

VIEWER BEWARE

SAVING SOCIETY FROM ANIMAL “SNUFF” FILMS

It's the stuff of nightmares. The images are often bloody, emotive and effective. Wallets are opened and people give, give, give to stop the suffering. These are films of animal life being taken, legally and illegally, footage that is sometimes real, too often staged.

From the unfamiliar world of medical research to the routine slaughter of livestock for food, “snuff” films chronicle the death-throes of animals. They are big business today, and most large animal rights groups maintain a library.

Meanwhile there is a history showing that the media, in constant need of images, have become co-dependents in a “supplier and addict” relationship.

Exposing illegal acts is part of the media's job, but they must work from facts, not manufactured nightmares. Media that use images of cruelty without authenticating them must take responsibility for misleading the public if they turn out to be staged. They are no less culpable than the people who staged them.

Likewise, the media must ensure that real images of legal activities are put in the correct context. For example, many animals exhibit muscle spasms after death. Yet all too often, the media and the public are duped into thinking the animals are still alive and suffering.

The only way the media can protect the public from unscrupulous operators who stage or misrepresent scenes is by ensuring they are not duped themselves. To this end, they must:

- Ask for full, uncut film footage, with audio. Anyone offering video but unwilling to meet this requirement is likely hiding something.
- Ask that all people in the film be named.
- Require sworn statements from the film crew in the case of film of an illegal act, attesting to the time, place and other circumstances relating to the act.

Presenting images out of context, or simply faking them, is a serious business. Following are some examples of people who have tried ... and been exposed:

1964: Artek Films vilifies Canadian sealers with film, aired by CBC, of a seal being skinned alive. The man in the film later tells a court that he was “employed by a group of photographers ... to skin a large seal for the film. I solemnly swear before witnesses that I was asked to torment the said seal and not to use a [club], but just to use a knife to carry out this operation, where in normal practice a [club] is used to first kill the seals before skinning them.” CBC is castigated “for not enquiring into its accuracy before screening,” but the damage had been done.

1972: The Canadian Association for Humane Trapping produces the film *They Take So Long to Die*. Scenes of animals suffering horribly in inappropriate traps

are subsequently aired on CBS. It is later learned the animals had been caught in the wild and released into a compound to be trapped and filmed at leisure.

1980s: Greenpeace Australia distributes film of two men mutilating live kangaroos as part of a campaign to ban 'roo products in Europe. Greenpeace only withdraws the film after a court convicts the men for breaking the law, and concludes that they were paid to do so by the film crew.

1988: Film of dolphins mangled in the gear of a Panamanian fishing boat is presented by Earth Island Institute as “tragically representative” of the US fleet, even though the fleet carries government observers on every trip. Drastic regulations follow; by 1992 the US fleet is cut by half.

1994: Posing as staff of a hunting magazine, a film crew tricks a man into committing acts of extreme cruelty on kangaroos. The film is used by animal rights group Viva!, which says it shows an “experienced, unlicensed but commercial killer” engaged in standard industry practice. The crew flee Australia before they can be prosecuted, but the man is taken to court, where it is learned he is indeed unlicensed, but he's also not a commercial shooter, and had no permit to shoot on the property where filming occurred.

Despite the findings, Viva! continues using the film, claiming it shows 'roos being hung via gashes in their legs “whilst still alive”. In fact, movements seen in the limbs are clearly muscle spasms.

1996: Film of a brutal dolphin slaughter is used in a campaign to block Venezuelan tuna imports to the US. Various groups claim it “proves” 40,000 dolphins are killed annually in a country where dolphins are protected. Then the uncut film surfaces. The crew had told fishermen they were scientists who needed to kill a dolphin for research and would take full responsibility. They supply the knife and direct the action. “Act natural!” yells the cameraman. “Get me more blood!”

1997: People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals releases edited video of an Illinois facility showing acts of cruelty to foxes, including electrocution, a method of euthanasia not approved in Illinois. PeTA claims the video depicts “modern fur farms”.

Subsequent investigation finds the facility was not a fur farm but a scent-producer, operating under the Department of Natural Resources. If it was a fur farm, it would have been permitted by the Department of Agriculture. The scent producer was punished, but PeTA never released the unedited footage, and continues to misrepresent its source to smear responsible fur farmers.

