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Animal Rights Talk: Moral Debate over the Internet

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KEYWORDS

animal rights movement, animal research, e-mail

ABSTRACT

Messages sent over Animal Rights-Talk, an electronic mail network devoted to the discussion of issues related to the animal rights movement, were analyzed. Messages typically fell into the following categories: questions and information, discussions of philosophical issues, ethical problems associated with the treatment of particular species, the politics of the animal rights movement, problems of moral consistency, the ethics of particular uses of non-human species (e.g., meat consumption, biomedical research with animal subjects), and matters pertaining to the internal life of the network (e.g., efforts at control of perceived norm violations). Debates between animal activists and animal researchers over the network often reflected the conflicting cosmologies of scientists and animal protectionists. We argue that computer bulletin boards offer a potentially important avenue for qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Spurred by the publication of Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation* in 1975, the contemporary animal protection movement has emerged as one of the largest and most effective grassroots social movements in the United States. Several million Americans are members or supporters of animal protection organizations, and recent surveys have suggested that as many as 80% of Americans feel that animals should have some rights which limit the way they are used (Orlans 1993). Not surprisingly, the animal rights movement has drawn the attention of behavioral scientists interested in the sociological and psychological underpinnings of social movements. Quantitative studies based on surveys of activists attending demonstrations (Galvin & Herzog 1992; Jamison & Lunch 1992; Pious 1991) and a survey of subscribers to a popular animal rights magazine (Richards & Krannich 1991) indicate that animal activists tend to be disproportionately female, well-educated, upper middle-class, and liberal. Ethnographic studies (Herzog 1993b; Jasper & Nelkin 1992; Sperling 1988) suggest that the assumption of an animal rights perspective bears similarities to religious conversion. These include a fundamental shift in world-view, sometimes dramatic changes in lifestyle (i.e., diet, friends), an evangelical commitment to convert others, a sense of collective guilt and the concomitant possibility of redemption, and the conviction that the new perspective is morally correct and that non-conforming behaviors (i.e., meat-eating, vivisection) are morally wrong.

Sutherland and Nash (1994) have argued that this constellation of beliefs constitutes an alternative "environmental cosmology." It might be expected that the emergence of a new and radically different cosmology will result in conflicts between those holding traditional views and those who have adopted the new perspective. The present debate over our moral stance toward members of non-human species is

emblematic of conflicts that can occur between individuals who hold conflicting moral paradigms. The result has been an acrimonious controversy between well-meaning individuals on both sides, who, more often than not, have a distorted view of their adversaries and who find little common ground for discussion (Gluck & Kubacki 1991; Herzog 1993a; Paul 1995).

In recent years, animal activists have begun to communicate via electronic mail bulletin boards. Many millions of individuals presently have access to computer networks at home, school, and at work, and these electronic mail networks represent a potential agent of social change (Goode & Johnson 1991; Rheingold 1991; Perry 1992; Perry & Adam 1992). Computer bulletin boards also offer a unique opportunity for the analysis of communication patterns between individuals holding conflicting beliefs about social issues. They provide a glimpse into the concerns and conversations of individuals interested in a wide range of issues, and they offer a convenient yet largely unused source of data for sociological research.

In this report, we present the results of a long-term qualitative study of interactions between participants over an e-mail bulletin board devoted to discussions of issues related to the treatment of animals. Our original purpose was to characterize communication patterns within a virtual electronic community in which the members were united by a mutually accepted set of assumptions (i.e., the belief that animals were entitled to moral consideration) and behavioral norms (i.e., vegetarianism). It quickly became apparent, however, that the list members were not a homogeneous community of like-minded souls with a common set of norms and values. Indeed, some members of the network were animal researchers and other individuals who opposed the agenda of the animal rights activists. These participants seemed to have their own agenda—that of rebutting the ideas and rhetoric of the committed activists on the list. When we discovered that many conversations were between individuals having conflicting moral paradigms we shifted the focus of our study to an analysis of electronic communications among individuals who inhabited different ethical worlds.

AR-Talk

In the spring of 1989, an electronic bulletin board, Animal-Rights, was established under the auspices of the Animal Rights Electronic Network (AREN) to facilitate communication among animal activists. The organizers' goal was to create a global network linking activists and animal rights organizations. In October, 1990 the bulletin board was split into two separate lists, AR-News and AR-Talk. AR-News contained notices of current events of interest to activists such as upcoming demonstrations, recent legislation related to the use of animals, and items appearing in local and national newspapers and magazines; it was not intended for extended discussion of issues or events. AR-Talk, in contrast, was organized as a vehicle to facilitate interaction between activists. It was an unmoderated list, meaning that messages were not screened or reviewed by the list coordinator before they were distributed to the subscribers. According to the charter, "The purpose of this list is to open channels where new ideas, philosophies and concerns can be exchanged freely. Debates are likely to occur as well as friendships and associations.... The list is open to anyone who is interested regardless of his/her opinions on animal rights." The charter went on to suggest possible topics for discussion. These included vivisection, factory farming, furs, environmental protection, religious perspectives on animal issues, animal research, and vegetarian lifestyles. The charter also recommended that participants who seriously wished to pursue the issues raised over the network read the two central philosophical statements on which the modern animal rights movement is based, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Regan 1983) and *Animal Liberation* (Singer 1975).

