


The media view of livestock production


And why they so often get it wrong, side with activists and act as if producers are the source of 'the problem'

Presented at the Alberta Farm Animal Care Livestock Care Conference
Red Deer, Alberta, Canada
April 4, 2008



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What we'll explore this afternoon

1. How activists are able to savage producers and packers
2. How the media runs with their rhetoric
3. How you can make a difference by fighting back effectively

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How activists are able to savage producers

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Industry played a role

- Industry gave its critics an opening with
 - A laser-like focus on performance
 - A concurrent neglect of welfare issues

» Industry's bottom-line bias wasn't bad – just unbalanced

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Media played an even bigger role

- Media is complicit in sensationalizing industry issues
 - Are reporters and writers ignorant? No, just uninformed
 - Minimal ag background, lack of interest, no big-picture perspective

» The same percentage of media members as the rest of the population have no connection with food production.

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Bottom line: What's missing?



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Let's re-define 'the media'

- Print media
 - newspapers
 - trade pubs
 - B2B magazines
 - scientific/professional publications
 - communication pieces from interest groups, activists, think tanks
 - newsletters
 - books

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Feedstuffs

Journal of Animal Science

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

The Seattle Times

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Broadcast

- Broadcast media
 - television networks
 - cable news channels
 - cable talk shows
 - news radio
 - talk radio
 - satellite radio










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New Media

- Online media channels
 - Web sites
 - ezines, eNewsletters
 - news and special interest blogs
 - social media
 - podcasts (audio and video)
 - chat rooms
 - YouTube









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Whether traditional or New Media

They constantly get it wrong. Why?

1. *They're uneducated.* Most media people don't care to spend too much time on background. They're busy, stressed and willing to rely on the data activists feed them.
2. *They're unaware.* Most media coverage fails to explore related issues impacting meat production. For example: the impact of food-safety regulations.
3. *They're unbalanced.* Most mainstream media coverage treats sound science and extremist rhetoric as if both were equally weighted perspectives worthy of identical treatment.

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The activists had a great game plan

- Activists learned to launch strategic, well-funded attacks
 - Where every issue's a crisis
 - Where industry is incompetent
 - Where inspection is inadequate

» Every issue is framed as 'evil, greedy producers' versus 'noble, crusading reformers'


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How the media runs with the activist rhetoric

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Everything is a crisis

- Example: The horse slaughter ban in The United States
 - » The ban is positioned as a way to curtail animal abuse:
 - ‘All three foreign-owned plants in the U.S. have been stopped from slaughtering horses, but the industry hauls American horses to Mexico and Canada. Horses are forced to endure an agonizing transport, and once they arrive at the plant, they are stabbed to death or suffer multiple gun shots to the head.’
 - *Humane Society of the United States, October 2007*



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Horses are people, too

- The real issue: Eating companion animals is wrong
 - » ‘Horses are as close to human as any animal you can get.’
 - *Rep. John Spratt (D-South Carolina)*
 - » The way a society treats its animals – particularly horses – speaks to the morals of its citizens.’
 - *Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.)*
 - » ‘I am grateful to Gov. Blagojevich for ending the shameless slaughter of these beautiful animals for the sole purpose of ensuring fine dining in European restaurants.’
 - *Illinois Rep. Bob Molaro (D-Chicago)*

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The unintended consequence

- Neglect, abandonment and suffering increased
 - Two Texas horse plants forced to close, due to a ban on the production of horsemeat, causing an increase in horse shipped to Mexico
 - Third U.S. horse plant in DeKalb, Ill., shuttered by Illinois legislature
 - *Annual capacity: 50,000 head*
 - *Increase in Canadian horse slaughter: + 50,000 head*

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Industry is incompetent

- Hallmark Packing beef recall: An issue of abuse
 - » ‘Not since Upton Sinclair’s 1906 book ‘The Jungle’ has the American meat market been this shaken [with] undercover video showing Westland/Hallmark Meat Co. employees forcing into the slaughterhouse animals that could not stand.’
 - *The Washington Post*
 - » ‘The meat industry a financial incentive to send unhealthy cattle to slaughter.’
 - *The New York Times*

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The unanswered questions

- None of the media explored the fact that USDA’s School Lunch Program purchases ground beef via competitive bidding. All that matters is who can deliver the lowest price.
- None of the media bothered to point out that downer cows are virtually the exclusive province of the dairy industry – not beef producers or packers.
- None of the media bothered to note that although some downers’ lack of mobility is symptomatic of an underlying disease, most downers are crippled due to dairy industry practices. They’re not sick, not diseased or not unfit for human consumption.

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Inspection is inadequate

- It's the basis of state level challenges to production ag
 - California ballot initiative (Prevention of Cruelty Act)
 - » "Prohibits the cruel confinement of farm animals in a manner that does not allow them to turn around freely, lie down, stand up, and fully extend their limbs. This will ban gestation crates, veal crates and tiny battery cages." [HSUS]
- It's fundamental to media coverage of recall incidents
 - Hallmark ground beef recall
 - » "An animal-rights group is suing USDA to tighten its rules on slaughtering sick or injured livestock [due to] the loophole that allows packing plants to slaughter disabled livestock for food, rather than having them euthanized and destroyed." [Wall Street Journal]

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Target practice

- Anti-hunting measures, based on 'animal abuse'
 - Alaska ballot initiative to ban aerial killing of wolves
 - "Aerial hunting involves shooting wolves from the air or chasing them down to the point of exhaustion and landing to shoot them point blank."

