



CORPORATE MEDIA: LOVE 'EM OR LEAVE 'EM?

As activists, we are well-aware of the power of media to spread a message to the public. But does that message always get through, or is it garbled by the news stations and reporters who probably don't care about the issues and are just looking for an "angle"? Should we cater to corporate media, or take action without thinking of possible media reaction? Thanks to Paul Shapiro and Kevin Jonas for their participation in this issue's debate.

LOVE 'EM: ANIMALS NEED MORE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

By Paul Shapiro

THE DEBATE

Sometimes members of the animal movement talk about corruption in mainstream media—how it's wedded to its advertisers and routinely acts as a mouthpiece for the powerful animal-abusing industries.

Those making these arguments often use them as a justification for not trying to garner mainstream media attention for animal issues or, even worse, for not caring about what the mainstream media says about the animal movement.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA

Like it or not, hundreds of millions of Americans consume mainstream media every day—along with animal products, as well. As such, virtually every person in the country is part of our target audience. In order to cause a fundamental reduction in the level of animal suffering, we need to reach all of them with the message of compassion and mercy. These are the very people who must change their eating habits in order for animal liberation to become possible.

While it would be great to wait for the public to start consuming independent media, to force animals to wait for their liberation until such a societal shift takes place is both unfair and unethical.

EFFICIENCY

Compared to the advertising budgets of the wealthiest animal-exploiting industries, the ani-

mal movement is dirt poor. Because we can't compete by placing paid ads promoting animal-friendly living, if we want to reach the masses who cause the overwhelming majority of animal abuse through their daily diets, we need the mainstream media.

Again, animal liberation cannot be achieved without changing everyday Americans' attitudes and actions toward other animals. These are the people we need to influence, and using the mainstream media is the most efficient way of reaching them.

WHO ARE THE MEDIA?

It's important to remember that the media is made up of human beings—different individuals with different opinions. Some reporters are animal-friendly, while others aren't. There are also those who may not be animal advocates, but still report objectively on newsworthy movement events.

The relative success of U.S. factory-farm investigations shows that garnering positive, mainstream media coverage for animals is possible. In the past two years, outlets including the New York Times, Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, CNN, the Associated Press, and USA Today have responsibly covered farmed-animal issues, exposing millions to the abuse suffered by animals on factory farms.

Indeed, as evidenced by favorable coverage of investigations and open rescues, positive portrayals of the animal movement in mainstream press are possible. Article titles such as "Md. Egg Farm Accused of Cruelty," "Group Alleges Egg Farms Are Cruel," and "Animal Advocates Turn Their Attention to Chickens" are not exceptions; they have been the rule and clearly show how objectively the media has handled factory-farm investigations.

IS ANY PRESS GOOD PRESS? ASK TRENT LOTT, ENRON, OR GARY CONDIT

Some animal advocates argue either a) we should not care how the mainstream press portrays the movement or b) any media attention is better than none at all. However, common sense indicates that neither is true.

Consider Gary Condit, the congressperson from California accused of having an affair with an intern who was later found murdered. A media frenzy ensued, making Condit a political liability for the Democratic party. In the end, the negative press was enough to remove him from his long-held seat in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Similarly, when the media exposed Enron for using fuzzy accounting to overstate its earnings, the power company's name became synonymous with corporate corruption and its stock price plummeted from \$88 to less than five cents, forcing the company into bankruptcy.

And, finally, consider the influence the media had over U.S. Senator Trent Lott's reputation. After commenting that the country would be better off had we elected Strom Thurmond—a rabidly pro-segregation candidate—as president, Lott was harranged by the press until he lost his position as the Senate majority leader. Is it likely Condit, Enron, and Lott think any press is good press?

THE BOTTOM LINE

Our target audience is the overwhelming majority of humanity: those who eat meat, eggs, and dairy. They are consuming mainstream media, and it's our job to use that opportunity to reach them with a message of compassion. If we're portrayed negatively in the press, it will only mean that more people will be antagonistic toward animals, leaving them to suffer even longer.

Paul Shapiro is the campaigns director for Compassion Over Killing and can be emailed at pshapiro@cok.net.

KEVIN'S RESPONSE:

Influencing the masses is of the utmost importance, and the corporate media coverage is the best way to expose our cause. We must hope for the best story, prepare for the worst, and consider it a victory whenever the press brings animal rights into the public arena.

OUT OF SIGHT - OUT OF MIND

There is something worse than negative press: NO press. Positive articles ARE rare and the animals don't have the luxury of wait-

ing for one every 4-6 months. Our exposure must be constant, and the media greatly favors "colorful" stories. Organizations waiting for favorable exposure are usually silent 90% of the year and are of NO consequence to public debate.

AN EMPTYING ARSENAL

When our actions are determined by fear of negative publicity, we deprive the animals of a wide range of tactics. The A.L.F. cannot forgo liberations and sabotage because the press says 'no.' Historically, movements have included controversial tactics and survived adverse media - so can ours.

ENRON? TRENT LOTT?

Give me a break! This analogy is so absurd and out of context that I won't waste any of my precious 250-word rebuttal convincing you of this.

WAKE UP!

It's naive to think we can achieve liberation simply by exposing the sad living conditions of animals. We're talking about the most socially-ingrained prejudice ever! Challenging this will piss a lot of people off. We have to anticipate, inevitable negative media. Controversy allows us to push the animal rights message.

LEAVE 'EM: BAD PRESS IS A FACT OF LIFE

By Kevin Jonas

CORPORATE MEDIA LACKS INTEGRITY

These days, corporate media is anything but news reporting. Instead we are pitched stories aimed at marketing a message, a product, or a war. Are we really expecting objectivity from news organizations that count as their sponsors the very industries we are trying to abolish? Our tactics and what is considered success should not be determined by the opinions of those at Fox News or “journalists” like John Stossell, Geraldo, and the advertisers they represent.

