Keeping it “inside the fence”: An examination of responses to a farm animal welfare issue on Twitter

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Abstract.

Social media sites have become common sources of information about current affairs, and animal activist organisations, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), use these networks as campaign tools to raise awareness against animal agriculture. The aim of this study was to understand how an animal welfare issue was discussed on Twitter in Australia. Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) data featuring key words and hashtags were initially collected between April and May 2014 to examine tweets on animal welfare issues in the absence of a triggering event. In July 2014, PETA released footage portraying ill-treatment of sheep in Australian shearing sheds, generating 9,610 tweets in 7 days including themes such as disgust, condemnation of the cruelty, and calls to boycott the wool industry. PETA’s social media campaign began 24 hours before conventional news media online, highlighting the role of social media in leading conventional media campaigning. Associated Twitter activity from the wool industry was limited. It is concluded that Twitter is not currently an effective medium for conversations between producers and the community about farm animal welfare, despite encouragement from industry. While there are positives for producers and industry to be on Twitter, including the promotion of their business and communication within their micro-publics, Twitter as a platform may not ideal for generating dialogue between producers and the community. Further research into how people engage with the content, not just through the study of retweets and amount of traffic, is required to understand whether social media has potential to change attitudes towards animal production.
Introduction

Farm animal welfare is a contentious issue in livestock production. Population growth, urbanisation, growing disposable incomes and rising global meat consumption are increasing demand for animal protein, raising considerable environmental, public health and ethical concerns about animal production (Verbeke and Viaene 2000; Rawles 2010; Gunderson 2013). Consumers are now actively encouraged to eat local, seasonal, wild, organic, fair trade or sustainable (Ankeny 2012) and consider whether food has been produced in humane ways. Consumers in the US (Olynk et al. 2009; McKendree et al. 2014) have extended concerns about food from nutritional attributes (i.e. protein or fat content), to production methods to limit impacts on the environment and animal welfare. Further studies have also demonstrated that consumers view high animal welfare standards during production as an indication that their meat is safe, healthy, better tasting, and of high quality (Verbeke et al 2010, Bray and Ankeny 2017). Taylor and Signal (2009) and Bray and Ankeny (2017) both highlight that Australian consumers are also considering the welfare of animals when purchasing food, however neither study examined actual purchasing behavior. Although the influence of concern for farm animal welfare on purchasing behavior is an important topic for further research in Australia, concern for farm animal welfare can also be linked with boycotting animal products (Rothgerber 2015) and community behaviors (Coleman et al. 2016) that also have the potential to affect the livestock production sector.

Consumers receive information about food production through the media (Hoban and Kendall 1994; Tonsor and Olynk 2011) and the role of social media in the distribution of topical information is of increasing interest, such as communication during and after natural disasters (Mark and Semaan 2008; Sutton et al. 2008) and online campaigning or protest (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). Australia’s National Farmers Federation (2013) has reported that it “seems clear that the well-resourced and coordinated campaigns waged by animal rights/liberation groups are having an influence on both consumers and retailers seeking a marketing edge”, although the impact of these campaigns on consumer purchasing behavior is yet to be examined empirically. The 2011 ban on live-export of Australian cattle following a television exposé and subsequent social media campaign is an example of the impact of the media on livestock production (Munro 2014, Schoenmaker and Alexander 2012, Tiplady et al. 2013). Concern about the impact of increased social media activity by animal welfare activist groups has led Australian livestock organisations to encourage producers to use social media, in particular Twitter, to “help consumers get to the real story, and to have real conversation – one that is genuine and free from
The use of Twitter during the live export issue (Rikken 2013) and ongoing use by activist organisations and their supporters, the early adoption by some members of the agricultural community to have weekly discussions on Twitter using the #agchatoz hashtag (Burgess et al. 2015; White 2011), as well as its emerging role as an important social media site contributed to the encouragement by industry organisations for producers to use Twitter (Phelps 2011). Hence, the aim of the research described in this paper was to explore the nature of communication about Australian farm animal welfare issues on Twitter by examining Twitter posts, known as ‘tweets’. In addition, this research aimed to explore the relationship between tweets and news media reporting about farm animal welfare issues.