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Ending animal 'abuse'

- Prohibition against dog racing
 - Massachusetts referendum to ban greyhound racing
 - "Racing dogs are housed in cages barely large enough for them to stand up or turn around, and in the past five years, more than 700 dogs have been injured on the racetrack."

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How you can make a difference

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A new perspective

- The key is to re-frame the issues
 - As long as the debate is on the activist community's terms, industry cannot win.

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Animal welfare

- Activists frame their coverage of animal handling as an ongoing problem
- Media coverage centers on animal 'abuse' resulting from
 - Industrial production: cages, crates and confinement
 - Genetics, cloning and biotechnology
 - Humane handling, transport and slaughter
- » The frame is that 'Nature' is the ideal; any deviation is a negative



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Re-framing the issue

Animal welfare: It's about cages, crates and confinement

» *Re-framing:* Modern production systems are moving toward an ideal world that protects animals from disease, predation and temperature extremes, while allowing natural behaviors.

Shorthand: household pets

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Biotechnology

- Media stories generally fail to explore the complexities of biotechnology – it's 'good or bad'
 - Escape of GMO strains of crops
 - Dangerous impact of cloning on genetic diversity
 - Market closures due to 'public protests'
- » GMOs, biotech and genetics research as painted as departures from what Nature intended for crops and livestock. 'Natural' is normal; science is scary.



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Re-framing the issues

Biotechnology: Natural is normal, science is scary; the 'Frankenfood' syndrome

» *Re-framing:* We need biotech to feed the world, ramp up energy production, preserve wildlife habitat and maintain food security

Shorthand: Precision is biotech's key asset

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Food safety

- Foodborne illness and contamination episodes are pictured as preventable threats to public health
 - E. coli O157:H7 and other microbial pathogens in food
 - Chemical contamination (melamine in pet food)
 - Residues (allegedly) found from drugs and hormones in meat
- » Media always details victims' stories and incorporates activist demands for safer food.



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Re-framing the issues

Food safety: Outbreaks and illnesses are preventable (if only industry cared enough to make the effort)

» *Re-framing:* Microbial pathogens are ubiquitous, resilient and ever-evolving. Yet modern food production reduces the risk to historically infinitesimal levels.

Shorthand: 99.998% of U.S. meal occasions are problem-free

(Source: Council on Science and Technology)

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Production inputs

- Media tends to marginalize – if not demonize – all uses of antibiotics, hormones and other pharmaceuticals
 - 'Natural' meats are described as the ideal
 - Veterinary uses of production inputs are ignored
 - Health risks of 'tainted' meat vastly overplayed
- » 'Big Pharma' is portrayed as a greedy profiteer raking in cash at the expense of public and animal health



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Re-framing the issues

Production inputs: Demonizing the use of inputs


» *Re-framing:* Due to inputs, beef producers have doubled productivity since the 1950s, producing better quality beef on less acreage with fewer animals, saving arable farmland, reducing prices and increasing the availability of nutritious protein.

Shorthand: Twice the beef; fewer cattle

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Environmental damage

- Negative 'eco-impact' from production agriculture due to
 - Production agriculture depletes resources
 - Concentrated feeding exacerbates manure handling/waste disposal
 - Methane from cattle is causing global warming
- » To the media, meat production – at best – causes eco-damage that requires expensive, challenging mitigation efforts.



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Re-framing the issues

Environmental impact: Meat = global warming, resource depletion

» *Re-framing:* The truth is that there is tremendous synergy between animal husbandry and other segments of food production, and producers and farmers have the potential to be the ultimate environmental stewards.

Shorthand: Going organic? Hello, manure.

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Vegetarianism

- Negative 'Although most veggie foods require the same inputs, resources, energy and processing/transportation infrastructure, media focuses on 'benefits' of vegetarianism
 - Analog products flow through same production, processing, distribution system
 - Most livestock production globally occur on less-arable land
- » However, in most media coverage, there is an absolute failure to connect modern food production and processing with option to 'go veggie'



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Re-framing the issues

Vegetarianism: The new traditional diet is meat-free – we've 'evolved beyond meat.'

» *Re-framing:* Without modern science, technology, pharmacology, processing systems and distribution infrastructure, veggie lifestyles would be impossible.

Shorthand: Celibacy

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Why you must get involved

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Getting engaged on the issues

At the end of the day, every single member of the meat and poultry industries needs to be proactive

- Activists aren't going to abandon their cause
 - Media are going to educate themselves
 - Consumers aren't going to change their ways
- » Processors and purveyors must take on the challenge of gaining media access, re-framing the dialogue and altering the outcome of our national debate over food animal and dietary issues.

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How to communicate the message

- Formal channels
 - Letters to editor
 - Interviews, quotes, speeches, 'expert' opinion
- Informal venues
 - Community groups and events, churches, workplace
- Opportunistic occasions
 - Friends, family, colleagues, strangers

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Summary

- The media often 'gets it wrong' in its reporting on livestock production, and the results are detrimental to optimal use of the science and technology needed to advance agriculture.
- Many key issues (animal welfare, biotechnology, environment and food safety) require a response that is creative, proactive and vigilant.
- Industry participants can – and must – help sustain their businesses and markets by helping to re-frame the debate, re-position the issues and speak the truth to an uninformed media.

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Meat of the Matter

www.themeatofthematter.com



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Thank you.

Any questions?

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[Photo: Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame]



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