

## 76. Choosing Effective Frames to Communicate Animal Welfare Issues

*Miriam Sullivan and Nancy Longnecker*

Science Communication Program, Faculty of Life and Physical Sciences,  
The University of Western Australia  
Miriam.sullivan@uwa.edu.au

**Abstract.** Animal welfare organisations use multiple communication frames, but it is unclear which ones are most effective in promoting attitudinal and behavioural change. This paper reviews framing techniques that draw on shocking imagery, measures of animal intelligence, societal norms and celebrity promotion. Societal norms and celebrity promotions have the greatest potential to modify attitudes and behaviour as they are accessible and relevant to the general public, unlike frames promoting animal intelligence. Shock frames are also effective, but should be avoided as they may provoke audience backlash and reduce the credibility of the organisation.

Keywords: Animal welfare, Celebrity, Framing, Social norms

### Introduction

Most societal and scientific issues can be approached from different viewpoints, emphasising different values and considerations of the same essential argument. Choosing a single viewpoint for communicating an issue is known as framing and can have significant effects on the way in which the audience responds (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Animal welfare is a good case study for studying the influence of framing, as it is an issue that has an extremely broad potential audience who hold conflicting values and viewpoints.

Animal welfare is highly valued by the general public (Bennett, 1998), but most people lack knowledge about specific welfare topics (Tawse, 2010). In theory, this means that there is a large audience who are prepared to act on animal welfare issues if the relevant organisations can communicate their message effectively.

It is important to note the difference between animal rights and animal welfare. Animal rights philosophy argues that animals have rights and should therefore not be used by humans for any purpose (Regan, 2004). Animal welfare considers animal use acceptable as long as it is done humanely (Carenzi & Verga, 2009; Dawkins, 2006). For example, an animal rights activist might boycott meat entirely, whereas a person who values animal welfare may seek out free-range products rather than factory farmed animals. This more moderate viewpoint asks people to make small changes to their consumer behaviour, a much realistic communication goal than the major lifestyle changes required by animal rights groups (Mika, 2006).

Both animal rights and animal welfare societies have a long history of using shocking images to raise awareness of animal suffering. For example, past advertisements have included graphic depictions of face-branding cattle, euthanized animal shelter kittens, and blood pouring from a fur coat (Jones, 1997).

Yet shock tactics may be counterproductive, distressing viewers but leaving them unwilling or unable to act on their emotions. This effect has been observed in climate change campaigning, where negative fear-laden frames are thought to disempower the audience and fail to encourage deeper engagement (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Likewise, humanitarian charities are finding that people can become overwhelmed and seek to justify their apathy by questioning the validity of aid organisations (Seu, 2010).

Negative framing in political advertising has been shown to produce a backlash against the attacker (Jasperson & Fan, 2002), but even more of a concern is that long-term negative campaigning can reduce public trust in the government and the political system (Lau, Sigelman, & Rovner, 2007). Consequently, it is important to consider whether shock frames are a useful tool for animal welfare activists or whether their continued use may lower the credibility of the entire movement.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to review common frames in animal welfare and develop predictions of their efficacy.

### Animal Welfare and Moral Shocks

Animal rights activists and previous researchers have concluded that shock tactics are their most powerful tool, eliciting audience attention and prompting action. University students exposed to depressing, negative images of dogs were willing to donate more money and time than if exposed to a warm, happy dog (Haynes, Thornton, & Jones,

2004). Jaspar and Poulsen (1995) found that most members of animal rights groups were recruited through shocking images and literature.

However, there are some important drawbacks to using a shock frame. Apart from the fact that overly explicit images are frequently banned or refused by advertisers (PETA, 2010), shock frames may only appeal to a limited segment of the population. Animal rights groups are predominantly made up of women – over 70% in most groups (Herzog, 2007) – who are non-religious college graduates (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995; Mika, 2006). The frames which are effective for this group may alienate others (Mika, 2006).

Many consumers may simply avoid or switch-off to advertisements that they find emotionally distressing. Studies demonstrating the effectiveness of shock frames are normally conducted on captive participants (eg. Haynes, et al., 2004), but a more realistic situation is described by advertising creative director Andy Firth who said,

You can see animal welfare ads a mile off. A sad looking animal and you already know what it's about. Consequently, you choose not to read it. You already know how it will make you feel. (Duncan, 2008)

The counter productive nature of shock tactics has been observed in animal welfare campaigns. Mika (2006) looked at morally shocking advertisements for vegetarianism and found that non-activists had a nearly unanimously negative reaction. Many people were offended and expressed reduced support for the advertiser.

In summary, negative shock framing may be effective at attracting attention, but also risks alienating large sections of the audience. As such, it is only a worthwhile communication strategy if there are no viable alternative frames.

### **Framing Animals as Intelligent Beings**

One strategy growing in popularity amongst animal welfare organisations is to frame animals as intelligent beings. The information used in these frames is normally based on sound, scientific research in animal cognition. For example, the Animals Australia 'Free Betty' campaign against battery eggs states that a chicken, 'can recognise over 100 of her friends by their facial features' and that her calls, 'communicate a wealth of information' (Fig. 1); both claims are supported by research (Bradshaw, 1991; Evans & Evans, 1999).

