the PMAF (Protection Mondiale des Animaux de Ferme) in their anti-foie-gras poster (2010, p.469); (c) Discursively: as in a Compassion Over Killing (COK) t-shirt with an image of a dog on a plate and the question, ''Why not? You eat other animals, don't you?'' (Cherry, 2010, p.470). "Boundary-blurring's strategies" are divided into two categories, as summarized by Bertolaso:

> In the first category there are the focusing strategies; these strategies stress the biological evidence that humans are animals as well and that there is no difference between animals that are culturally loved and respected and animals that are culturally seen as mere resources; the second category is composed of the universalizing strategies, which place nonhuman animals beside humans as victims of violence and compare the animal rights movement to the movement for human rights (2015, p. 15).

A boundary-blurring strategy of focusing would consist of dismantling the companion/farmed animal divide, as done for instance by vegan artist Roma Velarde in one of her paintings titled "Tu perro no quiere ser tu comida. Los demás animales tampoco" ("Your dog doesn't want to be your food. Other animals neither"). She painted a puppy in a plate and a piglet in a bed on the floor, changing the normalized places where each animal would be to question the species boundary and cultural assignation that has been normalized for each species (Velarde, 2018). In the case of the

universalizing strategy, some visual examples are the superposition of images of human animal exploitation and nonhuman animal exploitation, as the human victims of the holocaust and chickens encaged in factory farms. This kind of imagery has also been used making verbal or visual references to the comparison between human slavery and animal exploitation, as for example in a campaign against the circus that show an elephant chained paw with the text "slavery continue in the circus". These strategies have been criticized from decolonial and anti-racist vegan activists and thinkers, for both ethical and strategical reasons (see, for example McJetters, 2014; Ko & Ko, 2017).

Some authors have argued that the use of moral shocks can generate paralysis or activate psychological defense mechanisms that promote inaction within the anti-speciesist discourse and political activity by alienating a part of the audience whose reaction is offense (Mika, 2006). This can prevent people from broadly exploring other arguments (environmental, food justice, human health) that resonate with them and encourage them to move towards veganism and plant-based diets. At worst, this can result in a backlash against the organizations and a loss of credibility of the whole movement (Mika, 2006, p. 921), greatly reducing one's predisposition to be a part of it. On the other hand, some studies have also shown their effectiveness in raising awareness and changing speciesist attitudes towards nonhuman animals (Scudder & Mills, 2009). The next section collects the main existent empirical studies on anti-speciesist visuals designed to produce moral shock, and some risks and considerations on the use of moral shocks are explored in the discussion.

Research on Effective Anti-Speciesist Visuals

Amongst the main research conducted on the effectiveness of images portraying nonhuman animals, it is important to highlight Robin L. Nabi's (1998) examination of the relation between disgust and attitude-change in the case of animal experimentation. Nabi (1998) used an experimental research methodology with 134 students attending one of two Northeastern universities. The participants were exposed to four versions of a video message addressing the issue of experimental medical research on animals with the same audio and structure "but different combinations of visual affective intensity in the counterargument (the opponents' arguments) and rebuttal (the proponents' arguments) sections" (p. 474). The visuals included;

a) very graphic images of monkeys being inflicted with head injuries; b) images of monkeys in a laboratory setting; c) human babies with deformities and other sick people in the hospital as well as happy people presumably helped by animal research; and d) a researcher performing routine laboratory tasks. In every video, the narrator described the need for and benefits of animal research (Nabi, 1998, p. 476). Nabi's research suggests that "disgust can be the dominant emotion elicited by a persuasive message" (1998, p. 480) and that the exposure to graphic images of animal experimentation and the feelings of disgust toward them motivated attitude-change (p. 480).

In 2006, Mika examined the way PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) framed its advertising campaigns. Mika's research addressed the contemporary animal rights movement's framing by conducting focus group analyses of one pivotal audience: the non-activist population. Mika analyzed 13 different images that included Christian-religious content (allusions to Jesus's vegetarianism and Bible quotes), patriotic references (the slogan "proud to be an American vegetarian" with the U.S. flag), moral shock (the aforementioned comparison between farms and concentration camps and an image with "meat is murder" written in white and red capital letters with black background), absent referent (an image of a white thin nude woman with meat cuts drawn on her body and the message "all the animals have the same parts" and an illustration of a smiling pig with the slogan "meat's no treat for those you eat!"), two images of semi-nude thin and hegemonically attractive white and black women dressed in a vegetable bikini with the slogan "let vegetarianism grow on you" and an image of a peace symbol linking vegetarianism with non-violence. Mika classified the images according to their alignment to the frame categories of transformation, moral shock, extension, absent referent, and bridging (2006, p. 923). Her conclusion was:

