

Reproducing speciesism: a content analysis of Australian media representations of veganism

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Introduction

This paper contributes new research on representations of veganism in the Australian print media by adapting an approach used in a 2007 study of the issue in the United Kingdom (Cole & Morgan 2011). It conveys preliminary quantitative and qualitative data from a content analysis of how the practicalities and ethical basis of veganism – as an anti-speciesist social practice – were portrayed in Australian media in 2007 and 2012. Consistent with the UK study, the results indicate these media outlets are reproducing largely negative discourses about veganism, which it is argued are out of step with the lived reality of practitioners and the related scholarship.

Background

This research contributes to the critical animal studies literature that is increasingly attending to the role of the media in reproducing anthropocentric cultures and ideologies that perpetuate the oppression of other animals in various ways. As Fitzgerald and Taylor argue, one of the ways that the media contributes to animal oppression is through the bolstering of “a cultural hegemony regarding not just the acceptability, but the *necessity* of animal consumption” (2014: 166; original emphasis). The normalisation of human supremacy over other animals is partly achieved through the denigration of the opposite ethical position, that is, the vegan rejection of humans’ entitlement to do with other animals as they wish.

Cole and Morgan's (2011) media analysis of representations of veganism has furthered understanding of the institutional bases of speciesism and the exploitation of other animals. Their focus on the media was chosen because of its influence over public discourse and perceptions of veganism. They were particularly interested to learn if the animal rights, or anti-speciesist philosophy, motivating many vegans was conveyed in media reporting (Leneman, 1999: 222). In brief, Cole and Morgan found that "an overall vegaphobic bias" in the media served to marginalise vegans, entrench public ignorance or avoidance of the ethics of animal food production and consumption, and normalise human violence against other animals on a global industrialised scale (2011: 148). Vegans' fundamental ethical concern to avoid contributing to animal suffering was erased from the vast majority of media coverage analysed. Cole and Morgan (2011: 136) contend media coverage mirrors the over-emphasis in the academic literature on the dietary aspect of veganism and its elimination of animal products to the extent that a 'veganism-as-deviance' model is reproduced. They attributed the media's silencing of vegan concerns for other animals as a reflection of the deeply speciesist culture of western society, based on multiple layers of species' privilege. This privilege extends from the individual consumer of animal products to the immense power and profits accruing to the elites commanding the global animal-industrial complex (Nibert 2012; Twine 2012).

Research Methods

Following the methods set out in Cole and Morgan (2011), national and major capital city newspapers in each state/territory were searched using the keywords 'vegan', 'vegans' and

‘veganism’ (collectively described below as ‘vegan’) for the years 2007 (n=131) and 2012 (n=202). The electronic database *Factiva* was used instead of the *Lexis/Nexis* database employed in the UK study. A complete sample was obtained from *The Australian*, *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Courier Mail*, *The Territorian*, *The West Australian*, *The Advertiser* (Adelaide), and *The Mercury* (Hobart). The sampling frame permitted inclusion of content-specific articles about veganism, as well as descriptive applications of ‘vegan’ to seemingly unrelated topics.

Quantitative and qualitative thematic data analysis of the sample was conducted using a two-stage process. Firstly, each author independently categorised the sample using the broad ‘positive’, ‘negative’ and ‘neutral’ coding scheme set forth by Cole and Morgan (2011). Secondly, articles in the negative category were further coded using Cole and Morgan’s (2011) six thematic sub-categories of veganism as ‘ridiculous’, veganism as ‘asceticism’, veganism as ‘difficult/impossible’, veganism as ‘a fad’, vegans as ‘hostile’, and vegans as ‘oversensitive’. Results of each stage were collectively reviewed by the team to ensure agreement and consistency of the initial coding application and discuss discrepancies until consensus was achieved. Like the UK sample, some of the Australian articles contained more than one dominant discourse and were, therefore, included in the theme that was most strongly conveyed. The qualitative analysis was guided by the six themes noted above.

Findings

Basic descriptive analysis indicates that while the UK experience of negative articles outweighing neutral and positive articles was echoed in both the 2007 and 2012 Australian

samples, differences in their distribution patterns and the prevalence of specific negative themes were apparent (Table 1). The proportion of negative articles in the UK sample was sharply higher than the Australian samples at 74 percent. In the UK, the frequency of negative articles was 12 times that of positive articles, compared to 2.5 times as many in Australia (in 2012 it had risen to 3.75 times). Conversely, most Australian media coverage was either positive or neutral.

