

Animal Welfare and Social Media: Is the Internet an Ally of Animals?

Katarzyna Szpargala

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies
National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University

This essay examines the role of social media in animal protection. Animals dominated the internet. There are millions of cute and funny animal videos and pictures online. Considering this huge popularity of animals' videos and pictures online, it should not be surprising that activists and organizations will try to increase awareness among social media users about animal rights and welfare. Social media can be helpful, and its influence in the animal movement is obvious, but its impact should not be overestimated. Additionally, some of these seemingly harmless videos and pictures promote animal abuse, and viewers may unintentionally support harmful and illegal practices.

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Introduction

The internet loves animals. It seems pretty obvious that animal content dominated the online sphere, be it by the number of Youtube channels focusing on animals or the popularity of animal profiles on Instagram. Among thousands of cute and funny profiles, videos, and photos that aim to entertain, there are also profiles and channels that wish to increase awareness about animal rights and improve animal welfare, such as animal rescue groups or educational Youtube channels run by individuals or animal rights groups. By the number of followers, it is safe to say that these channels and profiles are not unnoticed or marginalized. For instance, despite its controversial reputation, People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has almost six million followers on Facebook, and the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) has Facebook profiles for multiple countries such as Taiwan SPCA or SPCA Malaysia.

However, the question is how efficient social media can be? Can social media improve animal welfare and rights? Nowadays, almost everyone has an account on one or two social media platforms, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of social media users even grew; in the past twelve months, over 500 million people joined social media (Data Portal, 2021). It is estimated that there are over four billion social media users worldwide (Data Portal, 2021). Social media are used for various purposes such as communication, entertainment, education and so on. Recently, however, more users decide to use their platforms to increase awareness and gain support for certain social issues and promote social changes. The online sphere, together with the offline sphere, became the place for activism and protests. However, there is also an increasing debate

about the effectiveness and sincerity of so-called online activism. Is online activism meaningful for social and political changes or is it just slacktivism? Are online activists engaged in social issues? Can they establish a collective identity or is it just an insignificant gesture? There are many reasonable doubts about the role of social media in political and social activities.

Some scholars argued that activism and social movements, similar to other aspects of our lives, have moved to the online sphere, and it is just a part of contemporary society; thus, it should not be rejected or treated as a nonsignificant part of social or political involvement. Moreover, due to the nature of the internet, certain social actions might reach a wider audience faster and do not need to rely on traditional media and their attention as much as in conventional methods, which contribute to political decentralization (Aji, 2019; Downing, 2018).

On the other hand, some voices argued that online activism, often called by skeptics *slacktivism* or *clicktivism*, has no real power or social effect, but people can feel good about themselves because they share or change their profile picture on Facebook to support a certain movement without much or any sacrifice (Morozov, 2009). Additionally, scholars in animal studies noted that social media might contribute to the increase of animal abuse as some users profit from the popularity of Youtube channels or Facebook profiles that promote animal cruelty or support illegal animal trade (Edes, 2019).

This article briefly analyzes the role of social media in animal protection. Social media contributes to raising awareness about animal issues and can be a supporting tool for animal activism but awareness alone is not enough to improve animal welfare. Simultaneously social media creates a hostile environment that promotes animal abuse and animal trade, which users may unintentionally support.

Is the Internet a Tool For Liberalization or Oppression? A Long-Standing Debate and Arrival of Social Media

The debate about the efficiency and role of the internet in the social environment and socio-political changes is nothing new. According to van Dijk (2006), "when the new media arrived in the 1980s, some people were talking about the 'pollution' of our social environment by the new media penetrating our private lives" (p. 2). Some of the early voices firmly demonized the internet, treating it as a wonderland for "pornographers, terrorists and political extremists" (Newey, 1999, p. 13). The tone somehow changed in the 1990s, and many of the dystopian views were replaced by more optimistic attitudes toward the internet (van Dijk, 2006). Early media scholars and internet enthusiasts believed that the internet would be an egalitarian space, where social norms and hierarchies would not be reflected (boyd, 2011; van Dijk, 2006; van Zoonen, 2001; Vickery & Everbach, 2018). It was also speculated that the internet would enhance democracy and provide visibility to marginalized groups and viewpoints; in other words, it was seen as a tool for liberalization (Newey, 1999). Thus, some early scholars believed that the internet and technology could be tools to overcome various inequalities and oppressions. This view represents the so-called technological determinism theory. Technological determinism presumes that technology strongly affects and changes our society. By doing so, it is also assumed that "technology can solve problems that larger social and cultural institutions of sexism, racism, and power have created" (Vickery, 2018, p. 34). However, as critical media scholars have noticed, the internet has become just another space where

hierarchies and power relations visible in our society are reinforced and recreated (boyd, 2011; Powell & Henry, 2017; van Zoonen, 2001; Vickery & Everbach, 2018).

