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The Invisible Suffering of Farm Animals in Traffic Accidents: As Sentient Beings They Are Low Ranked in Life as Well as in Death

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Farm animals killed in traffic accidents during transport are seldom described as individuals. Often the focus is on the traffic problems caused by accidents, rather than on the animals themselves. Further still, central to the way that these accidents are reported is that very few if any emotions or details are conveyed in the language used in relation to the condition of the farm animals. In this contribution, we discuss why facts dominate and suffering is sidelined when accidents are reported by the media, We suggest that this is in line with how humans reflect an inner scale placing farm animals lower than companion animals and in line with a long history of distancing ourselves from animal death.

Keywords: commodification, emotions, livestock transport, human-animal relations, media analysis

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INTRODUCTION

"All pigs had to be turned down after transport with pigs overturned" (Mundbjerg, 2021)
"Chaos as lorry carrying 170 pigs overturns on motorway" (Mills, 2020)
"Overturned chicken truck in Cork causes traffic delays" (Forde, 2017)

Headlines like these in newspapers or on TV are well known to us, not only in Denmark but in the UK (Mills, 2020), Ireland (Forde, 2017) and other countries with industrially farmed animals. Often this sort of news focuses on the immediate traffic problems caused by the accident – as seen recently in a Danish newspaper from 2021: *Chaos in the traffic on the highway: Pig transport crashed into the safety fence* (Rasmussen, 2021). Other accidents in Denmark with pigs during transport have been in the news during 2021. One morning in May, two trucks with pigs overturned in the same geographical area – this caused traffic problems and some pigs were harmed, the paper reported (Møller, 2021). Similarly, in late 2020, a pig truck overturned in Scotland and was covered online by 'Edinburgh Live' as 'A1 crash: Road closed in both directions following serious smash in East Lothian' (Stafford, 2020a).

Central in the way that these accidents are reported is that very little if any emotions or details are conveyed in the language used in relation to the condition of the farm animals. The focus is on facts, like the traffic problems, the weather, the driver's condition, the material damage, telling how many pigs that were killed or perhaps harmed, if these numbers are known, and possibly mentioning if veterinarians were called to put down any injured animals.

In this article, we draw on media portrayals from three European countries, specifically Denmark, Ireland and the UK. By using search engines and terms like traffic, accidents, animal transport, overturning, pigs, livestock (In Danish and English), we selected media reports from 2017 to 2021, including reports from Irish, Scottish, English, and Danish media outlets.

Our aim has been to reflect on the ways that the status of the animals bred for food affects and is reinforced by the way traffic accidents involving these animals are reported in the media. In no means a comprehensive analysis, rather, our perspective draws attention to the social norms that govern and are reproduced by such media portrayals.

Trucks transporting animals are a common sight on European highways. Millions of animals are on the road all year round – on their way to the slaughterhouse, between farms or on the way to be exported. For example, Denmark alone exports about half of the 30 million pigs weaned every year to other EU countries (Dahl-Pedersen and Herskin, 2021).

Every year, some of these trucks are involved in accidents. Between 2018 and 2020, 17 trucks with pigs were reported in turn over accidents and two were involved in other sorts of accidents. The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration published the number of accidents with pigs during transport between 2018 and September 2020 to the Minister of Agriculture, because a member of the Danish parliament asked for them. No numbers of how many pigs killed or injured in these accidents were given at the same occasion. (Anonymous 1, 2022)

Other accidents involving farm animals are reported in the same neutral way, like at the end of 2021, when a truck with poultry overturned due to icy conditions on Danish roads (Lassen, 2021). Or in Ireland, when an overturned poultry truck led to the reduction of a dual carriageway to a single lane (Forde, 2017). Again, the focus is on weather problems or traffic disruption. However, the readers are also informed that the driver is okay - and that, in the Danish case, the load of 7000 chickens complicated the clean-up as it took time to separate the living from the dead. Whereas in Ireland, whilst there were hundreds of chickens in the truck, the numbers killed were not specified. Thus, whilst some media sources reported the number of animals killed, much greater emphasis appears to be placed on the emergency response and the disturbances to traffic.