METHODS

We became aware of AR-Talk early in 1991 and signed on to the bulletin board. For several months we saved occasional messages ("posts") that we found particularly interesting. In June 1992, we decided to use the posts as data for a study of communication between activists, and we established an e-mail address exclusively to record all messages sent over the network. Approximately 4,000 posts, most of which we read, were received as of October, 1995. We found this amount of data overwhelming and arbitrarily decided to focus part of our analysis on the messages posted between August 12, 1992 and February 26, 1993. During this time (hereafter referred to as the primary analysis period) we received a total of 354 communications. Sixty-one of these messages were duplicates and were not included in the analysis, leaving 293 posts in the primary data base. (We continued to monitor the network for messages of interest through February, 1996. Some of these messages, while not in the primary data set, are described in this report.) The primary posts were catalogued using database software. The attributes coded for each message included the e-mail address of the sender, name and sex of the correspondent, his or her institutional affiliation, and the basic stance regarding animal protectionism reflected in the post. (Note that not all this information was available for every post.) The posts were also classified according to the type of message, its rhetorical style, and both the general issues addressed and the specific topics discussed. Note that we never participated in the conversations so as not to influence the course of the discussions. In this report, we have let the participants "speak" for themselves as much as possible to convey the flavor of their messages; direct quotations that typify the range of the correspondence are used extensively.¹

RESULTS

The Correspondents

Our goal was to analyze the messages and interactions among individuals engaged in discussions of a set of highly charged moral issues. With only a few exceptions, our knowledge of the participants and their reasons for participating in the discussion is limited to their posts over the network. For example, we have only limited information as to the number of individuals who have subscribed to AR-Talk since its inception. In October, 1993, there were 163 active subscribers. The list administrator estimated that he received about a dozen requests to join the list each week and almost an equal number of requests to be removed. He believed that between 1,000 and 2,000 individuals subscribed to the list since it began though many of these were members for only a brief period (personal communication: C. Roberson September 15, 1993).

Not all subscribers actively participated in the intellectual life of the list. During the primary analysis period, about half of the subscribers were "lurkers" who never actually engaged in the dialog. Further, not all of the active participants were equally involved in the life of the network. At times, a few correspondents would dominate the conversations; about a dozen participants were particularly heavy users during the primary analysis period. The length of time that participants were active also varied. Some individuals logged onto the list, only to request to be dropped after a couple of days. (The plea, "Help! How do I get off this list?" was a fairly common refrain during the primary analysis period, though problems getting off of the list became less frequent as list administration became more efficient.) Sometimes the dropouts would indicate their reasons for quitting in their request to be removed from the network. The most common reason for leaving was an inability to keep up with the flow of posts. Some, however, left because of disappointment with the quality or direction of the interactions between the participants. Some of the participants logged on and off intermittently, depending on their interest in the current topics of discussion.

We were able to glean some information about the participants from the content of their posts or their e-mail addresses. The e-mail addresses of the correspondents suggested that most were in some way associated with colleges, universities or research institutes. These participants included graduate students, undergraduates, post-doctoral fellows, faculty members, and researchers. The list also included a smattering of non-academic professionals drawn from medicine, business, law, and engineering. We know that at least three occasional participants were professionally involved with animal protection organizations. E-mail facilitates international communication, and while most of the participants appeared to be from the United States, other countries, including Australia, France, England, Wales, Israel, the Netherlands, and Canada, were represented.

It is unlikely that the animal protectionists who participated in AR-Talk were representative of animal activists as a whole. Virtually all studies of the sociology of animal activists have reported that females outnumber males by a ratio of two or three to one (e.g., Galvin & Herzog 1992; Jamison & Lunch 1992; Jasper & Nelkin 1992; Pious 1991). The opposite, however, was true of AR-Talk subscribers, two-thirds of which were male. In addition to the atypical sex ratio, it is likely that the participants were more highly educated, more computer literate, and possibly more verbally facile than the average activist (or at least, more comfortable sharing their thoughts in written form with strangers).