In short, as much as the online sphere can promote positive social changes and give voices to marginalized groups, it can also be used to create a hostile environment and promote abusive behaviors. Nowadays, most scholars do not assume that digital technologies are inherently bad or good (Powell & Henry, 2017; van Dijk, 2006), but that these technologies should always be studied in the wider socio-cultural and political contexts, as well as in contexts of their production and consumption (Shaw, 2014).

This debate is even more noticeable with the growing popularity of social media. Social media has influenced society and affected socio-cultural and political changes. The question is to what extent.

There are numerous studies on whether the internet, particularly social media, enhances participation and involvement in political and social changes. According to Fuchs (2018), "social media is a kind of mirror of what is happening in society" (p. 385). Thus, people's social and political involvement can be visible through social media, but the extent of this involvement is complicated to estimate.

Some scholars argued that the internet harms social movements and the political involvement of people. For instance, the ties and relationships between members of socio-political movements are weak, there is also a lack of emotional involvement and hierarchical organization, which are needed in high-risk activism that challenges the status quo (Gladwell, 2010). Social media increases participation level and awareness, but as Morozov (2009) argued, even if the online sphere increases awareness, it is still not enough to solve the problems. Awareness must turn into actions while the online sphere complicates this process and lessens the motivation level to take actions (Gladwell, 2010).

Other scholars, on the other hand, perceived online involvement more positively. They argued that the internet might positively affect participation in social and political issues as it helps to mobilize individuals, for instance, by decreasing participation costs and requesting smaller contributions from participants (Cammaerts, 2015). It also allows faster and more equal distribution as more voices and views have a platform to share their opinions and information (Downing, 2018; Newey, 1999).

Nonetheless, online actions should be accompanied by offline activities. Social media might be an effective supporting tool for collective efforts due to its capacity to reach wider audiences in a shorter time. It also gives ordinary citizens and groups the possibility to increase their visibility without relying on mainstream media (Cammaerts, 2015). Social media also allows people to act globally and advocate for various issues worldwide (Cammaerts, 2015), although global actions are usually less efficient than local ones (Morozov, 2009).

Whether one supports or condemns online activism, animal protection organizations and individuals often turn to social media to advocate animal rights and welfare. Unfortunately, the same can be said about illegal wildlife traffickers and animal abusers.



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Animal Rights/Welfare and Social Media - Does Social Media Increase Awareness about Animal Rights or Promote Animal Abuse?

The beginning of the animal rights movement is often associated with Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* in 1975, but the movement began in the early 19th century when some started encouraging policies to reduce animal torture and exploitation (Aji, 2019; Munro, 2012). Early animal protection organizations and activists focused mostly on issuing policies to eliminate various forms of animal abuse (Aji, 2019). The debate and goal shifted in the 1970s as the philosophical foundation, based on Peter Singer and Tom Regan's concepts, focused on human and non-human relationships and animals' emotional sentiments (Aji, 2019). Nowadays, animal activists aim to improve animal welfare and conservation and eliminate abusive animal practices through various methods.

It is important to note that the animal movement is not homogenous; various groups have different agendas, goals, and philosophies toward animal rights and welfare. The socio-cultural and political background plays a significant role in the development of animal rights organizations and activism, so the difference between these groups has multiple sources. According to Munro (2012), there are three main orientations among animal protectionists, such as animal welfare, animal liberation, and animal rights, but they all "are united on the principle that animals are sentient beings rather than 'things' to be commodified as food, research tools, or sporting trophies" (p. 169).

Over the last few years, the internet became an important tool for animal rights protectionists, activists, and organizations. Considering the popularity of animals' videos and pictures online, it should not be surprising that activists and organizations will try to increase awareness among social

media users about animal issues. As Aji (2019) noted, "social media seems to have a significant influence in the process of forming the collective identity of sympathizers of the animal protection movement" (p. 395).

