

ANIMALS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE EPOCH. ON THE IMPORTANCE OF VISUAL MATERIALS IN THE PRO-ANIMAL MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The article aims to discuss the importance of visual materials in the pro-animal movement in terms of their use in various areas of pro-animal activity, i.e. promotion of a plant-based diet or investigative activities. The starting point of the considerations is an outline of the issues related to Anthropocene and anthropocentrism (in the context of the current status of animals), and the characteristics of pro-animal activities, undertaken mainly by the third sector. Based on the analysis, it has been shown that visual messages perform an important role in shaping convincing messages, and therefore constitute an invaluable communication tool in the pro-animal movement. They have both a documentary and informative as well as a persuasive character, which is also illustrated by selected examples. In addition, the article emphasizes the role of the media in cooperation with the pro-animal movement, which is an important element of its communication strategy.

Keywords: visual communication, visual messages, pro-animal movement, Anthropocene

Introduction

The topic of animals and their rights is increasingly present in the social discourse. We constantly encounter various reports in the media about violence against these beings – primarily when it comes to the so-called companion animals (such as dogs or cats), i.e. those that live with humans on a daily basis. It is worth adding that most often these messages are accompanied by various types of visual materials.

While the issues of pet abuse arouse a widespread opposition and outrage in the society (as reflected in relatively frequent media coverage and public reactions to it), many acts of violence also affect livestock. We are talking primarily about various forms of cruelty towards animals bred on large-scale industrial farms, which for various reasons are still not particularly exposed in the social debate. As a consequence, a large part of the society is unaware of both the various forms of abuse that take place in industrial breeding and the scale of this problem.

A kind of response to this gap is broadly understood pro-animal activities. To

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achieve the best results, the pro-animal movement employs various types of communication strategies. One of them is the use of visual materials that significantly strengthen a particular message. Generally speaking, in the context of communicating such specific issues as the suffering of animals or promoting pro-animal behaviour (e.g. choosing a plant-based diet), visual messages take on great importance. In this view, they are an extremely valuable tool for conveying content, without which words alone would not be able to express a particular message, and at the same time, stimulate a discussion among recipients or encourage them to change their attitudes.

Anthropocene and anthropocentrism and animals – an outline of issues

As stated by Ewa Bińczyk, according to what various researchers of Earth science postulate, Anthropocene is considered a new geological epoch. It can be characterized by the extraordinary degree of transformation of planetary systems by man, which leads to irreversible losses, such as the loss of biodiversity. At the same time, the most serious challenge related to the Anthropocene is the risk of climate change caused by human activity, which includes, among others, greenhouse gas emissions or animal husbandry (2017). It is worth emphasizing here that the broadly understood reflection on Anthropocene has its own clearly anthropocentric character. Anthropocentrism is a way of thinking according to which man is at the centre of everything, and thus everything that is human is privileged. There are at least a few basic types of this anthropocentrism. One of them is ontological (metaphysical) anthropocentrism. According to it, man is a unique being, distinguished from other species, which is why he deserves a privileged position in the hierarchy of beings (Bińczyk, 2018).

As a consequence of the extreme anthropocentric approach, many ethical problems arise. From the point of view of these considerations, the most important of them is the attitude of people towards animals, which has taken on, in a certain dimension, the form of objectification or cruelty. Especially the fate of farm animals in industrial conditions is currently one of the most important ethical issues². Industrial breeding of animals is considered a cruel form of obtaining animal products. Industrial farms are distinguished mainly by minimizing costs while maximizing profits, which inevitably leads to the suffering of animals bred on them (Musiał & Fatalska, 2014). Generally speaking, “man cannot free himself from the anthropocentric paradigm, and the proximity or usefulness of the animal determines whether he recognizes its value or objectifies it” (Dzwonkowska, 2017). As a result, humans put value on the lives of animals, in the sense that they care for some species extraordinarily, while for other animals they want to bear almost no responsibility.

The answer to the asymmetrical relationship between men and animals in the current Anthropocene epoch is the pro-animal movement widespread throughout the world. As part of it, various actions are taken to improve the fate of these beings and at the same time to communicate pro-animal attitudes.

Characteristics of the pro-animal movement

Moving on to the reflections on the specificity of the pro-animal movement – identified in this approach with the concept of activism for animals – it is worth starting by referring to the roots, i.e. to what the term “activism” means. Social activism refers primarily to actions for social change of various nature. Activists’ actions can concern both specific decisions (e.g. of a political nature) and more general problems, which makes them more long term. Generally speaking, within the framework of activism, very differ-

² Other ethical issues, in the context of the discussed problems, are abuses towards the so-called laboratory or fur animals.

ent actions are undertaken, just as the factors that encourage people to undertake them are diverse (Besta et al., 2019). One of them is the activity undertaken for the benefit of animals, as a response to various types of problems. A particularly glaring problem in this Anthropocene epoch is the poor welfare³ of these beings and the various forms of cruelty towards them, which occurs especially on large-scale industrial farms.