E-Mail Posts

The posts tended to fall into clusters that can be understood as relatively discrete conversations. Over 85% of the posts were in one way or another direct responses to previous messages. There were 26 of these conversations within the 293 posts of the primary data set. The average conversation during the primary analysis period contained about a dozen posts, though they ranged from 2 to 71 messages in length. Conversations would typically begin when a participant would either ask a direct question to the list members (e.g., "How do you all feel about the ethics of using flea powder on pet dogs?") or write a comment on a current event or controversial issue within the humane movement (e.g., the support of the Humane Society of the United States of hunting to reduce excess populations of deer, a television news magazine segment in which animal activists were given unfavorable treatment; a Supreme Court ruling that animal sacrifice is protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution). The ensuing discussions would often drift to related subjects. Thus, they maintained the tangential feeling of a group discussion, sometimes on several topics simultaneously, rather than a linear conversation.

When we originally signed onto the list, the conversants tended to focus on one or two topics at any given time. However, the number of active participants expanded during the early part of the study. This increase in volume changed the feel of discourse from that of a dialogue among a small group to that of an electronic cocktail party in which there were several conversations going on in the same room simultaneously—one in which the participants focused on one topic but with an ear to what is going on elsewhere in the room. For example, over a typical two day period, we received 22 posts. They covered four topics: the prevalence of scientific fraud among "vivisectors"; the use of animals in AIDS research; recent changes in FDA regulations related to vitamin supplements; and the stance of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) toward the ethics of keeping pets.

Issues and Topics

We found that six broad themes were represented in the posts. Note that the content of a post could fall into more than one category.

Queries and Information

A small proportion of the messages took the form of questions about a specific topic or unsolicited information directed at the subscribers. Examples of the former included requests for rides to demonstrations, a request for information about the address of the Animal Liberation Front (a clandestine militant animal rights group) and an inquiry about the animal care policies at subscribers' universities. One participant sought advice about the best way to treat his sick chicken using products that had not been tested on animals. Another wondered about the correct pronunciation of the term *vegan* (a term describing individuals who eat absolutely no animal products including milk, eggs, and honey). Occasionally, inquiries about the e-mail addresses or whereabouts of activists would appear. John Broida, a psychologist, used the list to gather information about the attitudes of list participants toward issues related to science and ethics.

Occasionally, unsolicited information of general interest was posted over the network. These included, for example, notices of recently published books related to the treatment of animals, announcements of upcoming conferences, and the text of the presidential "Proclamation of National Biomedical Research Day." One activist offered her Christmas list of charitable organizations to support and to avoid based on their policies toward the use of animals. (Not all of the participants agreed with her choices; her list became the subject of an extended conversation which pitted the "pure" animal rights segment of the list with those that also supported environmentally oriented organizations, such as the Sierra Club.)

Animal Rights Philosophy

Slightly over half of the primary posts directly addressed philosophical issues related to the treatment of animals. A common topic of discussion concerned the advantages of using reason versus emotion when discussing issues related to the treatment of animals. One activist wrote to a fellow animal rights advocate:

I have to agree with you that you have to be emotionally moved to join the animal rights movement. Logical philosophy will convince almost nobody.... However, I still find the ethical debates interesting. If we allow the anti-AR troops the logical reasoning while we run our arguments solely on an emotional basis we are going to be denigrated for being emotional and considered "crazies." Even if we are not going to convince closed-minded people via ethical arguments, at least it shows that we have thought about our life choices and are not mentally incompetent. If we can get the general public to think there is a viable argument here then they might be willing to look into the matter and then be emotionally drawn into the movement.

The level of philosophical discourse over the network was sometimes quite sophisticated. There were occasional arguments among the animal protectionists on the list as to whether Singer's (1975) utilitarian argument or Regan's (1983) rights-based ethical theory provided the most cogent argument for animal protectionism. For example, one writer expressed his belief in the superiority of the Singer's as opposed to Regan's view of animal liberation:

I think utilitarianism is the best ethical code that I have come across. But there are faults with it. Utility is always subjective. The problem is that vivisectionists give very little negative utility to the pain and death of animals while giving very high utility to the expanding power of human life. If we drop the anthropomorphism, utilitarianism loses a lot of its power for the vivisectionists. I think that with the right people—those who take things with

a grain of salt and adjust their ideas of utility properly—utilitarianism can provide the greatest ethical theory.

Ethical Issues and Animal Species

Almost 40% of the posts in the primary data base were concerned with the treatment of various species. Two types of posts fell into this category. The first focused on the treatment of a single species or a specific animal. A wide array of animals were discussed in this context: dogs, cats, whales, horses, pigeons, monkeys, chickens, chimpanzees, elephants, mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, dolphin, tuna, lions, and baboons. For example, there was an extended discussion of the mistreatment of elephants in circuses following an incident in which a circus elephant killed its trainer during a performance and was subsequently shot by police on the streets of Honolulu. While all agreed that the situation was tragic, some felt that the trainer simply got what was coming to him, whereas others argued that the trainer was among the most caring and humane in his field.