A study from Spain and one from the United States and Canada have similarly used media reports to describe the causation and consequences of accidents involving animals in commercial trucks (Woods & Grandin, 2008; Miranda-de la Lama et al, 2011). The analysis from the Spanish study indicates that the characteristics of livestock vehicle accidents vary according to species. One of the main reasons of accidents appears to be driver fatigue, which is due to several factors such as intense workdays, poorly designed route plans, or high levels of pressure from the companies. The analysis of accidents in North America also showed that driver fatigue was the most likely explanation.

In this industrialized farm era, smaller farmed animals, like pigs and chickens, are typically described as homogenous flocks or an indiscriminate group, rarely as individuals (Wilkie, 2010; Cudworth, 2015) This of course affects their portrayal in news media. No doubt, accidents like these somehow affect police, drivers and passengers in passing cars, the veterinarians who are called, and the journalist who reports it, but the emotional toll or specific details about the affected farm animals appear to be less explored in media portrayals. To return to the pig truck crash in the UK, an eyewitness recounted the experience in a related article, 'I couldn't listen to their screams, I'll never forget that awful sound, they were so distressed' (Stafford, 2020b). However, this article was titled 'A1 crash: Eyewitness tells of moment her husband pulled a man from truck transporting pigs' (Stafford, 2020b) and detailed how the three humans injured were not in a life-threatening condition.

The market-based categorization of animals bred for food of course reflects how language is used – and yet, many questions remain at the messy roadside of live animal transport incidents: Did the animals suffer? How were they harmed? Trapped and dying slowly? Smashed and dying instantly? Panicking and running away, dying later? Broken limbs? Broken wings? What was it like to put them down? How was it done? What is it like to be the driver and witness all of this?

However, if the victim is an individual animal on the top of the sociozoologic scale (Arluke and Sanders, 1996) like the dog that we all love, the scene in the media is often described completely differently. In a report from an incident about a dog running loose on a Danish highway in November 2021 (Mejborn, 2021), the headline read '*Dog put down by police in the middle of a highway: "It was not nice"*.

In the text we are informed, in detail, how the dog had run away from home, been injured in the traffic on the highway, was suffering from the injuries and the police decision to put them down by shooting them.

Furthermore, the paper cited the communicating officer from the police as saying: "We did it simply to minimize the suffering of the animal", stressing that it certainly was "far from a nice experience to put down a dog on the middle of the highway. Right in front of a lot of people who were in rush-hour queues as a result."

However, the police officer added, "Sadly, sometimes this is the harsh reality". The article concludes saying that the dog was wearing a collar and therefore it did not take long for the police to find the owner and "bring him the pitiful news".

THE SOCIOZOOLOGIC SCALE

The harsh reality is that most human animals, including scientists, police, and journalists, have an inner scale in which more-than-human animals are ranked. Arluke and Sanders describe how humans are at the top of this sociozoologic scale. 'The best animals', so tame they are almost like humans, come next. Also animals other than pets can be ranked as 'good', those in labs and farms for instance. Still, Arluke and Sanders categorize these animals as instrumental animals or tools, not regarded in the same way as pets, but as necessary cogs in the

wheel of society, reconstructed as they are as food or scientific data (Arluke and Sanders, 1996, p. 170).

When companion animals die, regardless of ownership, there is a general acceptance of mourning, as they are often seen as family members. In this connection it is obvious for media to talk about minimizing the suffering of the dog – and that this experience for the police is "not nice". Lab or farm animals, lower on the scale and further away from the human, are already objectified before death, transformed into objects, data, commodities (Lynch, 1988). However, using this scale, Arluke and Sanders did not mainly intend to focus on the destiny of the animals. Rather they used the "ladder of worth" - our ability to rank-order animals - to point to how the inconsistencies that follow may be a useful form of thinking about systems of social control that seek to justify inconsistent treatment of more-than-human animals (1996, p. 168).

NEUTRAL LANGUAGE AND FARM ANIMALS

Still, we find the scale on its own is useful, when it comes to raising awareness about how language is used regarding farmed animals. We are reminded that we constantly reflect this inner scale, in how we perceive and describe the deaths of farm animals who are killed, slaughtered, or euthanized both inside and outside slaughterhouse. As shown by Jepson (2009), whilst terms used for killing human beings are highly specific and differentiated on the basis of the motivation for killing, terms used for killing animals are general, carry little information about the act, and in many cases, interchangeable. This is in line with the words used in the Danish news about pigs killed during transport. 'Being killed' is used often but seldom other words come forward, giving the whole scenery a strange glow of something clean and controlled. As seen from a distance, no emotions shown, no blood, no screams, no smell, no panic.