It should be mentioned that the 60s' of the last century were a period of widespread industrial farming and other forms of exploitation of animals on a massive scale. At the same time, at the turn of the 60s' and 70s' of the twentieth century, a new reflection regarding the relationship between a man and an animal appeared which seem to be related to each other. It was then that the so-called Animal Liberation Movement was formed, which is associated with the development of a new model of human relations with animals by intellectuals from the so-called Oxford Group (among others, philosophers such as Peter Singer or Tom Regan). The aftermath of their work are the titles of books published on this subject at that time (Grabowska, 2014). It can be assumed that such studies have become, in a way, a "driving force" in the society for various pro-animal activities.

As Mamzer notes: "And although today animals are still the last social category for the exploitation of which there is social consent, this permission is shrinking" (2020). Undoubtedly, an important role in this area is performed by the broadly understood pro-animal movement, within which various methods of communicating with the environment are used, and one of the tools of this communication are various types of visual messages.

Visual materials in animal activities – an attempt to determine the importance

Today's culture, described as visual or pictorial, is not based on images alone, but is distinguished by a modern tendency to visualize or depict existence. In general, its novelty lies in focusing on the visual – as a space for creating and contesting meanings (Mirzoeff, 2012). At the same time, as is well known, images have enormous power, as expressed by the popular saying that a picture is worth more than a thousand words. It is impossible to disagree with it, because visual stimuli affect the recipients with much greater force than the text itself. And although the image has not completely supplanted the word, it is an indispensable part of it and, in a certain sense, replaces it and, above all, complements it. One example is represented by various types of visual materials used by the pro-animal movement, which have considerable value in its strategy.

It should be noted that the areas of activity of the pro-animal movement are diverse. Nevertheless, animal welfare issues deserve special attention, including, above all, investigative activities. In addition, an important area of activity of the pro-animal movement is the promotion of a plant-based diet (including the promotion of limiting the consumption of animal products)⁴. In general, these two paths of action are closely related, as expressed in the following words: "One of the goals that the modern animal rights movement has set for itself is to bring about a situation in which the society ceases to participate in the exploitation of animals for any purpose, and the vegan lifestyle becomes the norm, and not – as it is today – an unpopular exception. This is the goal that most organizations strongly agree on. What distinguishes them are ideas on how to achieve this goal" (Karbowski, 2014). Thus, it is appropriate to devote more attention to these two areas in the context of determining the importance of the visual materials used in them.

3 The most general understanding of animal welfare is fulfilling their basic needs (in accordance to their species).

4 It is worth emphasising that the promotion of veganism or vegetarianism has also a pro-ecological dimension. Hence, it has an important role in the context of the deepening ecological crisis.

It is noteworthy that one of the best ways to provoke a discussion in the society regarding the human-animal relationship is to document the realities of industrial farms in the form of photographic or film materials, and then to publish them on the largest possible scale (Karbowski, 2014). Investigative documentation is, therefore, an excellent tool in the fight to change the regulations improving animal welfare, changing company policies or modifying consumer behaviour. The films and photos created as part of the investigations are at the same time very mediagenic (Gogłoz, 2017). It is worth emphasizing that the media have an invaluable role in the effective communication of the pro-animal movement. In general, “the interest of the media is a very important argument in favour of using the investigation technique to provoke a social debate about animal production. For a long time, we have been living in a world in which the influence of the ‘fourth power’ on the surrounding reality is indisputable” (Karbowski, 2014). Thus, secret investigations, which appear in the media with the widest possible reach, help to raise public awareness and spark various discussions about the exploitation of animals and the cruelty associated with it. As a consequence, this may even contribute to the amendment of certain regulations or the liquidation of certain places of exploitation of animals, if there are grounds for this (Fernández, 2020).

On the basis of the above considerations, it can be assumed that effective cooperation with the media is an important element of the communication strategy of the pro-animal movement. The visual materials used by this movement are in this view a kind of connector with the world of media. As an example, let us use the footage that is the result of the investigation at the largest mink farm Poland. It was carried out together with the information portal Onet.pl (Schwertner, 2020). It should be emphasized that the subject of this investigation, within a few days, generated 45 broadcasts on television, 8 in the press, 37 on the radio, and 190 articles on various Internet portals. It is worth mentioning that this widely commented in the media recording has also become a contribution to the political debate on the welfare of animals, especially animals bred for fur. As a consequence, a bill was created, the so-called “Five for Animals”, which provided for, among others, a ban on breeding animals for fur in Poland (Mik, 2020).



Figure 1. Screenshot from the reportage on the investigation at a mink farm
Source: Schwertner J. (2020, September 8). Szokujące nagrania. Tak się produkuje futra w Polsce. Film "Krwawy biznes futerkowców" Janusza Schwertnera. Onet. <https://www.onet.pl/informacje/onetwiadomosci/krwawy-biznes-futerkowcow-film-janusza-schwertner-a/82wy9vs,79cfc278>

It should be noted that as part of the ongoing discussion on the published materials from this type of investigations, there is also a legal thread. Photos and videos obtained

in this way, e.g. from industrial breeding, are often used as evidence, which can be submitted together with a notification of a suspected crime committed by the breeder. At the same time, such actions are understandable to both representatives of the media and the public, and do not undermine the very desirability of the existence of animal breeding (Karbowski, 2014).