The second set of contributions were concerned with the mental capacities, and hence moral status, of particular species. Factors discussed in these conversations included perceived intelligence of different species, the animals' abilities to experience pain and pleasure, and the possibility that animals have souls.

The Politics of the Animal Rights Movement

A perennial theme in the posts was strategies used by animal activists and organizations to further their cause. The ethics of violence as a movement strategy was a common topic of conversation. Sometimes these discussions revolved around actions taken by members of the Animal Liberation Front, the organization which has been responsible for most of the violent attacks on research laboratories in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice 1993). One participant defended the actions of the ALF:

Here's a hypothetical situation: Say someone broke into my house and tried to murder my cat. I'd get my baseball bat and bash in his/her skull. It's the right thing to do—just like the AFL does the right thing. Someone has to take a stand against violence toward animals and that can only be done with violence.

But another activists vehemently disagreed:

Every fool with a gun or a bomb always thinks the violence he/she does is necessary. That's why violence goes on, and on, and on. Those of us who are seriously engaged in the struggle against violence, be it violence to children, violence to women, violence to animals, violence of the state to free expression, or violence of individuals against society, must understand that the buck either stops here or not at all: we either demonstrate another way to live, work, and effect change, or we go on living in a world of might-makes-right until we're all blown away.

Occasionally, bitter disagreement among hard-core activists erupted over the internal politics of the movement. A particularly vitriolic debate broke out over the strategies of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the largest (350,000 members) and wealthiest (\$10 million annual budget) animal rights organization (Guillermo 1993). Several PETA tactics were topics of discussion, including a controversial PETA advertisement in which meat consumers were juxtaposed with a picture of a corpulent pig. (Some of the activists felt the ad portrayed an unflattering stereotype of obese people; others were more concerned that the ad was unfair to pigs.) The activists were also divided about PETA's "I'd rather go naked than wear fur" ad campaign which featured nude and semi-nude photographs of well-known

models. Some of the activists felt that the ads exploited and objectified women. Others felt that they were justified. One (a male) responded to a feminist who had criticized the ads, saying, "I don't see how women as a whole were 'used' (by PETA). What I saw when I saw the ads were people standing up for what they believed in. People with a conscience. People who have thought about their lives and their decisions. People—not objects. If anything these ads did more to speak of the humanity of these people than they objectified the people in the ads."

The PETA take-over of the New England Antivivisection Society (NEAVS), a rival and well-endowed animal rights organization, produced a series of acrimonious exchanges between pro-PETA activists and defenders of NEAVS who objected to the hostile takeover. One animal activist wrote:

In my view, PETA has little to show but bizarre ads that create unconstructive controversies, personal politics, organizational raids, etc. For the record, my opinion is colored by being involved in a long and rather nasty struggle for keeping PETA directors from controlling NEAVS and watching how nasty PETA can be. They don't have a sense of ethics (or civility).

A similar debate broke out between a group of activists who argued that there was a natural affinity between the animal rights movement and the environmental movement and another set of activists who adamantly believed that the goals and underlying philosophy of the animal rights movement, which emphasizes the well-being of individual animals, were at odds with the principles advocated by environmentalists who emphasize the preservation of ecosystems. One activist wrote of her disillusionment with the environmental organization Greenpeace when she saw a watch with a leather band advertised in one of their gift catalogs. After unsuccessfully trying to explain to Greenpeace officials why wearing leather was immoral she dropped her membership in the organization. Another activist consoled the woman but supported Greenpeace:

I share your view and don't wear leather. But Greenpeace is neither an animal rights or an animal welfare organization. I would EXPECT them to be clueless about leather and cows, or about dissection, vivisection, circuses, horse racing and all the rest. I believe that we should judge them by their stated goals.... I suggest that we not see these organizations as our enemies. They are not. Our concerns overlap with theirs, and often many of us have worked shoulder to shoulder with them on our common campaigns. (There is no shortage of organizations which most certainly are our enemies.)

Some participants found arguments between essentially like-minded animal protectionists frustrating. A long-time list participant was discouraged by these internecine conflicts and wrote:

Animal rights or animal welfare? To euthanize or not? Was this ad politically correct? Of course, we must debate these things! It's essential that we do. But you don't debate this in such a way that the acid you throw around corrodes the major structures of your movement. My plea to you all: if you haven't served in the trenches for 5 or 10 years; if you have an armchair academic interest in animal rights, then listen to those on this list who obviously have the experience it takes to discuss matters of strategies and tactics.