**Background**

News media interest in livestock production is often generated after animal-rights groups initiate a campaign against an animal industry or practice or by some adverse event that compromises animal welfare (Coleman 2010; Schoenmaker and Alexander 2012; Tiplady et al. 2013; Munro 2014). While animal activism still utilises traditional campaigning methods such as billboards and protests, technologies such as smart phones and the generation of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter has transformed the means and opportunities for activists to communicate, collaborate and demonstrate globally (Monaghan 2014). However, social media does not work independently of news media channels. In 2011, the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s current affairs program ‘Four Corners’ aired ‘A Bloody Business’ which showed the mistreatment of Australian cattle in Indonesian abattoirs (Four Corners 2011). After this broadcast, animal rights organisation Animals Australia created a website titled ‘Ban Live Export’ which was immediately joined by the social networking site GetUp! who launched its fastest-ever petition campaign, receiving 35,000 signatures in just five hours (Schoenmaker and Alexander 2012). The RSPCA and Animals Australia websites crashed after receiving 2000 visits per minute. This social media onslaught was supported by traditional media and radio and the overwhelming response from the public is claimed to be the reasoning behind the suspension of live cattle trade to Indonesia (Munro 2014). This example highlights the importance of the relationship between social media and traditional media channels to drive significant social and political change.

Ahmed and Jaidka (2013) stated that social networks have created a “critical force in generating and disseminating information … especially in situations such as protests, where
public activism and media coverage form a key symbiotic relationship”. Monaghan (2014) suggests reasons for the use of social media include the low cost of online communication, enabling a powerless resistance to organise against a resource-rich and powerful opposition; the promotion of a joint identity across a dispersed population which can be mobilised by activists in pursuit of interests perceived as core to that identity; and the creation of communities that adopt issue-based communication to strengthen the participants identification with the movement. Bruns (2017) highlights that the main driver for users to connect on Twitter is shared interests, thus generating communities around an issue or interest. The building of communities on Twitter is clearly evident by the #agchatoz community which has been created because of a mutual interest in agriculture (Burgess et al 2015). More recently, these communities have been theorised in the research literature as "micro-publics" (Barbour et al. 2014; Moore et al. 2017). Unlike in traditional broadcast media, within social networks the individual is no longer part of a collective, but rather an individual connected to multiple publics. The generation of the micro-public is centered around the performative self, i.e. how the user decides to generate and portray their online identity (Moore et al. 2017). For example, someone who follows a particular football team is more likely to share content about football than someone who is an active follower of tennis and basketball. In each public, the individual is a node but they are simultaneously orbiting nodes in other networks. Although these networks overlap, they can still be thought of as having a central point which is the user’s identity, hence networking activity amongst friends and followers across these networks can be described as a micro-public (Barbour et al. 2014). Creation of the micro-public takes into account the practices of social media such as tagging, sharing, and mediated expression in forms of personal images, memes, and likes and dislikes. This idea of the micro-public brings into question how far information shared within these communities extends, for example whether information related to an animal welfare issues is being seen by those outside of the existing communities that already share a specific interest.

Twitter is a microblogging service which enables users to publish 140 character bursts of information termed “tweets”, enabling social interaction, focusing on sharing of opinion and information to followers (Kwak et al. 2010). Twitter also allows users to remain anonymous if they prefer. Users do not need to post information about themselves to ‘follow’ a user or be ‘followed’, which enables the site to focus less on who the person is and more about what they have to say. Twitter is used by 2.8 million Australians (12% of Australia’s population) (Bochenski 2014), and 338 million users worldwide (Statista, 2017). While there are fewer
Australians on Twitter than there are on other social media platforms such as Facebook, the active encouragement from the agricultural industry for producers to use Twitter (as described previously) makes this platform an important site for social research.

Twitter has the ability for users to search for information of interest with the use of hashtags (keywords prefixed with the hash symbol ‘#’, creating searchable text) (Bruns and Liang 2012). These hashtags provide a mechanism for conversation between users, even if the users are not following one another, and can also be followed by visitors to the Twitter website who do not have their own Twitter profile (Bruns and Burgess 2011, 2012). Bruns and Steiglitz (2012) distinguish three types of hashtags; *ad hoc* ones which transpire in response to breaking news or other events; *recurring* ones which users use to contribute repeatedly to a certain topic (such as #AgChatOz discussions); and *praeter hoc* ones which organisations encourage users to adopt when tweeting about events such as TV shows or a conference. However, Bruns and Moe (2013) further differentiate hashtags as *topical or non-topical*. They suggest that *topical* hashtags are used to contribute to discussions about a particular topic while non-topical hashtags (such as #beef or #fail) are emotive markers and can be applied to any tweet.