Access to authentic materials showing the conditions prevailing on farms (and presenting other problems related to the treatment of animals by man) is also of key importance in terms of the recipients forming opinions about industrial farms (Karbowski, 2014). In general, these materials have primarily a documentary and informative dimension. At the same time, according to Gogłozka, after conducting research by scientists associated with Kansas State University, it turned out that materials showing the suffering of animals also affect the decrease in interest in the consumption of animal products (2017).

Nevertheless, when it comes to promoting a plant-based diet by the pro-animal movement, it is worth noting that, in general, the way of presenting visual content on this topic is different from the classic investigative documentation. It is mainly about lifestyle campaigns. While the materials from the investigations are clearly marked by a negative emotional charge, visual messages promoting a plant-based diet have a rather positive overtone. One example is a multi-coloured billboard showing products of plant origin. This and other posters of this type appeared in 2019 on the streets of Warsaw (they were also available in Polish retail chains), as part of the lifestyle campaign “Roślinniejemy” (a game of words, with double meaning: becoming a plant and eating plants), run by the pro-animal organization Stowarzyszenie Otwarte Klatki (Open Cages Association). As it can be seen, an important role in this message is also performed by a catchy slogan – “Bez spiny jem rośliny” (“I got no beef with eating plants”, which is also the name of the campaign’s activity), which accompanies the attached graphics (“BEZ SPINY: prawdopodobnie* najlepsza roślinna kampania”, 2019). In general, visual messages published within this area of pro-animal activity are rather devoid of such elements that could arouse negative emotions, related, for example, to the suffering of animals or the consequences of excessive consumption of meat products. In turn, they point to the benefits of a plant-based diet (such as taste or visual qualities, which was presented on the mentioned poster), and thus arouse positive feelings.



Figure 2. Billboard promoting a plant-based diet

Source: Bez spiny jem rośliny. Dieta wege ma wiele odcieni i wcale nie oznacza hejtu na mięso. (2019, May 31). Noizz.pl. <https://noizz.pl/ekologia/bez-spiny-jem-rosliny-kampania-namawiajaca-o-ograniczenia-spozycia-miesia/r4smzsg>

In light of the above, a fundamental role in creating convincing messages is performed by vivid and emotional images that have the power to attract recipients. They facilitate remembering important messages. This occurs by interacting with previous attitudes and values, which in turn leads to the formation of cognitive and affective reactions. It should be emphasized that man reacts to imaging in a direct way, and experiences it in such categories as: emotions, intuition or mood (Thomas-Walters et al., 2020).

In general, the emotional layer is significant in the context of the discussed issues, because it provides visual messages with a, to a certain extent, persuasive character. It results from at least the fact that persuasion as a form of interaction refers not only to reason or will, but also to emotions (Osika, 2005). Thus, emotions seem to be a key issue in the visual communication of the pro-animal movement. Emotional visual messages have the potential, among others, to shape desired attitudes among the recipients (Fernández, 2020).

Summary and conclusions

All in all, communication with the environment through visual materials performs a significant role in the pro-animal movement. The various types of visual messages used by this movement often address difficult issues in such a way that is understandable to the widest possible audience. In addition, they encourage a discussion, very relevant nowadays, or taking specific actions, e.g. in the context of changing eating habits. Thus, they perform both documentary and informational as well as persuasive function. The use of visual messages is, therefore, important for the success of the activities undertaken by this movement.

To summarise, in pro-animal activities, which aim to⁵, among others, increase public awareness of various issues, the right (accurate) message performs a key role. The image is, therefore, an invaluable tool in communication conducted by pro-animal activists. All pro-animal campaigns are based on various visual messages, which, due to their huge potential, are used in various areas of pro-animal activity. In many cases, they are an indispensable element of a particular message. Generally speaking, in today's Anthropocene epoch, they are of great value in the battle to improve the living conditions of animals by showing their suffering and revealing various forms of violence. This includes visual materials (both photographic and film) from various investigations, which are increasingly appearing in the media, and the social response to them.

It is worth emphasizing that the subject matter presented in the article is an introduction to an in-depth research in this area. The strategic visual communication of the pro-animal movement is a subject that still needs further study to obtain a more accurate result. This is particularly important also due to the fact that the superiority of images over text (when it comes to retaining information) has long been established. It is believed that images engage deeper levels of semantic cognitive processing. Meanwhile, despite the significant development of research on visual communication in recent years, less research is being carried out on visual representations than on text analysis (Thomas-Walters et al., 2020). And this is despite the fact that the visual communication is recognized as the dominant contemporary way of transmitting content (Cicha, 2017).

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5 It needs to be mentioned that the main goal of activities undertaken by the pro-animal movement is also achieving systemic changes.

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