Neutralizing the language in relation to farm animals killed during transport fits into a long story of distancing us from animal death, as already shown by Vialles (1987). She details how slaughterhouses have relocated from urban centers into anonymous sites far from the consumers, a physical distancing that consolidates a psychological distancing as consumers are increasingly detached from the animals we consume. This physical and psychological disconnection can be traced back to the early nineteenth century and the emergence of the city (Elias, 2000) where burgeoning middle-class populations and associated regimes of hygiene and sanitation removed death and killing from public view. Today, a disconnect between humans and the animals we consume continues to characterize our post-domestic societies (Bulliet, 2007). Thus, how we write about more-than-human lives and deaths reflects the policing of emotions that categorical hierarchies depend on. Such policing of emotion, how we should and should not feel is explored by Mc Loughlin (2019) in her emotionography of the slaughterhouse, where she details how Irish slaughter workers repress the emotional complexity of the individual animals they encounter so as to maintain the boundary between human/non-human animals. The hegemonic masculine ideals of unemotionality and pride mean that the emotions of workers as well as the emotional experience of the cattle they work with must be denied, diminished, or repressed.

DISCUSSION

With their neutral semantic choices, these media portrayals reinforce a commodified view of farm animals diminishing their status as sentient beings, which is further evidenced by the categorization of these stories as traffic reports rather than welfare cases. The need for the media outlets to increase engagement through 'clicks' might have shaped some of these headlines and how accidents are reported and as such, underscores the need for further analysis.

The same masculine ideals of unemotionality as detailed by Mc Loughlin (2019) could be at stake when the industrialized farm animals suffer or die outside the slaughterhouse in road accidents, as the story passes through the media meat mincer. However, it is worth noting that the sociozoologic scale does not homogenize all animals bred for food. Indeed, media portrayals of cattle-related accidents typically recount the incidents with much greater detail about the status of the cattle. Furthermore, they are often described as lucky to escape (Watkins, 2020) and cattle stories have even prompted discussions as to how the media should refer to animals, such as whether an animal is a 'who' or a 'which' (Corbett, 2016), a question that is highly relevant for academia, from animal studies to animal welfare.

Across Denmark, the UK, and Ireland, where we have drawn our examples, such coverage reflects a socially normalized policing of emotion that aligns with how these animals are categorized in post-domestic societies (Bulliet, 2007).

The lack of emotions, the non-specific details, and the emphasis on how this impacts on humans, from a threat to their safety to a headache at rush hour, the media is reflecting and reinforcing the commodified status of these animals which work to minimize the existential weight of their status as sentient beings. To return to the UK, animal rights activists called on the local council to erect a memorial plaque on the roadside where the lorry overturned (Horne, 2020) as it was revealed that 70 pigs died in the crash. What would it mean to have memorials for animals dying in crashes? Such a suggestion makes explicit the policing of emotions that disciplines how we think (and write) about who we kill and consume and how they live and die. We do not want to be too close to the individual animal, we are not interested to know too much about suffering. We should therefore ask ourselves, whether a memorial feels more extreme than countless reports of animal deaths devoid of the emotional mess of suffering and why exactly that is the case.

LIMITATIONS

We recognize the limits of the data provided that it only accounts for incidents in four countries and a limited data collection. However, as a comment that speaks to the theme of 'Securing Animal Welfare in Times of Crisis and Animals' End of Life Outside Conventional Slaughter', we hope to provoke a critical reflection on how the categorization of animals reproduces socially acceptable ways of thinking, feeling, and writing about animal death (Mazhary, 2021). As a comment to a theme, we expect that such a critical awareness to the reporting of traffic accidents including potentially large numbers of animals provokes deeper analysis of media portrayals and how these play a role in public understanding of welfare issues at transport.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

We have shared the task of this paper. IA contributed with Danish cases, EL with cases from Ireland/UK. We have from the beginning agreed on our argument and points of view. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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