> The only potentially encouraging result for PETA is that the moral shock ads caught the attention of nearly every discussant and the responses were notably strong. Some of the other ads went unnoticed or elicited only tepid responses. (p. 933)

The strongest negative reactions from the audience were related to the images designed to produce moral shocks: the religious and patriotic ads, and the image of a nude woman with meat cuts drawn on her body. These strong negative reactions had different foundations: lack of credibility and

opportunism—in the case of the patriotic advertising, lack of identification with the values of the ad, a perception of a faulty interpretation of the Bible in the case of the religious ads and a significant challenge to deeply integrated cultural beliefs in the case of the moral shocks (Mika, 2006, pp. 937-938). Mika's research leaves some of the big questions regarding the challenges faced by animal advocacy unanswered:

> Is it better to conduct strong visceral campaigns that, at least, initially turn people off or is it better to offer more innocuous, less personally threatening campaigns that might not produce any significant reaction? (Mika, 2006, p. 938)

For Mika, the question remained unresolved in her research. The discussants' struggle with their moral quandary may be resolved by not thinking about it, or maybe it "could represent the first step in a journey that will lead to joining the movement" (2006, p. 938). Another conclusion from Mika's research is the importance of carefully targeting the audiences and delivering the appropriate message to each target audience, especially in broad-based campaigns.

In 2009, Scudder and Mills directed research on the credibility of PETA's shock advocacy regarding factory farming. Done from the animal industries' point of view, Scudder and Mills's research addressed how PETA's visual campaign could be detrimental to their corporate profits. The video they examined depicts an undercover investigation on a pig farm: "it documented abusive practices showing workers beating pigs with rods and hammers, killing runts by slamming them to the ground, and allowing sick pigs to starve" (p. 163). They used an experimental methodology with questions on the credibility of the animal industries and PETA before and after watching the video (2009, p. 163). The sample was formed by 53 participants (51% female, 49% male) who were communication students from a public university located in "an area where agribusiness interests loom large" (p. 163), with an average age of slightly less than 21 years old.

The main results were that (a) PETA's moral shock video damaged the credibility of the animal industry, (b) "advocacy messages intensify already existing negative predispositions toward the animal food-processing industry" (p. 164), and (c) "the intense, negative nature of the video attacking the negative pig farming practices increased the credibility of PETA for the average viewer" (p. 164).

In his article *How Do Graphic Images Affect Animal Advocacy?* Hawthorne (2012) refers to research conducted by the non-profit organization FARM (Farm Animal Rights Movement). In it, three different images of a pig with different levels of explicit violence were shown to an audience: "a dead pig on a muddy slaughterhouse floor, a dead pig on a bloody slaughterhouse floor, a dead pig with its throat slit on a bloody slaughterhouse floor" (Hawthorne, 2012). FARM's study showed that in this case, the most effective image was the one with the least explicit violence. However, it is important to consider that in these specific pictures, the pig shown was not alive, and this fact could also condition the perception of suffering and violence towards him/her.

In contrast, the Humane Research Council (2012) suggested that violent images that create moral shock are successful in producing behavioral change. In this work, they examined which videos were most effective for vegetarian/vegan promotion in a sample of more than 500 people aged between 15 and 23. Regarding gender,

> women in this sample were significantly more likely than men to indicate that they currently "rarely" or "never" eat red meat, so it is unclear if this finding suggests women are willing to make more extreme changes than men (i.e., moving from regular meat eating to meat elimination), or if they are simply more likely to be meat reducers and so a shift to elimination is an easier step (Humane Research Council, 2012, p. 8)

The videos tested were *Farm to Fridge* (Mercy for Animals), an animal abuse video with graphic content which shows undercover investigations in slaughterhouses; a sequence from *A Life Connected* (Nonviolence United), focused on the environmental and human health benefits of vegetarianism; a sequence from *Geico Couple* (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine), which refers to weight loss and health; and *Maxine's Dash for Freedom* (Farm Sanctuary), a non-graphic visual which narrates the story of a cow who escaped from the slaughterhouse and was rescued. The Humane Research Council study (2012) aimed to discover whether it was more effective to focus the message on health, the environment or ethics; the relative effectiveness of graphic images; and whether it is more effective to promote veganism or advocate a reduction in the consumption of animal products. The amount of people who said they had learned something new