**Methods**

A social constructivist framework (Creswell 2013a) was used to guide the development of the research design and analysis. The use of social media in research is increasing and has advanced from several disciplinary and methodological bases. Novel mixed-method, interdisciplinary approaches for the qualitative and quantitative study of ‘big data’ datasets collected from social media platforms (Boyd and Crawford 2012) have tended to use custom-made research tools which are generally unavailable to other researchers (Bruns and Liang 2012).

Although Twitter used by a smaller percentage of Australians than other social media platforms, it has been used by researchers interested in examining social phenomena due to its publicly accessible Application Programming Interface (API) (Chorley and Mottershead 2016), and is more easily accessible than other social networking sites such as Facebook. The API is made of two parts; the search or REST API or the streaming API. The REST API allows past tweets to be retrieved through a request from Twitter at a cost, while the streaming API allows current tweets to be collected and archived using specific keywords, hashtags and users. This research utilised the streaming API through the freely accessible Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet (TAGS), developed by Hawksey (2013).
and relied heavily on the use of hashtags and specific key words.

Non event-based sampling

A major challenge in doing research on the use of Twitter as a communication tool is to capture a comprehensive and representative sample of tweets which relate to the topic of interest (Bruns and Liang 2012). Data collection began by selecting putative hashtags and search terms (where topics did not have specific hashtags) based on the authors’ knowledge of online discussions and recent media articles about animal welfare in livestock production. A manual search of each hashtag and search term ensured they were relevant and useful, however general search terms often were categorised as nontopical hashtags thus retrieved unrelated information, e.g. when searching for “beef”, the majority of the tweets were images of steak dinners or the user had a disagreement or “beef” with someone. The search terms were broadly categorised as either aligning with animal welfare activists or livestock production industry opinions to ensure a diversity of views were captured. The refined list of topical search terms and hashtags is described in Table 1. Each search topic was entered into TAGS and tweets were collected hourly. Tweets were collected initially for 31 days (April 30 – May 30 2014) to explore activity and content because the potential size and content of the data around the topics were unknown. Summary data were monitored frequently to ensure a suitable collection period.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search term/hashtag</th>
<th>Justification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AgGag</strong></td>
<td>Largely an American debate, ‘ag-gag’ has been topical in Australia due to recent actions by activists i.e. filming inside a Young, New South Wales piggery without permission and posting the footage to YouTube (McAlloon 2014). Voiceless hosted a series of lectures during this period, inviting American journalist Will Potter to talk about ‘ag-gag’ laws. Potter was a large contributor to tweets about ‘ag-gag’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>#banliveexport</strong></td>
<td>The live export of cattle and sheep was criticised in 2011, when the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) aired ‘A Bloody Business’ on their program Four Corners (Four Corners 2011). This program contained footage obtained by Animals Australia of the mistreatment of Australian cattle in Indonesian abattoirs. Subsequently, it became a topical issue for mainstream and social media (Munro 2014) which led to the generation of the hashtag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Battery hens or #batteryhens or battery cage</strong></td>
<td>Consumer questions about animal production practices has resulted in the use of battery cages has becoming controversial, with supermarket and fast food chains stocking or using only cage free eggs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>#factoryfarming or factory farming</strong></td>
<td>In recent years, factory farming practices such as battery cages and sow stalls have been under scrutiny by animal rights activists, leading to increased consumer awareness of welfare issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>#farmers4animalwelfare</strong></td>
<td>@farmers4animalwelfare and #farmers4animalwelfare was created by a group of social media users and livestock producers to create a voice for those interested in developing a better understanding of on-farm welfare practices. Both were created after Coles supermarket started selling Animals Australia’s ‘Make It Possible’ shopping bags in June 2013 (Lewis and Ockenden 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>#hadagutful (sic)</strong></td>
<td>#hadagutful (sic) was generated by people who supported the Australian live export trade as an alternative voice to the activist campaign. #hadagutful was used in the organisation of a pro live export rally held at Port Fremantle, Western Australia, promoted largely through social media channels such as Twitter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>#makeitpossible</strong></td>
<td>#makeitpossible was Animals Australia’s campaign aimed at stopping factory farming practices including the use of sow stalls and battery cages in food production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>#saveliveexport</strong></td>
<td>#saveliveexport was used as an alternative to #banliveexport, as it was used by users who supported the live export trade during the suspension in 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sowstalls or sow stalls</strong></td>
<td>Animals Australia have run a number of campaigns to increase consumer awareness of the welfare issues associated with sow stalls. Coles supermarkets have recently advertised their brand as ‘sow stall free’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data were exported to an Excel spreadsheet where duplicates, tweets in languages other than English and tweets unrelated to the topics of interest were deleted. Although #AgChatOz is one of the most utilised hashtags by the online agricultural community in Australia, it was omitted as there were no scheduled discussions about livestock production, and no conversations about livestock production were collected. The #makeitpossible hashtag, used by the Australian animal welfare activist group Animals Australia, was adopted by a Korean electronics company and generated hundreds of tweets. After reviewing the tweets, it was discovered that there were no tweets relevant to the research collected in the 31-day period therefore the search term was omitted from the results.