Although the Free Betty campaign still makes use of graphic imagery, the dominant frame is that chickens are intelligent and therefore worthy of our care. This line of thinking is also popular in the scientific literature. The argument runs that suffering can only be present if you are consciously aware of it. Therefore, we do not need to be concerned for the welfare of animals that do not experience pain and have low mental capacity. Once there is reason to suspect that an animal is sentient than we have a moral imperative to safeguard their welfare (eg. Broom, 2007; Brydges & Braithwaite, 2008).

On the surface, the lay public seems to agree with the scientific consensus; people who have a higher level of belief in animal intelligence are less likely to support the use of animals by humans (Knight, Vrij, Cherryman, & Nunkoosing, 2004). However, evidence suggests that people attribute intelligence to animals they already like, such as cats and dogs, but do not necessarily decide to protect animals they discover to be intelligent (Knight & Barnett, 2008).

People who deal with dilemmas about animal intelligence, such as working with laboratory rats while simultaneously keeping a pet rat, may even justify their behaviour and reduce emotional conflict by crediting some individuals with being special or smarter compared to the rest of the species (Knight & Barnett, 2008; Serpell, 2009).

Effective frames are easily accessible and resonate with the existing beliefs of the audience (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The frame of farm animals as intelligent creatures meets neither of these criteria; it is an unfamiliar concept to most people and contradicts popular beliefs. Additionally, people seem to be adept at mentally manipulating information about animal intelligence to suit their behaviour.

Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that long-term promotion of intelligence frames, coupled with educational programs, can change social perceptions of some species (Goedeke, 2004). However, if this is the ultimate aim of the communication strategy then it might be more efficient to target social norms directly.

### **Framing Animal Welfare as a Social Norm**

People usually behave according to their beliefs about what is considered normal and acceptable within society (reviewed in Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Social norms are a powerful driver of human behaviour, affecting everything from participation in recycling to reducing binge drinking and the extent of their effects are probably still underestimated (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008).

Because norms are important for building relationships with others and constructing self identity (Cialdini &



Goldstein, 2004) they are immediately accessible and relevant to an audience, making them an effective communication frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007). For example, the most important factor in determining if dog owners would take part in recommended activities such as obedience training were their beliefs about the expectations of friends and family (Rohlf, Bennett, Toukhsati, & Coleman, 2010).

Social norms are also important for influencing donations; men gave more money to a public radio station when they received descriptive information about the amount most people gave (Croson, Handy, & Shang, 2010). This is potentially important for animal welfare organisations as men are generally less sympathetic to animal welfare compared to women (Herzog, 2007). Men and women also differ in the type of animal abuse they engage in, with men more likely to violently attack animals while women more often hoard and neglect animals (Herzog, 2007). It may be useful for animal welfare organisations to separate these aspects of animal abuse and run campaigns using social norm framing to target men and traditional shock frames to target women.

The RSPCA is one of the most credible and well-known animal welfare organisations in the UK and Australia (Hughes, 1995). Their advertisements emphasize the social acceptance of animal welfare goals and encourage people to become a supporter (see Fig. 2 for an example). Like many social movements, animal welfare and rights are heavily involved in Web 2.0 and internet networking which provides them with a cost-effective method of reaching a broader range of people (Loader, 2008). There is little information on how internet communities provide information and construct social norms. However, recall of political information was increased in students who friended a politically- orientated profile on Facebook (Teresi, 2009).

### **Celebrity-based Frames**

Another aspect of social norm framing is the use of celebrities as role models and promoters. It is accepted within the advertising industry that associating a product with well-known and attractive celebrities can increase sales

(Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008). The key factors in determining the success of a campaign are the credibility of the celebrity and that the celebrity and product are well-matched (Till, Stanley, & Priluck, 2008). Both factors are important in ensuring the frame is accessible and pertinent to the audience.

PETA is especially renowned for using celebrities (eg. The Daily Telegraph, 2010) but the effectiveness of their approach is questionable. Going for quantity over quality, PETA celebrities often have no direct link to animal welfare and are portrayed in a sexualized fashion. This has raised questions about the credibility of the organisation and generated feminist debates (Deckha, 2008).

A better example of effective use of celebrity can be seen in Jamie Oliver's television phenomena 'Jamie's Fowl Dinners' and the follow-up 'Jamie Saves Our Bacon' (Klein, 2009; Van Someren & Ward, 2008). As a celebrity chef, Jamie Oliver is well matched to encourage consumers to cook using free-range animal products (Gerodimos, 2008). News outlets hailed 'Fowl Dinners' as an unqualified success, claiming it increased sales of free-range chicken by 35% (Hickman, 2008). Although it is yet to be shown whether the impact was long lasting, consumer associations with celebrities are thought to be memorable (Till, et al., 2008).

### **Discussion**

Animal welfare groups have traditionally used shock frames to mobilize support, but there is increasing concern that this approach alienates the public and reduces organizational credibility. Frames focusing on social norms and celebrities are likely to be the most effective frames for encouraging positive attitudes and behavioural change. Both these frames are immediately accessible and relevant to the general public, unlike the frame of animal intelligence.

The next logical step for research is to test these predictions using field testing and experimental manipulation of frames. Such an experiment would have to be carefully designed; even simple manipulations of an image can have unexpected effects (Haynes, et al., 2004), while preserving an image and changing the framing text can lead to a disconnect between the words and the visuals (Nabi, 1998).

This study has important implications for the broader field of science communication. Communicators should be aware that, although they are effective, negative frames can result in audience backlash when employed for long-term campaigns. We also note the potential role of Web 2.0 social networking in the formation of social norms and an urgent need for research in this area.

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