Moral Consistency

Animal activists as well as their adversaries are often acutely aware of the problems of trying to maintain consistency between beliefs and behavior (e.g., Gallup & Suarez 1987; Pious 1991). Issues related to moral consistency were common topics of conversation between list participants. Sometimes consistency issues were brought up by activists seeking advice, for example, the participant who had come to feel guilty about using a leather baseball glove and who (successfully) queried participants about a source for

a synthetic alternative. More often, however, consistency issues were raised by anti-AR list participants who pointed out the difficulty (in their view, impossibility) of living a "cruelty free life." On several occasions animal researchers suggested that the use of gory photographs of animal abuse—a stock in trade of animal rights brochures—was immoral because photographic film is made of gelatin. A scientist on the list pointed out that gelatin is obtained by boiling the skin, ligaments, tendons, and bones of animals and then wrote:

Now, talk about your ethical dilemma, gelatin is used as in candy making, jellies, ice cream, manufactured rubber substitutes, adhesives, cements, capsules for medicines, photographic plates and films, and matches and mercury lamps. Are we about to enter the realm of cruelty-free glues, inks, jellies, with movie stars appearing in PETA ads saying they'd "rather curse the darkness than use matches and mercury lamps?" Where will it end?

A common manifestation of the moral consistency issue became known to list participants as "the cockroach problem." The problem was originally raised by an opponent of animal rights who asked the activists on the list what they thought were appropriate ethical obligations toward tapeworms, scorpions, mosquitos, shrews, sewer rats, and planaria. An animal advocate responded with frustration:

Again, and again, and again, the same old line: "But what about cockroaches?" For those of us who have tried to advance calm, rational arguments for the inclusion of our fellow mammals in the sphere of our moral horizon, this line is about the most infuriating torpedo into any meaningful dialogue. I submit that the mosquito/cockroach thing should be recognized by all of us as clear proof that the ears of the listener are hopelessly plugged.... For heaven's sake let's bury the cockroach and the tape worm and the suffering of carrots and cabbages that you and your friends have hurled at us again and again.

Another perennial topic related to moral consistency was particularly polarizing—the morality of abortion and its relevance to animal rights. One AR supporter described his moral ambivalence on the abortion issue:

Fetuses ARE separate living entities. They are not human, but they are living animals. If you poke them with a pin they feel pain, not the mother. If you suck them out with a vacuum, they feel it. It is suffering. It is pain. To ignore this is to put us on the same playing field as those who ignore the suffering of animals. However, I am split on this issue because in today's society many young women end up working dead-end jobs for too little pay—they lose their hope and dreams—all because they were unable to get an abortion.

In the midst of one of the bouts of abortion discussions an activist wrote, "I submit that this discussion does not belong here. It is a very complex and serious issue...AR people are divided on abortion. The AR movement takes no stand on this issue. Therefore I suggest we drop the subject." Another, however, disagreed, "I think the discussion does belong here. Especially since many people, both AR and anti-AR, feminist and anti-feminist, see the connection between the two issues."

Uses of Animals

The most acrimonious debates between AR-Talk participants were associated with the ethics of specific uses of animals by humans. Many uses of animals were discussed over the network. These discussions occasionally took bizarre twists. One participant, for example, expressed outrage at a local art museum

which was exhibiting the work of an artist whose "sculptures" included the dried shriveled bodies of small animals hanging from branches. In response, a participant mused about the ethics of using roadkills in artistic displays. This produced a volley of correspondence over the next several weeks. It was, however, the consumption of animals by humans and their use as subjects in biomedical research that produced the largest number of posts.

Eating Animals. Discussions about the merits of vegetarian lifestyles typically did not have the bitter quality that sometimes characterized the continuous debates over animal research. There were, however, several very lengthy conversations over technical aspects of vegetarianism and the consumption of animal products. For example, several list members conducted an extended discussion of nutritional benefits and costs of vegetarianism. The discussion began when one participant wrote that vitamin B-12 deficiency was more common in humans who ate meat than in vegetarians. One of the scientists on the list took issue with this statement. There followed an extended technical debate which was of great interest to a few participants, but tedious to the majority. The two participants eventually took the unusual step of agreeing to have a neutral third party review their posts on this topic, and the discussion became known as "B-12 (moderated)." Those interested in contributing to the moderated discussion would send their message to the moderator who would screen it for appropriateness, logic, and cogency before sending it on to the list.

Biomedical Research. More often than not, the role of animals in biomedical and behavioral research was the dominant ethical concern of the participants, and it was this topic in which the conflicting cosmologies of activists and scientists were most pronounced. The animal activists, naturally, were opposed to much or all research with animals. The activists often felt that animal research was cruel, immoral and unnecessary. One of the regular participants on the list was a scientist who used rats to study nutrition and eating behaviors. In one post he justified research on animal feeding behaviors on the grounds that it would eventually lead to better human health. An activist, reflecting the view of many of the animal advocates, wrote:

We don't need vivisectionists like yourself withholding food from animals in cages and taking notes on the resulting pathologies. We humans, like other animals, know when we are hungry. This may come as a shock to you, undermining as it does the very *raison d'être* for your life's work—starving animals. If you want to help people, Bill, leave vivisection and start working on economic justice. If you want to torture animals, stay right where you are.