To further understand the nature of communication on Twitter, the number of original tweets, retweets and web-generated tweets were counted. Original tweets were those that a particular user has written and published themselves. A retweet is the rebroadcast of content onto a user’s feed that was originally published by another user. Web-generated tweets were those which were generated by ‘clicking’ on a ‘button’ on an organisation’s web page to send an automatically generated message. Web-generated tweets are often used by animal activist organisations, offering users an option to tweet the content they just saw on a web page, for example after watching an embedded video or reading information into their Twitter feed to share it with their network.

Event-based monitoring
On July 9, 2014, a video titled “Sheep Punched, Stomped on, Cut for Wool” was released via YouTube by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA 2014) and was shared on Twitter bringing the issue of mistreatment of sheep in Australian shearing sheds to the attention of an Australian and global audience. Purposeful sampling of data related to this issue was initiated to represent a key social media event related to livestock production. The data collected from this event were collected using TAGS for seven days, using the keywords PETA and/or wool. To further understand the relationship between social and conventional news media, the number of news stories about the controversial footage published in conventional news media channels were counted using Google News and URLs included within tweets.

All data collected were quantified and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006; Creswell 2013b) with each tweet being treated in its entirety as a single piece of text. Coding was limited to the generation of initial, broad codes which describe the content of the tweets, and themes were identified from the codes. Tweets have been reproduced verbatim, including all abbreviations, spelling and grammatical errors.
Results

A total number of 14,642 tweets were collected during the non-event and event-based sampling periods using the specified hashtags and keywords shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 Number and type of tweets per topic. Differences in collection period were due to technical issues with the collection program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Collection period (days)</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>Original tweets</th>
<th>Web generated tweets</th>
<th>Retweets</th>
<th>Total tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ban live export</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>956</td>
<td>1,401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had-a-gutful (sic)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save live export</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ag gag</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1,038</td>
<td>2,452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers for animal welfare</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sow stalls</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory farming</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battery Cage</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,207</td>
<td>1,893</td>
<td>513</td>
<td>2,626</td>
<td>5,032</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Number and type of tweets from the first 24 hours and seven days of the PETA wool campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Collection Period</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>Original tweets</th>
<th>Web generated tweets</th>
<th>Retweets</th>
<th>Total tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PETA wool</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
<td>2,134</td>
<td>1,211</td>
<td>1,206</td>
<td>2,014</td>
<td>4,431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PETA wool</td>
<td>7 days</td>
<td>6,861</td>
<td>2,465</td>
<td>3,335</td>
<td>3,810</td>
<td>9,610</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non event-based sampling

During the 31-day sampling period (30 April to 31 May 2014), using hashtags and keywords, 5032 tweets were collected from 1,207 (Table 2), and the description of the tweets for each of the hashtags and keywords is provided below.

Ban live export: With the absence of a news event related to live export during the collection period, the tweets collected using #banliveexport had little originality in content, as reflected by the high proportion of retweets (68%). There were also large amounts of web-generated tweets originating from Animals Australia rather than independent users. Many of the tweets contained a URL directing users to other sources of information.