1998: US TV stations air video supplied by news company SweepsFeed of abused dogs and cats. The film, claims the Humane Society of the US, was taken in China, and depicts the source of fur which will be misla-

beled for sale in the US. Canada's CBC later reports that the video was given to SweepsFeed by an animal rights group, and was never authenticated. Said a SweepFeed spokesperson, "How do we know that video wasn't a fake video? We don't, because we didn't shoot it ..."

1999: Australian activists break into a licensed possum abattoir and install hidden cameras. The resulting video of possums being stunned and then bled airs on national TV, with the allegation that it shows extreme cruelty. The muscle spasms seen after bleeding has begun are proof, say the activists, that the animals are still alive. The Tasmanian Animal Welfare Advisory Committee finds no evidence of any breach of animal welfare, and concludes the video shows a well-conducted operation, while the operators appear to take "inordinate care" in all procedures.

2000: NBC Dateline uses video produced by the Humane Society of the US as part of its campaign against karakul. The video, shot in Uzbekistan, claims karakul is produced from unborn lambs removed from ewes killed for this purpose. Affidavits from producers attest that HSUS's claim is false. Uzbek Karakul Co. states: "Having thoroughly investigated the matter, we can confirm that the killing sequence in the footage was staged. The sequence was taken at the request of HSUS representatives, following a scenario suggested by them. The farm workers were asked personally by the HSUS representatives to bring a sheep, cut off its head and remove the unborn lamb."

2005: The jury is still out on this one, but the evidence is highly suspect. Video purporting to show fur production in Heibei, China is released by Swiss Animal Protection. Foxes and raccoon dogs are shown in a market. One man, in a butcher's apron, quickly kills a raccoon dog. But another, in street clothes, brutally skins alive a raccoon dog that he has hung on the back of a truck (with no license plate). The animal struggles wildly, making the process extremely difficult.

Also shown is a skinned, but still moving animal on a pile of carcasses. While the animal is covered in blood, showing its heart was pumping during skinning, those beneath it are clean, as they would be if skinned when dead.

Another scene shows a man hitting a fox on the head, temporarily stunning but not killing it. He then struggles to skin the obviously live animal, alternating with beating it.

Aside from the inhumanity, skinning a live animal is difficult, dangerous, and stupid, since bleeding will damage the fur. It is highly likely these scenes were staged.

2005: Mercy for Animals releases images of dead and sick chickens, claiming they were taken at Ohio Fresh Eggs. It shows hens with open wounds, immobilized without access to water, trapped in wires, covered in feces, and sharing cages with corpses. But a farm spokesman states: "We have no idea when or where they took the pictures. There's no proof they took them at any of our facilities. The cages didn't represent our houses. Our birds are very different. We deny and dispute that it's our birds ..."

2007: Pennsylvania egg producer Esbenshade Farms is cleared of all 35 charges of animal cruelty in a case based on video taken by an investigator with Compassion Over Killing (COK), who had been employed by the farm after misrepresenting himself. COK edited the video down to 19 minutes, including images of hens impaled on wires, trapped and unable to get to food and water, and caged with corpses. It then presented the video to a humane officer, who brought charges without first visiting the farm.

At trial, the defense questions the authenticity of the video, suggesting scenes had been staged, and that some footage was not even taken on that farm.

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The media are often approached by activists claiming to have risked their lives to produce videos of animal abuse. What these activists typically fail to provide, however, is information on what happened where and when, and who was involved. Often, they won't provide this information because they themselves staged the abuse.

FCUSA asked three major TV networks to explain their policies on using footage of animal suffering from outside sources. Did they require that sources provide uncut footage, or did they accept edited clips? If the footage showed people acting illegally, did they require that the people be identified, if only for their own records? And did they require that the source provide the time and location of the film?

All three networks were downright unhelpful. They can't resist covering a breaking story, so they err on the side of activists, and keep their fingers crossed they won't end up in court. And if they do, by the time the case comes up, the damage has been done and the people who staged the film are long gone.

Unless something is done, this supplier-and-addict scenario is sure to become more common. The media industry is more competitive than ever, and it is now within the reach of any activist to buy a video camera and stage whatever horror scene he or she wishes.

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