The scientists and activists often stereotyped each other. Sometimes, however, these stereotypes were blown. A female activist sarcastically asked the researchers on the list whether or not they owned pets and how they would feel if their pet dog or cat ended up in a research laboratory. One of the researchers answered her:

It is a general misconception that those of us who do animal research do so because we are callous to animals.... This is as absurd as the argument that the reason why animal rights activists obsess about animals is that they typically don't have human children and use animals as substitutes. I grew up with pets, and I currently have two lively and distinctively individual cats at home. We who do research get very attached to our experimental animals as well. At least I do. The monkeys I do experiments on have distinct characters, lives, perceptions. They and I spend more time together over the two to three years in my lab than I spend with friends, colleagues, and family.

Researchers are often characterized by animal activists as being motivated by a vain quest for federal grants and status within the scientific community. In response to the charge that federal funding for research was essentially welfare for researchers, a scientist wrote:

I was very insulted by your characterization of research funding as "welfare". The people I have met in the research sector bust their ass in order to stay alive in a very competitive field.... Data and scientific breakthroughs don't just fall out of the sky like manna, so we can turn around and publish it. We dig for it, we search for it, we coax it out of the dark cracks and crevasses on the edge of what is understood and what isn't understood. So I suggest that you acquaint yourself with how we spend our time, before you start drawing pictures of us as over-educated winos begging coins on a street corner. I am sorry if this sounds harsh. But I spent an hour last night talking to a man that had MS and a friend of mine that does MS research (yes, on animals). And the man thanked us a number of times for the work we did and will do in the future, as basic researcheis. So to have you characterize research as little more than stealing scraps of food off the table not only belittles the work we do but devalues the happiness and life of that man.

Flame Wars and Social Control

AR-Talk, like any social system, was dynamic. Topics shifted and participants came and went. Sometimes the overall tone of discussion was polite, intellectual, and technical. A few weeks later the posts were belligerent and accusative. Hostile and sarcastic comments emanated from both the animal activists and researchers on the list and sometimes amounted to little more than personal attacks which often reflected the stereotypes that partisans on both sides of the issue had of each other. Some participants developed reputations as habitual "flamers." One of the female participants, for example, was known as a flamer. After she had directed a particularly virulent attack at one of the researchers on the list, another researcher asked:

Mary, what is your purpose in launching these attacks? I hope you don't believe that they are a form of meaningful discussion of the subject of animal research. We hear people like you yelling obscenities, insults, and threats at us (when they have little idea of what our work really is). These attacks do not serve the purpose to convince us of changing our ways of research, but for looking for ways to lock these people up and throw away the key. I, for one, am very insulted by your postings. I would suggest that if you have nothing to contribute to the discussions going on this network, that you stop posting at all.

Another participant also suggested that she voluntarily sign off of the list. Her response was to fire off another volley of messages decrying their attempts at censorship.

An intellectual low point in the life of AR-Talk during the time that we monitored the list occurred when one participant called another subscriber a "dickhead." This attack resulted in a series of posts in which the participants discussed the ethics and etiquette of e-mail. Most of the messages castigated the flamer who, in the words of one participant, had "gone ballistic."

Flame wars erupted at fairly regular intervals and were sometimes accompanied by exasperated attempts at social control—requests that the flamer leave the list or messages urging that the level of discussion be raised to a higher plane. An example of escalating rhetoric accompanied by attempts at social control occurred in a particularly bitter series of debates that broke out between two highly involved participants, both university faculty members, who held diametrically opposed views on animal research. For several weeks, AR-Talk seemed to become a two-way shouting match. Several participants suggested that AR-

Talkers simply refuse to respond to messages posted by the researcher who they felt was determined to subvert the list. One suggested that list members simply delete all of his messages hoping that he would "shut up" and drop off the list. He added that it might have the added benefit of "pissing off" the scientist. The researcher, who over the years has taken great delight in being a gadfly to the activists, responded immediately:

I can say that ignoring my posts will most certainly NOT shut me up. And far from being pissed off, I find your rush to intellectual safety rather amusing. You people don't want discussion, you want intellectual backslapping.

Attempts at social control also emanated from newcomers who joined the list expecting to share the electronic airways with kindred spirits. They were often surprised and sometimes quite disappointed to find that members of the animal research community and other foes of the animal protection movement were also participants in the discussion. At regular intervals the very purpose of the network was questioned. For some participants, the purpose of AR-Talk was clear; it was to encourage discussion between animal rights believers who were supporting each other—not to have long, drawn-out arguments with people who oppose animal rights. One activist reacted to the increasing number of researchers taking part in the network with a call to "take our list back." In a similar vein, a longtime participant wrote:

This list DOES welcome people who do not adhere to the AR view! But it does not follow that this list welcomes any and all people. It was meant for (a) people who already share certain fundamental ideas, (b) for people for whom the AR philosophy is new but who regard it as worth exploring, and (c) for people who have already studied it and have so far come to different conclusions but who consider either view as respectable and therefore want to engage in continued dialog with an open mind.... Any list of this kind does not welcome people whose mind is closed on the subject and who have a mission, a crusade to malign, ridicule and defeat the ideas that others want to discuss earnestly.... We have a few of these crusaders on this list. Please have the decency not to crash this party. Please leave!