Had a gutful (as in had a gut-full/to be sick of a topic): There was very little activity generated from #HadAGutful (113 tweets). Although originally associated with a save live export protest, close inspection of the tweets showed Twitter users adopted the hashtag to state why they have ‘had a gut-ful’ of live export i.e. opposing the trade. Thus, it has become a common hashtag used by users both for and against live export.

Save live export: #saveliveexport was used very little, with a total of three tweets during the 30-day collection period. One user used the hashtag, along with the ban live export hashtag in the following tweet, suggesting the content was designed for a broader audience.

“Cattle export hits the million mark, up 54%. #AusAg #Beef #LiveExport #BanLiveExport #SaveLiveExport [link]”
Ag-gag: ‘Ag-gag’ comprised many tweets from international users, mainly from the United States of America. Unlike ban live export, there were few web generated tweets. However, most retweets could be traced to a single user (323 retweets in total). Many tweets included a URL to further information.

Farmers for animal welfare: There was little use of #Farmers4AnimalWelfare (29 tweets). Most tweets were about everyday farm work and many were linked to a Facebook page. An example is “Crawling under the shearing shed to rescue a 2 week old puppy #farmers4animalwelfare”

Sow stalls: Few tweets about sow stalls originated from Australia (17 tweets). However, there were some international tweets related to Woolworths in South Africa who have recently pledged to phase out sow stalls. A common theme was that sow stalls are cruel and users were advocating for phase out and ban.

Factory farming: In the factory farming data, there were few original tweets, and many retweets (88%). Many of the URLs featured in the tweets were links to blogs from organisations such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). Key themes included that factory farming is destroying landscapes and that farming animals is cruel which can be seen in the example below.

“#Factoryfarming in the top two #climatechange enhancers, don't see anyone cutting down on meat or dairy & it's not in the news #tytlive”

Battery cage: The data collected using ‘battery cage’ as a search term was made of large amounts of web generated tweets (349) and retweets (162) with little originality. The main topic was about lobbying the Greek government to ban battery cages, which was a current campaign from ‘Compassion in World Farming’ (http://www.ciwf.org.uk)

Event-based twitter activity

The PETA wool campaign triggered a total number of 9,610 tweets over seven days, with over 4,000 tweets in the first 24 hours (Table 3), which is in stark contrast to the Twitter activity recorded above
Key themes which emerged from the PETA wool campaign are described in more detail in Table 4. Example tweets in these tables have been reproduced verbatim, including abbreviations, spelling and grammatical errors. Cruelty featured prominently in the PETAwool campaign tweets. Capital letters and online expletives and acronyms (i.e. WTF) were often used to emphasise the acts which occurred against the sheep. The descriptions of sheep were emotive and the industry was portrayed as cruel. Disgust was also a theme, with people expressing shock at the way sheep were treated in the video used in the campaign. A number of tweets came from people who felt disgusted that this treatment of sheep occurred in Australia. Several users suggested boycotting the use of wool as a way to stop animal cruelty. Users urged others to swap wool for alternatives, suggesting they would rather not use wool. Sheep farmers were perceived by users as untrustworthy to produce wool and maintain welfare standards, suggesting producers require supervision during shearing. A major theme which emerged was the reference to Australia. The wool industry is seen as a patriotic, iconic industry and the nation has been previously described as being “built off the sheep’s back”. Key messages included that cruelty to sheep is a national disgrace and Australia should be ashamed. Interestingly, there were no conversations between representatives of industry and activists or the broader public in the collected tweets. While there were some tweets collected from news organisations such as ABC Rural, the tweets collected were dominated by those opposing the wool industry.

Table 4 Examples of tweets from the PETA wool campaign categorised under each theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tweet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cruelty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Check out CRUEL: Sheep STOMPED on, PUNCHED for wool https://t.co/C6mrYljqY46”

“I love wool, I believed it to be a perfect product, sustainable, ethical, cruelty free. It could be but WTF! http://t.co/PTEIXzpoPD”

“People often ask me why it is cruel to buy wool. This post explains just how badly poor gentle sheep are treated. http://t.co/Mvyzj7jQtO”

“#sheep cruelty claims; http://t.co/n1dauStMm6 @farmonline @WoolProducers #wool #agchatoz”