While it would be great if our issues were covered fairly and at length based on their merits, this is not—and will never be—the case. Unless we are running naked through the streets in protest of fur coats, standing on a vivisector’s doorstep screaming through a bullhorn, or doing anything else ridiculous and controversial – the corporate media will consider there to be no story to cover. This is unfortunate, but a fact: unless we make ourselves the story, the animals will receive NO attention.

There is no other social justice issue in history more relegated to the periphery, marginalized, or controversial than that of animal rights. We are attacking the very core of the status quo with our message – we are challenging what people eat, wear, are amused by, and use for medicine. If we are indeed making inroads with these messages and actually are impacting both companies and consumers, we have to expect, and accept, that in many quarters we will be treated with, at best, mockery, and, more often, outright hostility.

This will be, and regardless of whether our tactics are leafleting or liberating, the press may still paint it negatively. The animal rights cause is only a baby movement, and we need to anticipate that

there will be lots of negative stories as it grows and undermines societal norms and values.

PUBLIC OPINION DOES NOT CONTROL PUBLIC POLICY

The Fortune 500 companies do! The same companies we want to change and/or destroy have all the politicians in their pockets and either own, or significantly fund, all major news outlets. Their every destructive wish is the government’s command.

So as long as there is a dollar to be made from animal exploitation, it does not matter how many people agree with some, or parts of, the animal rights message. The war in Iraq is a perfect example of this. The protests against this war set historical records for mass participation internationally, and it was not sanctioned by the United Nations. Despite this, Bush and his ‘coalition of the killing’ said they would not be influenced by such a ‘focus group.’ Instead they drew their policy support from the likes of Haliburton and Lockheed Martin. Is any of this ever reflected in the corporate media? No. The job of the press is to protect economic interests, and to this extent the animal rights movement must be guarded from letting the media stifle and/or intimidate our activism.

BAD PRESS CAN BE GOOD PRESS

The fact that so many are involved in animal rights activism today is born out of the fact that, for years, PeTA has pulled one outrageous stunt after another. Their philosophy that the average person needs to be exposed to an issue seven times before giving it a second thought has seen them create one story after another about animal rights. Often these stories are embarrassing and offensive, but they are still stories about animal rights. The present state of animal rights demands that constant exposure be given to the plight of these animals whenever and



Paul Shapiro and Kevin Jonas

however possible.

Once in a while it is possible to get a positive story in the corporate media about the animals themselves. But to hold out and wait for months on end for such stories that are few and far between not only quiets our collective voice for animal liberation, but is simplistic and naive.

Once awakened to the reality of bias in the corporate media, the movement can learn to use bad press as a tool. The SHAC campaign has demonstrated this to such an extent that its ‘media bark’ is far more fierce than its ‘protest bite.’ Monolithic companies around the world hear the words HLS or SHAC and images of screaming protestors come dancing into their heads. That such trepidation is felt within in the pharmaceutical industry is due precisely to the direct and unapologetic actions of grassroots activists. Bad press can be used to create a chilling incentive not to get into a particular line of work for fear of being exposed, targeted, and beaten.

Bad press is a fact of life for any social justice activist, one we need to learn to live with and use to our advantage. Animal rights activism is about rocking the proverbial boat and making waves of change. Splashes will happen. Whenever possible the corporate media should be used for the sake opening the eyes of as many as possible, but waiting for it to champion our cause is a detrimental mistake.

Kevin Jonas is a spokesperson for SHAC USA.

PAUL'S RESPONSE:

THE POSSIBILITY OF GOOD PRESS

The assertion that we must resort to “ridiculous and controversial” publicity stunts or “the corporate media will consider there to be no story to cover” has been proven false time and time again by the positive coverage garnered by undercover factory farm investigations, to name one example among many. Further, the thought that “unless we make ourselves the story, the animals will receive NO attention” has also been disproved by these same stories.

This is not to say that stories about animal advocates are always bad. Often, a good human interest piece can show the “face” of an animal activist and let people know that we’re simply everyday people motivated into action by feelings of compassion. But, it’s untrue to say we can only get stories about activists, rather than animal cruelty.

PUBLIC OPINION

Even though we probably agree more than we disagree on this issue, the area where I think Kevin and I differ most is his claim that public opinion is not crucial. It’s true that what we’d all consider bad publicity for the animal movement could scare some of our opponents. However, acting as if negative press only affects that one particular issue—and not the rest of the animal movement as a whole—ignores the fact that most Americans don’t make the same distinctions that we in the movement do.

As different as we may seem to each other, the average American does not know the difference between SHAC, COK, PETA, HSUS, or even the A.L.F. To them, it’s all just “the animal movement.” When they hear something bad about any part of the movement, it impacts the whole. This wouldn’t be so problematic if animals weren’t so dependent on public attitudes for their liberation.

The only way we can fundamentally reduce the level of animal suffering is to reduce the number of

animals people eat. Even if we were to completely abolish all vivisection in the United States, we would have impacted only a tiny fraction of one percent of all the animals we exploit. Since virtually everyone eats animals, it’s virtually everyone whose opinions we need to change.

When the mainstream media runs a negative story about the animal movement, no matter what the issue is, many people are less likely to consider doing anything positive for animals, most importantly making dietary change. It would be great if the public could disassociate the message from the messenger, but we need to play the cards as they’re dealt.

This is in no way to argue that we can control what the media says about us. Often, no matter what we say or do, we will be ridiculed and slammed by the press. But, that is not a justification to purposefully try to garner negative publicity or to concede that positive publicity is beyond our reach.

Finally, I want to thank NC and Kevin for this chance to discuss movement strategy. I wish we had more space!