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PETA's Facebook Page: Helping the Cause?

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A couple months ago, a rare white rhinoceros was killed in his enclosure at the Paris zoo. The poachers removed his ivory horn with a chainsaw, probably hoping to sell it on the black market. On Facebook, many of the articles conveying this news came from PETA, a non-profit organization advocating for the ethical treatment of domestic animals. Yet looking closer at their campaigns on Internet, it appears that the NGO's use of shocking statements and images risks to have an overall negative impact on the much-needed reflection on animal protection and animal cruelty. This article, then, explores the rhetorical power of PETA, as well as its pedagogical value. Studying their communication methods and content on their Facebook page, we question here their success in provoking their viewers' awareness on these issues through three different modes: their videos, their happenings and demonstrations, and their comments.

PETA's viewpoints draw from animal rights movements, and relate to a certain extent to antispeciesist theories. Antispeciesism denies the presence of a hierarchic relation between animal species. Their activists refuse the discrimination of certain species on the basis of a pretended superiority of humans over others animals; they wish to extend the principle of equality to the animal world. The shocking rhetoric PETA uses in order to push their agenda aims to causes those who are skeptical to question their methods. Many animal rights activists believe that their communication strategy does more harm than it helps¹. Yet, according to their Facebook page, PETA "[focuses their] attention on the four areas in which the largest numbers of animals suffer the most intensely for the longest periods of time: factory farms, laboratories, the clothing trade, and the entertainment industry, [working] through public education, cruelty investigations, research, animal rescue, special events, celebrity involvement, and protest campaigns" to spread awareness. An interesting aspect about PETA is their lack of support for wild animal suffering. Unlike antispeciesism, which take "*all* forms of suffering endured by nonhuman animals into consideration", PETA's scope of activism is narrow and limited. PETA is only concerned with domesticated animals, including farmed animals, or kept in zoo enclosures.

The administrators of PETA's Facebook page are animal activists who claim to be fighting to bring awareness of the injustices done upon animals through rallies, demonstrations, protests and campaigns. They are PETA representatives, and claim that

¹ Antispeciesists and vegan movements are very critical of PETA's communication methods, and frequently denounce the sexist character of many of their ads and campaigns. See for instance <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/07/breasts-peta-women-strawberries-and-cream-wimbledon-animals>

they are not afraid to show “the truth” about animal violence. In harrowing videos, they expose viewers, subscribers and supporters to a hidden world of animal cruelty that goes behind the scenes of some of the worst conditions imaginable. Unlike PETA’s official website, their Facebook page allows the construction of an online community sharing the NGO’s views and methods. The administrators censor, monitor and orient the conversation between viewers. For instance, they post a video or a status and ask viewers to comment on it. The Facebook page in this way is not only used for its representative function: it also becomes a place for participation, encouraging its members to get involved, share their opinion and take action. Participatory culture, following MIT professor Sasha Constanza-chock, relies on “participation, strong support for sharing, informal mentorship, members who feel that their contributions matter, and who care about others”. Furthermore, participatory culture is strongly rewarding for those involved, reminds Constanza-chock. “Not everyone must participate, but everyone must believe that if they participate it will be valued.” By asking the opinion of viewers and encouraging their participation, PETA makes their viewers feel like their contributions are important, and therefore appeal to their intelligence. As we will see though, PETA tacitly encourages hate speech and mainly rely on fear and guilt to change the behavior of viewers.

Many of the rhetorical strategies and tools used by PETA are evident in the footage that they project on their site. They call to pathos through the display of videos exposing animal suffering. Pathos, says Aristotle, “encompasses the emotional influence on the audience.” The goal is to persuade the audience, this by putting it in the appropriate emotional state. Yet invoking pathos does not necessarily involve shocking the audience, and should not rely on manipulative behavior. PETA insists that it is motivated by their sympathy and empathy for animals, but some of their rhetoric suggests otherwise. Building on the shock factor, PETA showcases a plethora of horrifying imagery. The NGO often shares incredibly graphic and gory pictures and videos to disturb viewers, this to the point that they take action, comment on the page and participate in the conversation. This tactic is definitely manipulative, as PETA often disguises shock with “pathos.”