Not all animal activists shared his view, and several disagreed with those who would banish scientists from the network, arguing that there was no point in simply talking to those already committed to the animal rights movement. Ultimately, there was no consensus among the list participants as to the purpose of the network. This was particularly true of the animal activists. While some of them appreciated the free-for-all tone that sometimes pervaded the discussion, others were troubled by it and resented the presence of outsiders.

Another set of difficulties resulted from the explosive growth of the network. When we initially logged on to AR-Talk, we received an average of several messages per day, and there were occasional stretches in which there were no posts for days at a time. The messages were often related to a single topic. Six months later there were 15 or 20 daily messages over the network, sometimes many more (the maximum was 77 in a 24-hour period). This flow resulted in a fragmentation of the conversations. One writer suggested that the list change from being unmoderated to moderated whereby a neutral third party would screen all messages for appropriateness and originality. By and large, the responses to this suggestion were not enthusiastic. Although several participants saw some merit in the idea, they pointed out the logistical problems of screening the messages as well suggesting that some of the unique flavor of the conversations would be lost. Others were concerned about censorship. One participant, in reference to the proposed list moderator, succinctly asked "And who might that person be, Mr. Orwell?"

As noted, the intellectual level of discussion over AR-Talk had a cyclical quality which seemed to depend on topics under discussion and the sincerity of the currently active discussants. By early 1995, most of the original participants—both activists and animal researchers—had dropped off of the list. The network was still quite active with several dozen messages on an average day, but the dynamics had changed. There were fewer participants, and the posts were almost completely polarized. The anti-animal rights contingent had dwindled to two or three long-term participants who took great delight at attempting to deflate the arguments of the activists. There were few of the sincere attempts at the sophisticated dialog that characterized the list at its best moments. Both serious animal activists and researchers expressed their frustration with the quality of the conversations. One activist referred to the list as nothing more than a form of "intellectual masturbation." At the end of the study, we contacted several long-term participants via e-mail and asked them why they had dropped out. One replied:

I'm no longer on AR-talk. Between the blather from Bob Smith and Tom Killian (the primary anti-animal rights members) on the one hand, and the equally tedious and endless blather from AR philosophers on the other, none of whom seemed to have the least respect for the ethics of fair debate, it came to have less news value than your typical comic book, and reminded me often of Ambrose Bierce's observation that a prejudice is a vagrant opinion without visible means of support.

The inability of the activists to engage in conversations that were mutually satisfying eventually resulted in the development of a new list, ARViews. The charter of the new network specified that it was open to anyone "if he/she is a critic of the current institutionalized exploitation of animals in our society and advocates change through abolition or through serious reform." The list was to be, like AR-Talk, "essentially" unmoderated and uncensored. However, there was to be a panel of five subscribers who were empowered to instruct the list administrator to throw off individuals who posted inappropriate messages. Clearly, the new list was intended for true believers.

The origins of this network were described to us by one of the founders:

After the arrival of Bob Smith and several others like him on AR-Talk, more and more "AR types" left AR-Talk and started communicating with each other. As a result of these e-mail exchanges, a classified, or shall we say unpublished new list was formed. Membership soon reached over 120 or so. Last summer one topic discussed on this list was what to do about AT-Talk. Long discussions followed. Most expressed their feelings and their reasons for leaving AR-Talk in this way: Ar-Talk was conceived as a forum for the discussion of the many areas of disagreement that exist among people who, by outsiders or by the news media, are likely to be called members of the "animal rights movement".... With the arrival of the Bob Smith group, such discussions disappeared because those people had a clear agenda: to expose all so-called "AR" ideas as wrong. These people clearly were representatives of those organizations whose purpose it is to eliminate the entire AR movement. (Let me add that they did an excellent job!) A decision was made to create a new forum, AR-Views, which was meant to replace AR-Talk, rather than to offer yet another new forum. A charter was written which invited all persons except those whose clear goal is to discredit, defeat or ridicule the animal rights/animal welfare movement. That would eliminate those three or four persons; otherwise the membership would be the same.

He went on to describe the long-range strategy of the animal rights forces which was, ironically, to close down AR-Talk altogether:

At the present moment there are only two or three pro-AR people left who still post on AR-Talk. Their postings are greeted by a chorus of anti-AR people. Efforts are underway to persuade those last AR-types to quit altogether. When they do, AR-Talk will contain no further pro-AR thoughts. This will end the stream of anti-AR rebuttals. AR-Talk will become dormant, and the administrator has said that at this point AR-Talk will be shut down.