[Table 1 about here]

Themes dominating the negative articles also varied between countries. Both Australian samples contained more ridiculing and hostile articles than the UK sample, while asceticism was more prominent in the latter. The 2012 Australian sample indicated an intensification of ridiculing articles offset by weakening untenable and hostility themes since 2007.

Qualitative data from the 2012 Australian sample illustrates how Cole and Morgan's (2011) dominant UK negative discourses are represented in the Australian print media. The 2012 sample is the focus here because of its currency and results appear in order of most frequently represented themes.

Ridiculing veganism

A strong vein of ridicule ran through many of the Australian articles wherein vegans were often presented as absurd and ludicrous by cultural standards. As Cole and Morgan (2011) encountered, in the Australian sample this often involved depicting vegans as guilty by association with social eccentrics, out-of-touch elites, or as comical fools. For example, what

could be more outlandish than a “cross-dressing heavy-metal occultist vegan” performer (*CM*, 2012a: 10) or more pretentious than “the vegan, bicycle-riding, inner-city elites who are completely out of touch with mainstream Australia” (*SMH*, 2012b: 3)? Cumulatively, these stereotypes trivialise vegan ethical concerns for other animals.

Veganism as asceticism

A minority of articles conceded that the supposedly ascetic and risky dietary option of veganism might be warranted in exceptional circumstances, such as dealing with serious health problems or as an elite sports fitness strategy. The supposed strictness of veganism is referenced in accounts of austere lifestyles, like an American boxer who resorts to “strict” veganism to prepare himself for “combat” (*The Australian*, 2012b: 103), or cancer-sufferers who could not adhere to veganism’s “harsh and unjustified lifestyle changes to combat cancer” (*The Age*, 2012a: 5; 2012c: 13). These representations subtly earmark veganism as beyond the serious contemplation of the general public who are deemed incapable of, and have no valid reason for, the extreme abstinence that ethical dietary choices are assumed to entail.

Veganism as untenable

In the minority of negative articles that recognised the ethical basis of veganism, it was nonetheless conveyed as untenable in practice. In Cole and Morgan’s (2011) study, this theme encompassed depictions of vegan food as largely unpalatable or inaccessible. Preparing tasty and nutritious vegan food could be an ordeal requiring, for example, “meticulous scientific dedication to alkaline levels” to produce an appetising cake (*SMH*, 2012a: 16). Numerous articles indicated that dining out options were equally elusive (*SMH*, 2012c: 10; *The Australian*,

2012c: 2), particularly if your suburban cafes “are as vegan-friendly as 1960s country New Zealand” (*The Age*, 2012b: 10). These portrayals indicate that, despite the ethical motivations underpinning veganism, it is practically implausible.

Vegans as overly-sensitive, faddish and hostile

A small number of negative articles depicted the ethical concerns of vegans for other animals as irrationally motivated by sentimentality, gullibility and aggressiveness. For example, a reader’s complaint about meat being advertised in a vegan special feature received a curt apology (WA, 2012a: 5). However, the lengthier defence of the butcher’s advertising prerogative that followed implied prioritising ethical concern for animals over marketing and economic imperatives of the meat industry was an overly emotional request. Insinuations of excessive sentimentality coloured some depictions of vegans as blindly following a faddish, or even cultish, practice. An article offering parental advice on eating disorders noted, “Adolescents probably shouldn’t be vegetarian ... there is not usually a reason for them to become a vegetarian or a vegan or faddy about food” (WA, 2012b: 2). Unduly zealous commitment to an ethical diet was also linked to confrontational and hostile behaviours in some articles. In coverage of an infanticide case, the parents’ veganism was repeatedly reported, suggesting that it is both a form of child neglect and a hallmark of deviant individuals (CM, 2012b: 10; 2012c). Some of the more overt attacks on vegans emanated from members of the animal industrial complex in response to animal advocacy campaigns. For instance, a live animal export proponent echoed the stereotyping of animal activists as eco-terrorists (Sorenson, 2009) when he warned of the dangerous influence of “militant vegan groups” in the public debate (NTN, 2012: 14). These articles portrayed ethical dietary choices as the irrational pursuit of emotionally unstable and volatile individuals.

Discussion

Consistent with Cole and Morgan's (2011) analysis of UK media portrayals of veganism, our study lends comparative evidence that their six negative dominant discourses are also espoused in major Australian print media outlets. For the purposes of this relatively brief discussion we have combined them into two overarching and interconnected discourses: a discourse of irrationality directed at vegan motivations and a discourse of impossibility directed at vegan practices.