Three videos chosen from hundreds displayed everyday on their Facebook Page clearly expose the different effects used by the organization. In the first video, two pigs are manhandled to death. PETA regularly refers to the abusive behaviors in slaughterhouses, which has become the norm. Filmed in a large shot to allow viewers to get the fully embrace the scene. The rhetorical power of the video lies in the raw footage, shot probably undercover by an amateur filmmaker. Its realism embeds the viewers into the reality of slaughterhouses. In contrast, the second video uses the voiceover of famous actor Justin Long, who points the harm done to foxes by outerwear company Canada Goose. A series of different snapshots include Canada Goose outerwear, photos of foxes, and images of foxes stuck in traps, struggling and wriggling to get free. The representation of the fox, in a close-up, aims to capture their frightened eyes and their desperate attempt to save themselves. The viewer is deliberately left to fill the blanks between these different edited short sequences, which do not seem to bear any direct relationship. The provocative questions and statistics on animal killing written over the images helps the viewer to orient his understanding of the video. The actor’s voice-over

gives legitimacy to PETA's discourse, as well as making it more relatable. The last video presents the struggles of large Orca whales kept in a tank in the famous amusement park Sea World. The last video goes a step further in provoking the emotion of the spectator. The short film inserts images of a young boy living in a small cell like room. Looking bored and lonely, dirty and miserable, the boy should remind the distress of domesticated orcas. Using the voice of the little boy, PETA enumerates statistic and facts about Orca abuse to reinforce the seriousness of their action, as well as the emotional impact of their representation. The innocence and vulnerability attributed to children should remind the profound injustice behind Sea World treatment of animals.

In their happenings also PETA resorts to the same shocking rhetorical tools. To raise awareness on fur trade, PETA often stages naked women body, covered in blood or encaged. Feminist groups, who accused the organization of sexism, have criticized their exclusive use of female bodies in these demonstrations. They denounce the organization's use of the female body to attract people. Furthermore, during their public demonstrations participants scream, chant and verbally berate those who do not support PETA's mission and views. Some participants protested naked in England or in the USA in winter, in order to deliver their message regarding inhuman behavior of people wearing fur. In New York City and in London, PETA demonstrators went so far as to splash red paint on pedestrians wearing fur. This was perceived as highly counter-productive: not only was it perceived as a destruction of property, it was considered as an assault.

Another tactic used by PETA involves hate speech. Hate speech attacks a person or group solely on the basis of attributes such as gender, ethnic origin, religion, race, disability, or sexual orientation. In fact, PETA's Facebook page itself could be classified as a hate site, if we consider the language used by participants to convey their messages. As a vivid example, this comment retrieved on the website: "instead of testing on animals, [we] should test on pedophiles and other criminals." There is a great amount of irony here. Members and supporters of PETA typically believe that individuals who eat meat and wear fur are murderers. Yet, if they wish labs to test products on humans, no matter how corrupt those individuals may be, how can one consider these activists any better than those animal testers they criticize? There is a vivid contradiction between an apparently civic movement protecting "life" in all forms and an organization condemning other individuals simply for their beliefs.

The analysis of a variety of comments on PETA's page show a high number of extreme comments written by followers and PETA themselves. For example, PETA's statement regarding hunting:

"It's a disgusting "hobby" that hunters claim is a sport. There is nothing respectable about it and it's an embarrassment to mankind that there are still people out there who do it. Killing animals for "sport" is clearly an effort to compensate for what those people are lacking in other areas. There's no excuse for it."

The page is also home for comments made by people who oppose PETA, including its discourse and its methods it uses to push for recognition, support and awareness. For example, a man named Peter Gabriel Torok:

“By the way in case you people didn’t know animals eat other animals its called nature.”

This comment is clearly responding to PETA’s hate speech as a rhetorical strategy, yet with arguments that are completely unfounded. It is not because animals eat each other that people *should* eat meat. This is a prime example of how followers fail to grasp the point of the discussion due to PETA’s communication choices, and lack of global political vision.

Through its attempts to shock and disturb viewers, PETA distracts people from true issues on animal cruelty and treatment, and limits its opportunities to make their points and spread awareness. The discourses and images conveyed on their Facebook Page limit the impact of their fight for animal rights. Their presence furthermore monopolizes the public sphere, by doing so minorizing the voice of other animal right activists, such as antispeciesist militants, who rely on more thorough and elaborate theories. The influence of celebrities, their constant appeal to emotions and guilt masks the weaknesses of PETA’s global political vision. Hiding behind a participatory culture furthermore, PETA appeal to their follower’s intelligence. Yet the presence of hate speech and poor arguments underline the theoretical and pedagogical limitations of PETA’s discourses. Far from a constructive approach, the administrators simply block commenters criticizing PETA.

Consequently, the true issue of animal abuse and animal rights is lost in translation as PETA proves that they are more concerned with shaming those who do not fall into their media consumption and Vegan lifestyle. They appear to be more focused on criticizing and condemning others than actually helping animals.

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