This strategy was successful. Six months after its formation AR-Views had attracted more subscribers than AR-Talk. In February, 1996 the list manager decided that AR-Talk no longer served its original intended function—that of furthering communication between proponents of the animal rights view. He officially renamed the list; the name AR-Talk was scrapped and replaced by the title, AR-Debate. The new list was to serve as a forum for argument between individuals who specifically did *not* share the common vision of a "cruelty-free world." After five years of providing a forum for discussions that were at different times provocative, tedious, funny, intellectually stimulating, and emotionally wrenching, AR-Talk ended.

DISCUSSION

We used messages posted over AR-Talk as a source of information about the concerns of animal activists, animal researchers and others interested in ethical issues associated with the treatment of other species. Though not the intent of its founders, the network eventually became one of the only forums in which members of the animal protectionist and animal research communities regularly engaged in dialog. This is not to say that the dialog was always productive. Indeed, all too often the "conversations" reflected the conflicting cosmologies described by Sutherland and Nash (1994). There were few if any instances in which a researcher was converted to an animal rights perspective and vice versa. While the intellectual level of discussion was sometimes quite high, all too often the dialog between animal activists and scientists degenerated into an electronic shouting match. Unfortunately, the conflicting paradigms represented by the participants seemed to have resulted in an unbridgeable gap which ultimately led to the demise of the forum. Most of the most active animal rights advocates gave up on the network and formed their own closed list. On the other hand, at the time of this writing, several dozen messages are posted daily to the network (under its new name), and the arguments continue between a small group of scientists and animal activists.

With the explosive growth of the Internet in recent years, the study of communication via electronic media is a subject of importance. Clearly, e-mail has significant advantages over face-to-face interactions in facilitating communication between individuals with deeply felt but opposing beliefs. First, written messages generally do not express the emotional components of interactions that are conveyed by paralinguistic nuances of vocal expression (i.e., loudness of voice, vocal tone, facial expressions). Second, participants have the opportunity to think out and edit their responses prior to mailing them. (Our impression was that some participants carefully composed their messages, while others took a more off-the-cuff approach.) Finally, while theoretically instantaneous, in reality e-mail messages are often screened by the receivers and a reply formulated at a later time. This latency period may serve as a time for reflection and, in the midst of a heated debate, a time for tempers to cool. On the other hand, there are factors which can make interactions between adversaries communicating over the information highway hotter than verbal conversations. The keyboard lends anonymity to the participants, who may feel free to write things that they would never say in a direct conversation.

Computerized bulletin boards offer a largely unexplored opportunity for qualitative research on many topics. They expose the researcher to a diverse spectrum of opinions. Divergent perspectives on animals and ethics can and have been studied through an analysis of the philosophical literature on animal rights

and the propaganda materials disseminated by the competing interest groups. However, the analysis of communications between members of e-mail discussion groups on controversial issues lends a unique and dynamic flavor to the debate not found in written materials. Finally, one could hardly hope for a more convenient source of data than conversations which automatically flow fully transcribed into the office of the researcher.

There are, however, limitations to the use of e-mail as a window into human experience. While our analysis revealed the topics that concerned activists and scientists, by and large the messages provided only a one-dimensional view of the participants themselves; we know relatively little about the motivations of the participants and the role that the bulletin board and animal issues played in their lives. (Over the years, there were several small spin-off groups from AR-Talk. It is interesting that the organizers of one of these groups, a by-invitation-only list composed primarily of academics interested in ethical issues associated with the treatment of animals, asked the participants to provide a biography to the other list members so that the participants would know something about each other as people other than their computer addresses.) We did meet one of the more active scientists on the network toward the end of the study. He mentioned that at times he spent eight to ten hours a week and as many as four hours a day composing messages and responding to the arguments of the anti-vivisectionists on the list. He felt that he had a mission to try to convince undecided list participants of the importance of animal research.

Despite these limitations, our analysis does provide an overview of issues that confront individuals who take seriously the moral problems that are raised by our interactions with other species. Listening and talking are often rare commodities in the social debate over the moral status of animals. Forums for discussion between individuals holding different perspectives on this issue are few and far between. Sometimes AR-Talk reflected the intransigence of people living in irreconcilably different moral worlds. Often there was more talking than listening. But sometimes the conversations were stimulating and useful in terms of values clarification, if not persuasion.

It could be argued that AR-Talk was a failed experiment. But, at least for a while, it provided a forum for discussions between morally serious, highly involved people with fundamentally different ethical perspectives on one of the most divisive social issues of our time.

ENDNOTE

¹ All direct quotations are used with the writer's permission. However, the names used in the quotations have been changed.

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