“Time to rethink wearing wool. Serious cruelty. http://t.co/ndKr1QNXHV @peta”
Disgust

“DISGUSTED with Australias treatment of sheep in the wool industry. Thank You PETA for the exposure #PETA #RSPCA #AnimalWelfare”

“I can’t bring myself to watch this, but I read the full nots and am so angry that ppl can get away with it. http://t.co/QEBAcFETQb @peta”

Boycotting wool

“DON’T WEAR WOOL! http://t.co/5qfQo2Ffvb”

“Swap wool 4 acrylic or other man made material that’s cruelty free. http://t.co/tfvCAAi6Xh”

“Here’s why you absolutely need to give up #wool http://t.co/7nzxNTdhRt #AnimalCruelty #animalabuse #sheep”

“I’ll never #knit with #wool #yarn. Period. http://t.co/LFW5R5EKhH #sheep #knitting #woolfree... http://t.co/uYaQmjYNgv”

“If it says wool, leave it on the shelf. http://t.co/pAyTACpOmx”

“I would rather not have wool at all… http://t.co/Lxb5DqdKR”

“If we continue to be the consumer, the production continues… HELP NOW: Sheep Punched,Stomped on,Cut for Wool http://t.co/0hpDuzlfdX via @peta”

“I hope these devastating videos from PETA inspire you to forever say no to buying anything made from wool. http://t.co/bboz3XdjrA”

“People don’t realise how terrible the wool industry is! I certainty will never purchase items made from wool! @PETAUK @peta2 @peta”

“The best thing that you can do for sheep is refuse to buy wool! It’s easy to check the lable when you’re… http://t.co/kICAednFrL”

Farmers/producers can’t be trusted

“Such #animalcruelty Again… Farmers cant b trusted with #AnimalWelfare”
“Woolgrowers need more supervision in their sheds. Latest PETA outcry on shearers is not what we need”

Australia

“Investigators in Australia and the U.S. found that shearers killed, beat, kicked, and throw terrified sheep. [link] via @PETA”

“They’re back. PETA launches a fresh attack on the Australian wool industry alleging new abuse across 3 states [link]”

“Animal activist group @peta takes aim at the Aus wool industry with shocking footage from shearing sheds #agchatoz [link]”

“PETA campaign targets Australian woolgrowers – Agriculture – Sheep – General News – Farmonline National [link]”

“Welfare group targets abuse in Australian shearing sheds. Wool industry says it’s isolated. [link] @abcrural...”

“PETA US went undercover in the Australian & US wool industries. What it found was worse than anyone cld have imagined [link]”

“@RdioAU @SkyNewsAust [link] fix this #australia”

“DISGUSTED with Australias treatment of sheep in the wool industry. Thank You PETA for the exposure #PETA #RSPCA #AnimalWelfare”

“They’re back. PETA launches a fresh attack on the Australian wool industry alleging new abuse across 3 states”

“What a disgrace Australia!! HELP NOW: Sheep Punched, Stomped On, and Cut for Wool: [link] via @peta”

Social media versus news media

Tweeting activity associated with the PETA wool campaign provided an opportunity to compare the ‘life cycle’ of a farm animal welfare activist campaign in news media and on Twitter. Tweets from the first seven days of the PETA wool campaign were counted to capture a snapshot of the type of online traffic a breaking news story can create and to describe the activity which occurs
on Twitter around an emerging topic. This activity is seen in Figure 1a which illustrates a
‘peak’ in activity 24-48 hours after the video was released on YouTube and subsequent Twitter
activity by PETA with a decline to stagnant numbers in following days. A similar trend was seen
in news stories published about the shearing video, as highlighted in Figure 1b. However, the wave
of news stories peaked two days after the story had made its debut on Twitter (Fig. 1b). The
relationship between the news media and social media became evident during analysis due to
a large number of tweets containing links to news articles. There was a decline in activity in
social media by day three of PETA’s wool campaign, suggesting loss of interest which is
reflected by an overall decline in tweets and the proportion of retweets increasing (Fig. 1a).
Interestingly, there was also shows peak in international media activity more than three
days after the campaign began (Figure 1b), although tweets were seen from PETA’s
international organisation shortly after the campaign began, further emphasizing the lag between
Twitter and the news media. International news articles were included in the analysis as tweets
generated from the PETA campaign were not able to be separated based on geographical location,
thus news articles being tweeted were also published in international press.

