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Farm animal welfare, responsible business & the role of big brands: the politics of sight

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Why Farm Animal Welfare (FAW)?

- Contemporary public concerns about FAW began to increase after the publication of Ruth Harrison’s (1964) book Animal Machines in the early 1960s.
- In recent decades, increasing public anxiety over animal farming epidemics (BSE, FMD and Avian Flu) has reinforced consumer concern for food safety and the welfare of farmed animals. (Miele and Lever 2014; Lever and Evans 2016)
Consumer concerns & FAW

- As consumer concerns have continued to grow, many food companies and corporate retailers have started to address FAW in their corporate social responsibility strategies (Lever and Evans 2016).
- Within the new markets for FAW friendly products that have emerged, improving FAW has often been presented as having mutually beneficial outcomes for food businesses, NGOs and consumers (Miele and Lever 2013).

The business case for FAW

- Large retailers and corporate actors use FAW to protect their brand by ensuring the integrity of their products, differentiating product ranges & communicating this to consumers (Miele and Lever 2013; Lever and Evans 2016).
- The business case for FAW has thus grown considerably and this has led to the emergence of the Business Benchmark on Farm Animal Welfare (BBFAW) (www.bbfaw.com).
I knew that FAW is linked to sustainability in many different ways and I was intrigued to know why it wasn’t considered in this context.  

**FAW and Sustainability**

Just as it’s argued that big brand companies engage very narrowly with sustainability to pursue growth and profits at the expense of environmental sustainability (Dauvergne and Lister 2013), in this paper I argue that many global food companies engage very narrowly with FAW.

What’s the evidence for this?

- Research I’ve been involved shows that many consumers link FAW to broad range of ethical and environmental issues linked to health, wellbeing, food safety and food quality (www.welfarequality.net)
- But this was not evident amongst companies in BBFAW!

**FAW and Sustainability in BBFAW**

- In 2014 BBFAW (Amos and Sullivan 2014) found that many companies do not provide regular updates on FAW practice and performance in the same way that they do for other sustainability issues such as climate change
- A year later (Amos and Sullivan 2015) it was reported that many companies report randomly on FAW, do not see links with wider sustainability agendas and have no understanding of why they are engaging with FAW
- While some companies discuss issues such as ‘food sustainability’, BBFAW found that many are not clear about whether or how FAW fits into this wider discourse (Amos and Sullivan 2015).

The ‘politics of sight’

- As we become more ‘civilized’, Elias (2012) argues that we push things that ‘offend’ us behind the scenes of everyday life into the collective unconscious
- Take for example, the issue of animal slaughter
- During the 18th century, slaughter was an everyday sight on urban streets. Over the last 250 years, however, the practice of slaughter has slowly disappeared from view
- Large public abattoirs replaced small private slaughterhouses on city streets, before they too were pushed out to the urban fringe where they could no longer offend ‘civilized sensibilities’ (see also Otter 2008; Vialles 1994).
As I’ve indicated already, many consumers link FAW to a broad range of ethical and environmental issues!

Research suggests that the cognitive dissonance experienced by meat eaters can be mitigated by focusing on the more ‘humane’ aspects of animal production (Bray et al. 2016).

Research also finds that the complexity of the issues involved means that consumers rarely make links between meat eating and issues such as climate change (Cole et al. 2009).

The political implications of the ‘politics of sight’ have not yet been fully realised (Pachirat 2011) and I argue that the continuing consumer distancing from the realities of industrial livestock production through responsible FAW management is problematic for environmental sustainability.

While some food companies now provide more information on FAW than they once (e.g. free range eggs and chickens), from reading BBAFW reports it seems clear that the more troubling aspects of FAW and meat production remain largely hidden from view!

The spectacular rise in the number of animals slaughtered globally in the half century since FAW first became a public concern in the early 1960s (Harrison 1964) illustrates both the scale of this expansion and the problem at hand (Weis 2013).

Only 8 Billion animals were slaughtered for food globally in 1961, yet by 2010 this figure had reached 64 billion!

This is expected to rise to 120 billion by 2050, and most of these animals will be raised under intensive systems of production with poor FAW (Weis 2013).

During the same period (1961-2010) greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from global beef cattle, chicken and pork production increased by 59%, 89% and 461% respectively (Caro et al. 2016).

While we need to reduce GHG emissions this is no easy task. In some production systems reductions can be achieved by improving FAW, while in other cases the reverse is true.

My conclusion is that the ‘politics of sight’ restricts consumer understanding of the links between FAW and environmental sustainability.

And that this gives global food companies the space to pursue responsible FAW management without raising consumer concerns to a point at which it will impact sales and profits!

But public pressure to address GHG emissions is increasing and global food companies need to start discussing and considering these issues if we are to address environmental sustainability.