was greater in *Farm to Fridge* and *A Life Connected* (62%), and smaller in the other two videos, *Maxine's Dash* and *Geico Couple* (53–54%). An average of 30% of the respondents said they would like to have more information about vegetarian/vegan food; in this case, the percentage was higher with *Farm to Fridge* (36%) and *Geico Couple* (34%), and smaller with *Maxine's Dash* (27%) and *A Life Connected* (25%) (Humane Research Council, 2012). This research shows that explicit violent images and moral shock (*Farm to Fridge*) have a greater correspondence with starting behavioral change. Other less shocking approaches and frames, as the video about health and weight loss, also prompt change towards vegetarianism or plant-based diet in these experiments. However, the use of the health and weight loss frame to promote a plant-based diet alone doesn't question human supremacy nor speciesism, as it is based on self-interest. While this strategy may influence some audiences, it can also reinforce sizeism and body dissatisfaction while reproducing body standards of thinness, as noted by Wrenn (2016a, 2016b).

More recently, in 2015, Doebel, Gabriel, and the Humane League analyzed different pictures of farmed animals and cruelty toward them in their report *Which Farm Animal Photos Are Most Likely to Inspire People to Eat Vegan?* to discover which of them were more effective in influencing people to reduce the consumption of animal products (Doebel et al., 2015). In their survey, participants answered the same three questions about a series of 30 photographs which included portraits and "cute" images of rescued nonhuman animals of different ages, animals encaged within factory farms and aquaculture facilities and severe injured, sick or dead animals. The questions required them: (a) to assess how much each picture incited them to stop eating animal products, (b) to evaluate the suffering of the animal(s) in the picture, and (c) to consider how much the animal(s) in the pictures looked like humans. With these three questions and a 10-level Likert scale, they evaluated the effectiveness of the images according to four different parameters: the animal species, the degree and type of suffering shown in the image, the age(s) of the animal(s) in the photographs and their effectiveness depending on the appearance of individuals or groups of animals. The findings showed greater effectiveness of the images of sick, injured animals or those of animals caged in a tiny space, followed by the ones of animals being kept in tight confinement. As for species, the most compelling photos are those of pigs, followed by photos of chickens and turkeys—with the

photos of birds being the most explicitly violent ones on average. Images that show individual animals are considered more effective than the group ones and, finally, the photographs of young animals suffering are framed as more effective on average than those of adult animals suffering (Doebel et al., 2015). To put it visually,

> The five photos that scored most highly for making people want to stop eating animal products were: a photo depicting a pig in a gestation crate with piglets; a dead calf; baby chicks being killed in a grinder; dead piglets in a pile in a farm setting; and an adult cow with half of its face extremely disfigured. Photos of confined or crowded adult animals were somewhat compelling but not as much as photos of dead or disfigured animals, or young animals in dirty factory farm settings (Doebel et al., 2015, p. 10)

The same year, Carolina Bertolaso researched the moral shock strategy in Animal Equality's Facebook communication. Bertolaso (2015) conducted a two-phases experiment among 511 non-vegan females between 15 and 35 years old. She directed the research to non-vegan women because they are considered by previous studies the target audience of animal advocacy organizations. Participants were exposed to a total of six Facebook posts and their attitude towards animals and animal products consumption were measured both one week before and one week after the exposition. The methodology consisted of a 2 X 2 experimental design where the strategy of moral shocks and individualization were tested in combination with a focus on promotion or prevention (Bertolaso, 2015, p. 21). The "prevention focus" highlights responsibility and frames goals as obligations while the "promotion focus" emphasizes accomplishments and frame goals as ideals (Bertolaso, 2015, p. 10).

Bertolaso's research with the moral shock strategy included six posts, each dedicated to a specific animal product: beef, pork, chicken, fish, eggs and dairy (Bertolaso, 2015, pp. 21-22). The analyzed visuals included "an image of a visibly distressed sow enclosed into a gestation crate" (p. 22), brutal scenes of the traditional tuna slaughter in Italy, a "thirty seconds video showing the life of a pig from the birth in a gestation crate to the death in a slaughterhouse" (p. 23), "a five seconds video […] showing the process through which newborn male chicks are ground up alive in the egg industry" (p. 23), "a seventy seconds video showing images from investigations of

Animal Equality in several European slaughterhouses" (p. 23), and a "one minute video revealing the process through which in the dairy industry newborn calves are systematically taken away from their mothers" (p. 23). Bertolaso concluded that the Facebook posts combining moral shock and promotion focused messages were the most effective for reducing female young participants' consumption of animal products (p. 45).