Animal shelters and rescue organizations often promote their animals and events, which increases adoption. Almost all shelters rely on social media as a fundraising tool, allowing for virtual adoption or general donation.

Animal protection groups also use their websites to increase awareness about animal cruelty and, in general, to inform people about animal welfare. For instance, Polish animal rights organization *Otwarte Klatki* (eng. Open Cages) uses Facebook and Twitter to document animal abuse and educate about animal welfare, mostly farm animal welfare. The organization aims to introduce social and legal changes in farm animal breeding and treatment through their actions. On their social media profiles, the online petitions and campaigns are promoted; however, to increase their impact on socio-political changes, online actions are organized along with offline activities.

As Morozov (2009) mentioned, increasing awareness is not enough to solve all the problems. It is the same for issues regarding animal rights and welfare. Social media enhances awareness about animal mistreatment, but it does not mean that more people take direct actions to prevent it. Animal organizations may have thousands of followers, but one click on their pages, and it is clear that they still need volunteers and activists to conduct offline actions such as documenting animal abuse, organizing protests, or meeting with politicians.

Social media might contribute to the awareness about animal welfare; however, it can also be used to glorify animal abuse and support illegal trade, especially in the case of wildlife animals. Most social media users have most probably seen videos and pictures of animals, be it companion, farm, or wildlife animals, that perform tricks or engage in human-like behaviors such as scrolling through smartphones or wearing clothes. Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube are full of these kinds of videos and pictures. Many of those are seemingly harmless, even cute and funny, but in reality, some promote animal abuse, and viewers may unintentionally support harmful and illegal practices.

Edes (2019), a primatologist, noticed that videos of primates on social media could be harmful and dangerous for animals and their environment. This is especially important for wildlife as social media has an impact on the perception of wildlife animals, such as slow lorises or chimpanzees, as being suitable for companion pets and decreasing the belief of the endangerment of these animals (Edes, 2019; Leighty et al., 2015; Nekaris et al., 2013).

It might seem that social media posts do not have any real impact on animals' environment and well-being; however, they may impact animal conservation as a reaction to these videos and posts are noticed by traders in the exotic pet trade and increase wildlife trafficking (Edes, 2019). Scholars argued that these videos and pictures affect public perception of wildlife animals, leading to approval of animal mistreatment. Primatologists agreed that posting and sharing videos and pictures showing wildlife animals as companion pets contribute to the exotic pet trade (Cole & Emerson, 2019).

Additionally, it is extremely easy to find videos on social media platforms that glorify animal cruelty. Lady Freethinker, a nonprofit organization, published a report on animal cruelty videos on Youtube. Searching by keywords such as dogfights, eating animals alive, and so on, tons of videos are

shown, violating Youtube's regulations (violent and graphic content and animal abuse are prohibited) and animal protection laws in certain countries (Lady Freethinker, 2019). Videos showing animal abuse have thousands of views, which means that some people are profiting from abusing animals; many activists and scholars called social media platforms on their inefficiency in monitoring and banning these kinds of videos and profiles.

Conclusion

The ongoing debate about the role and impact of the internet, social media especially, on the social movement and society has heated in recent years. It is hard to deny that social media is often used to promote animal rights and welfare. Animal protection organizations and activists turn to social media to increase awareness about animal issues and gain supporters. Of course, social media can be helpful, and its influence in the animal movement is obvious, but its impact should not be overestimated; online animal activism cannot replace on-the-street actions and campaigns.

Moreover, researchers also agree that animal abuse and illegal trade, especially in the case of wildlife animals, are increasing due to social media. Social media users may unintentionally support harmful and illegal practices. Edes (2019) mentioned *Five Freedoms* to help social media users gauge animal welfare in videos or pictures. The Five Freedoms were introduced in 1979 by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council and are recognized as basic standards in animal welfare. These Five Freedoms are as follow: 1) Freedom from hunger and thirst 2) Freedom from discomfort 3) Freedom from pain, injury, or disease 4) Freedom to express normal behaviors 5) Freedom from fear and distress

If any of these freedoms are violated, the video or picture should be reported and not shared. However, even if reported, it might still not be enough. As many noted, social media platforms themselves are not doing enough to prevent and monitor posts that violate their own regulations and national laws. Allowing these kinds of posts and videos to operate on platforms enables animal cruelty and escalates harmful and illegal activities.

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