The negative themes of ridicule, over-sensitivity, faddishness and hostility speak to a general discourse of irrationality in which veganism is denigrated as a deviant lifestyle choice. It essentially attacks the reasons *why* people practice veganism as wrong-headed. Together, these articles comprise a substantial majority of the negative sample. They convey a lack of understanding, or dismissal, by the media of the underlying ethical concern for other animals that motivates many vegans. The social licence to trivialise veganism, which the media reflects and reproduces, suggests that widespread public awareness of the extent of suffering in the animal-industrial complex and of veganism as an anti-cruelty practice has yet to be achieved. No recognition of the growing global animal advocacy movement, as a body of highly informed activist citizens, was discernible in these articles (Munro, 2012). Rather, the discourse of irrationality served to pathologise and criminalise them while simultaneously depoliticising and distracting attention from the structural causes and consequences of institutionalised violence against other animals.

The themes of asceticism and un-tenability are aspects of a larger discourse of impossibility. It essentially attacks *how* people practice veganism. The asceticism theme underscores the assumed impossible emotional demands of practicing veganism, while the untenable theme dwells on the unviable practical demands involved. Articles where asceticism was a dominant theme focused on the extraordinary emotional fortitude needed to withstand the supposed deprivations of veganism, such that only vital health or career needs could muster such stamina. The assumed wrong-headed concerns for other animals noted above is not in question here; instead, only super-human needs and effort can justify and sustain the decision to live vegan. Articles in which veganism was depicted as untenable accentuated the practical impossibilities of food provisioning at home, in the community, and while abroad, alongside the social exclusion such efforts would likely entail. Both themes presented vegans as abnormal ‘others’ and outside their readership, albeit at times an aura of admiration was used to signify veganism’s embodied ideals that the ‘normal’ citizen could only aspire to reach, yet, by virtue of their hedonism, would inevitably fail. While seemingly laudable, such stereotypes perpetuate veganism as an impossibility, as a choice no human truly enjoys, despite research evidencing vegans and vegetarians feel otherwise (Cole & Morgan 2011; Hamilton 2006).

The lived reality of veganism, as depicted in positive articles and extant research, tells a rather different story about increasing vegan food accessibility, popularity and growing health sector support for the nutritional benefits of plant-based diets, for example (Crook 2006; Iacobbo & Iacobbo 2006). The veracity of the discourse of impossibility is further undermined by media reporting itself, wherein a six percent increase was recorded in the number of neutral articles from 2007-12, which largely advise of vegan dining options. This empirically weak line of

argument may help explain why there has been a 5 percent decline in the number of articles in this vein over the period. While the impossibility discourse may wither as vegan options become more prevalent, a greater proportion of reporting is likely to focus on discrediting the rationality of vegan ethics and politics. If this trend continues, the relative absence of journalistic standards of evidence, balance of perspectives, or vegan voices in the negative or neutral articles is of crucial note (Breit, 2008). In these articles veganism usually appeared tangentially in unrelated pieces and rarely featured in news items where journalistic quality is arguably higher. Yet, where experts or vegans were included, articles were more likely to be positive in overall tone (*CT* 2012; *The Australian* 2012a). The findings underscore the traditionally conservative role of the mass media in manufacturing public support for, or blindness to, the corporate sector regardless of the costs to the environment, including its human and other animal species.

Conclusion

Briefly, media coverage of veganism is doing more harm than good in conveying its ethical or practical desirability. These ostracising portrayals help explain why veganism struggles to foster credibility as a counter-normative ideology and legitimate counter culture amongst mainstream Australia (Ragusa & Crampton, 2014). Consistent with sociological analyses of British media, we argue these media practices discredit veganism's capacity to seriously counter hegemonic norms and cultural practices (Cole & Morgan, 2011). By failing to engage with the latest research or vegan practitioners, the dominant negative media discourses of irrationality and impossibility normalise speciesist, unsustainable and unhealthy social practices while shoring up the financial fortunes of the animal-industrial complex. The media remain largely out of touch with, or impervious to, research and policy positions of animal advocacy, health, food security

and environmental leaders, who urge a shift towards plant-based diets (D'Silva 2013; De Boer & Aiking 2011).

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Table 1 Percentage of articles per category

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Negative Discourses					
				Ridiculing	Asceticism	Untenable	Fad	Oversensitive	Hostile
UK 2007	6%	20%	74%	22%	21%	13%	7%	6%	4%
Aust 2007 (n=131)	18%	37%	46%	43%	16%	20%	7%	2%	13%
Aust 2012 (n=202)	12%	43%	45%	50%	17%	14%	6%	4%	9%