From this empirical research into anti-speciesist communication, it is worth noting that the use of explicit violent images and moral shock were mostly effective in animal liberation activism. However, these studies are still not extensive enough to provide a basis for a meta-analysis, and more empirical research on the topic must be conducted. In my view, knowledge gaps that should be researched in the future include: (a) if the gender, class, age, and race of the recipient conditions the reception of moral shock, and how they do so; (b) how moral shock can be better complemented with other nonviolent visual communication strategies; (c) what audiences can be more adversely affected by moral shocks and what possible alternatives can be suggested for activists to persuade these audiences, e.g., children and parents, neurodivergent people; (d) the importance of moral shock for activist involvement and its role in motivation maintenance; and (e) the particular way moral shock reaches audiences in contemporary society with the rise of social media and a hyper-visual culture.

Discussion

As this literature review shows, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about the most effective images and strategies, and to know to what extent explicit images of violence towards nonhuman animals may be effective means of raising awareness of speciesist beliefs and attitudes, as well as promoting changes in them. In addition, there is still not enough information about what communication strategies were effective in the case of those who are already part of the movement, that is, animal liberation activists. As a consequence, strategic visual communication in animal liberation activism and the use of moral shocks are topics that still need further research if we are to obtain more accurate results. Nonetheless, a few conclusions can be drawn from our comparative analysis of the research conducted so far on the use of explicit violence in animal advocacy (for my own empirical qualitative research on the topic, see Fernández, 2020).

A relevant number of findings show a positive correlation between

moral shock or explicit violent images and positive change in the field of animal advocacy, as shown by Jasper and Poulsen in their comparison to anti-nuclear movements (1995), in Nabi's experiment (1998) on animal experimentation and disgust-eliciting visuals, in Mika's approach to moral shock in the PETA ads (2006), in Scudder and Mills's research on PETA's graphic video of factory farming (2009), in The Humane League Labs's report on explicit violent images (Doebel et al., 2015) or in Bertolaso's analysis (2015) of Animal Equality Facebook posts. These studies confirm that animal advocacy is a field in which emotions and persuasive communication, especially moral shock strategies, play a significant role in the promotion of veganism and the dissemination of non-speciesist ethics because of their potential to elicit audience attention and promote action, encourage activist involvement and moralize attitudes—especially in the case of the perception of disgust (Nabi, 1998; Herzog & Golden, 2009)

Bertolaso suggests that "a possible explanation of the efficacy of messages involving moral shocks is that moral shocks work at an unconscious level and are, therefore, able to overcome the rational barriers that people build to resist the idea that animals are not resources" (Bertolaso, 2015, p. 43). Graphic images may promote conscious or unconscious boundary blurring and crossing (Cherry, 2006) when the audiences can relate those suffering experiences with their own personal or near experiences of oppression, violence, and pain. This emotional experience can create a blurring or crossing of the symbolic boundaries established among human and nonhuman animals or different nonhuman animal species, such as those considered companions and those considered food.

However, as some philosophers and social scientists argue, the use of the moral shock frame for nonhuman animal advocacy involves some dangers and risks. This fact points out some ethical concerns for communicators. The moral shock strategy shows how the audience and society can take responsibility not just as the strategic utilitarian view of "means to an end," regardless of the costs to others outside the movement. Philosopher Elisa Aaltola suggests four main risks of using moral shocks and depicting explicit animal suffering: (a) the risk of aesthetics, which is related with the act of looking, and which could become aesthetic amusement and a form of spectacularization of suffering; (b) the risk of perpetuating moral wrongs, by desensitizing and normalizing violence; (c) the problem of privacy, which consists of the ethical implications related with the violation

of nonhuman animals' subjectivity and personhood by representing them in a violent context; and (d) the compassion fatigue generated in the audiences, which the author defines as "the wearing out of the ability to care about suffering" (Aaltola, 2014, p. 28) and could be linked to continuous exposure to shocking images.

Aaltola (2014) argues that the existence of these risks does not necessarily mean that moral shock must be completely rejected. On the contrary, they bring us to underline the importance of promoting the personalization of nonhuman animals in the images and of providing a context that prevents the denial of nonhuman animal agency (Hribal, 2010) and to accompany extreme images by efforts to promote action in response to the realities shown in those images (Aaltola, 2014, p. 29; Bertolaso, 2015). It is a good idea to announce the explicit content of images when possible, as a strategy of authenticity and respect for the audience (Freeman, 2009a). This would be especially relevant when the audiences exposed to such visual contents play a more indirect role in causing harm (Freeman, 2009a, p. 281) or when they are likely to struggle to manage the emotions triggered by the images, especially children and people with diverse mental functionality. In the case of children, an extra problem exists if the families get angry at the animal advocates because they consider their children to have been traumatized. This can promote hostility toward animal advocates and backlash towards their anti-speciesist message.