Fig. 1a The total number of tweets, generated tweets, retweets (RT) of generated tweets,
original tweets and retweets of original tweets from the first seven days after the PETA wool
video release.
Fig. 1b The number of conventional online media news stories published over seven days after the PETA wool campaign release.

**Discussion**

*Campaigns*

Campaigns enable organisations to generate large amounts of traffic on social media in a short space of time, and has the potential to generate activity outside of the micro-public. The cessation of the exporting of live Australian cattle to Indonesia and other destinations continues to be an issue for activist organisation such as Animals Australia. Following ‘A Bloody Business’ in 2011, another documentary, titled ‘Another Bloody Business’, aired which highlighted the poor treatment of sheep (Four Corners 2012), which was followed by billboards and other advertising material calling for a ban on live export and which continues to feature in Australian cities (Jooste 2016). On Twitter however, the hashtag #banliveexport, which sparked an “online frenzy” in 2011 (Rikken, 2013), contained only 1,401 tweets during the collection period in 2014 (Table 2) albeit by few users with 80% of the tweets being retweets or web-generated tweets. In contrast, the PETA wool campaign generated 9,610 tweets over seven days (74% being retweets or web-generated), with over 4,000 tweets in the first 24-hours (72% being retweets or web-generated). The viral nature of this campaign is partly due to PETA’s pre-existing online audience of 522,860 followers (Twitter 2014) who disseminated news about the wool campaign quickly, as well as the
nature of the campaign itself. As seen in both these examples, and as highlighted herein
(Figures 1a and 1b), the lifespan of a campaign is similar to that of the news cycle, where
there is large amounts of traffic generated early which later slows down when the issue is no
longer “hot off the press”. The live export example also highlights the ability for an issue to
persist online, even years after the beginning of the campaign.

Activist and social movement campaigns strive to be ‘affectively charged’ (Kuntsman 2012)
in attempt to gain recognition and build momentum around issues (Rodan and Mummery
2014). As seen in the PETA wool tweets (Table 4), the use of strong, emotive language was
used to help push their message across and generate a response from the online community.
Words such as cruelty and disgust highlight dislike towards the treatment of sheep seen in
the footage. There was also the idea of trust, suggesting farmers cannot be trusted with the
welfare of animals which relates to the broader agenda of animal activists opposition to
animal agriculture. Emotive language can spark feelings of outrage, resulting in social media
user’s feeling like they need to share this information with their network. References to
Australia appeal to a sense of patriotism, with farming, and the wool industry in particular,
being associated with the growth of the nation. This idea is echoed by associating the poor
treatment of sheep with the idea of being ‘un-Australian’. This use of emotive language and
the resulting response from the online community can be used to explain why there was not
just a proliferation in activity around the campaign, but the subsequent attention the
campaign received from the news media as discussed below.

Social vs news media

While commonly news media is shared on social media channels, this research clearly
indicates that social media has the capacity to lead news media stories within the new model
of the news cycle (Onderstall 2012), particularly in association with a campaign. PETA’s
wool campaign provided an opportunity to compare activity in both news media and on
Twitter about the same issue and the relationship between the news media and social media
became evident during analysis. In the case of the PETA campaign, industry responses
appeared in the conventional media (Barbour and Farley 2014, Bettles 2014) days after the
campaign started, and after the outrage seen online had passed. Social media, particularly
Twitter, is relied on heavily by journalists to develop followings and build connections with
the public (Moore et al. 2017) to not only distribute news but also to follow news as it
happens. The evidence of news media lagging behind social media activity in this research
highlights the necessity for industry representation online to respond faster if industry want
to become part of the conversation and be involved in more traditional news journalism to
increase the reach of their story.

Micro-publics
One of the motivations for completing this research was in response to concerns about the
anti-livestock production content being shared on social media. While hashtags are an
important part of tweets to increase the potential audience reach, content being shared
usually goes as far as a user’s micro-public (Barbour et al. 2014). This is important for the
current research for two reasons. The first reason is that animal activists are sharing content,
and unless it is gaining traction in news media channels, exposure to the content is occurring
to those within their micro-public. What is interesting in the case of animal welfare online is
that while activists and industry do not share the same values, their micro-publics online
interact and overlap as they both hold an interest in what the other is doing. However, it is
now understood that large amounts of traffic does not equate to an increased amount of
engagement with the content outside of the network. The second reason is that, while it
developing a network of producers and people working within the agricultural sector is
beneficial for other reasons such as decreased isolation, encouraging people to sign up to
Twitter will result in these users creating their own micro-public and thus information they
share is only going to go as far as those people within their following, as seen in the activism
group.