In sociologist Nik Taylor's approaches to media depictions of violence towards nonhuman animals, she notes that the use of moral shocks can run the risk of perpetuating the moral consideration of nonhuman animals as "others," which is directly opposed to breaking the speciesist mindset and could reinforce the human/animal binary and perpetuate the representation of other animals as humiliated and objectified. In her own words:

> Because most nonhuman animals start from a point of being Other, it will be necessary to ensure that any portrayals of violence done to them, and/or images of their dead bodies if deemed necessary, are not done in such a way as to extend the perceived divide between "us" and "them." In other words, their deaths, their bodies, and the violence inflicted upon them, cannot become merely spectacle (Taylor, 2016, p. 50).

The spectacular society and the spectacularization of suffering are constant worries related to the use of moral shocks. In his analysis of this concrete

problem in the animal rights context, Lowe referred to the concept of "the spectacular society," a hyper-mediated context in which persuasive visual stimuli are overwhelming. In the spectacle, showing the realities of nonhuman animals by argumentation supported by scientific evidence is not strategically sufficient, but a kind of inertia, which he called the "Enlightenment faith" (2008, p. 2). Lowe used the concept "sociological warfare" to describe the need for advocacy to disrupt the public's moral imagination about nonhuman animals and the treatment they receive (2008, p. 1). In his words:

> The term "sociological warfare" is intended to highlight the necessarily mediated persuasive efforts that animal rights activists and other liberation movements engage in that parallels state-based forms of persuasion like propaganda and psychological warfare, but also to emphasize that the ultimate goals of these efforts [sic] (are) to offer an alternative vision of current social arrangements. (2008, p. 4)

In the same vein as Lowe (2008), communication scholars and researchers describe the context in which animal liberation activists work as a hyper-visual spectacular context characterized by the "iconography of oppression" (Cronin & Kramer, 2018) and the speciesist ideology. In addition, Bertolaso's research underlines Moscovici's "minority influence theory" (1976), which shows the important difficulties that minority social groups face for their messages to be heard (Bertolaso, 2015, p. 6). Molloy's work on the popular media's representation of animal rights activists make clear how activists' media representation is biased and mixed: activists sometimes appear as "animal lovers," while other times they are represented in a stigmatized way as "terrorists" (2013, p.74, 75).

In this context of media marginalization of speciesism and animal liberation activism, Aaltola's ethical analysis (2014) complements the empirical conclusions drawn from the literature reviewed in this paper. She considers that, despite its risks, shock tactics are needed to produce "cracks" in the strongly anthropocentric cultural ethos and to bring light to hidden animal suffering (2014, p. 28). Following Freeman's examination of social movements communication ethics and its compatibility with public relations communication ethics (2009a), moral shock can be ethically justified as means to raise awareness of the situation of those who are worse off— nonhuman animals—and to promote individual and social changes that stop

the speciesist violence towards them. Freeman holds that the value of social responsibility should rank higher than the principle of respect in terms of respecting audience values (Freeman, 2009a, p. 282). These ethical guidelines "should also recognize the interests and integrity of the social movement organization's 'victims' or disadvantaged parties, and how they deserve respect as primary moral claimants" (Freeman, 2009a, p. 282).

Considering that the explicitness of the violent realities of nonhuman animals can make people look away, it is necessary to find effective frames to explain these experiences of nonhuman animal suffering, as well as other frames that emphasize their personhood, individuality, sentience and complex emotions, also in a positive and nonviolent way. As argued by Cronin and Kramer (2018), photographs of nonhuman animals that live in animal sanctuaries let us "imagine how the absence of fear and suffering might feel" (p. 90).

In summary, it seems reasonable to conclude that animal advocacy can benefit from the strategic use of moral shock through explicit violence in visual communication campaigns to trigger changes towards non-speciesist attitudes, cross and blur symbolic boundaries among animal species and promote alternatives to animal exploitation, such as veganism. Much more empirical research, however, is needed. This research would ideally confirm the effectiveness of moral shock and provide activists with a better understanding of how it works with emotions, as well as knowledge of what to avoid for reducing the risks of using it.

As an unfinished conclusion, this review points to the extensive possibilities of moral shock to break with the silencing of speciesism and nonhuman animals' voices by reaching people's emotions. Moral shock may be the necessary stimulus that breaks media speciesist ideology (Nibert, 2002; Khazaal & Almiron, 2016), its iconography of oppression (Cronin & Kramer, 2018), and shift the species-based moral boundaries (Cherry, 2010). Moral shock may be, therefore, a noted communication strategy for transforming the "spectacle of real suffering" (Lowe, 2008, p. 22).

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