Activism vs slacktivism
The number of web-generated tweets and re-tweets throughout the collection period, being
70% of the tweets is a novel finding and may be an indication of “slacktivism” rather than
activism or actual concern for animal welfare. Online activism is often criticised as
slacktivism as there is no evidence that sharing or liking a post online results in any real life
change of behaviour (Glenn 2015). Due to the high number of retweets seen throughout the
various search terms of this research, in particular the search terms associated with PETA’s
wool campaign, this could be considered as an example of slacktivism and highlights the
need for further research into relationships between content shared on online profiles and
behaviour change offline. Another criticism of online activism could also be centered around
the idea of the micro-public. While those participating in online protest may feel like they are
making a difference, it raises the question as to whether those not involved in the
organisation or those not passionate about the cause are being impacted by or exposed to the
activism or whether they continue to scroll past and ignore the content.
Industry voices

Australian farmers use Twitter as a platform to engage in conversation, whether it is with the broader community or to talk to other farmers through initiatives such as #AgChatOz. Taking part in conversations online decreases the feeling of isolation commonly felt amongst those living in rural communities (Brumby et al. 2010). Hashtags such as #Tweetsfromthetractorcab and #AusAg have also been used to generate conversation and awareness of agricultural production on Twitter. There is also a belief that those involved in agriculture should ‘sign up’ to Twitter to promote industry and to generate discussions with those outside of agriculture, particularly about animal production methods. However, the inability to identify numbers of tweets supporting industry positions using the search strategy described herein reveals that these discussions are not occurring in the same domain as activist, and arguably in mainstream conversations, about farm animal welfare. It could be said that these conversations are remaining “inside the fence”. Hashtags are fundamental in the search process and not including them in a tweet reduces the chances of tweets disseminated to a wider audience thus limiting the tweets reach. Along with hashtags, the question of exposure outside of the micro-public is raised – whether conversations and information about animal welfare from industry are being seen outside of the Australian agriculture micro-public that has been created.

Conclusions and implications

This research suggests that in the absence of a triggering event or campaign, concern about farm animal welfare in Australia expressed on Twitter originates from a relatively small number of individuals or groups and consists largely of retweets and web-generated tweets. In the presence of a triggering event or campaign, organisations with large followings and networks are able to mobilise support quickly generating a large amount of activity. However, analysis reveals that much of this activity requires a single click, either pressing a button on a website or retweeting, rather than composing an original message, which may not be a reliable indicator of community concern. Further research into social media campaign activity and level of engagement with an issue, and in particular whether this engagement extends to other domains both on and offline, for example signing petitions, boycotting products, or attending protests would be assist in further understanding the relationship between social media activity and concern. In addition, it would be valuable to understand whether people who do not usually participate in activist campaigns are using social media to actively seek and source information about farm
animal welfare, and which sources they trust to increase understanding of how powerful a
social media campaign is in shaping perceptions around topical issues.

This research also reveals that online traffic about farm animal welfare on Twitter is largely
dominated by animal activists and their network. However, there are Australian farmers in
Twitter and it is likely that discussions about farm animal welfare and the impact of activism are
occurring within their own micro-publics. The absence of producer voices in the main
discussion, particularly during the PETA campaign, is of concern if there is to be a conversation
about farm animal welfare between producers and consumers. The complete absence of a
dialogue between producers and consumers in the sample suggest that social media, or more
particularly Twitter, is not the medium through which this conversation is likely to occur naturally,
despite encouragement by industry for producers to get involved. This is more important if
social media activity becomes accepted by industry as a proxy for community sentiment
because, demonstrated by this research, it is not a reliable quantitative indicator. Further research
into how and why farmers use social media would increase understanding of how farmers can
contribute to digital conversations on agricultural issues. Finally, the role of agricultural
organisations on social media needs further exploration to further encourage participation by
food producers in conversations that affect them.


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