Are consumers wilfully ignorant about animal welfare?

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Abstract

Wilful ignorance is a documented human behaviour whereby people deliberately avoid information. Although much work has documented consumer attitudes toward farm animal welfare, few studies have questioned whether people even want to know how farm animals are raised. Using an internet survey of 1,000 subjects from the US state of Oklahoma, it is shown that around one-third admit to being wilfully ignorant regarding pork production. One-third also chose to look at a blank screen rather than a picture of how pregnant hogs are housed. Avoidance of guilt is shown to be a motivator for this behaviour.

Keywords: animal welfare, consumer attitudes, consumer preferences, gestation crate, swine production, wilful ignorance

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Much academic work has focused on studying consumer preferences for animal welfare, including the sources people use for information (McKendree et al 2014) — but one question typically neglected is whether a consumer even wants information. That is, what if some consumers would rather not know how farm animals are raised? Onwezen and van der Weele’s 2016 study in The Netherlands found that about 27% confess to ignoring specific information regarding meat production but, paradoxically, are also concerned with human responsibility.

Such behaviour is referred to as strategic or wilful ignorance, and without a keen understanding of its prevalence and nature a complete understanding of food preferences is impossible. Empirical research has demonstrated that consumers will often deliberately ignore information on negative externalities (such as environmental pollution) when choosing plane tickets (Thunström et al 2014). Individuals at risk of Huntington’s disease or HIV sometimes refuse to be tested even though it is both free and accurate (Bénabou & Tirole 2016). This empirical finding can be explained using economic modelling that combines the concept of multiple selves and guilt-avoidance (Thunström et al 2016), and models where information enters an individual’s utility function directly (Golman et al 2017). The appeal of wilful ignorance was also evidenced on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert when the host remarked, “Sometimes I wish there was an iPhone app that would help me forget where my iPhone was made” to much laughter. Do some individuals feel the same way about meat, dairy, and eggs?

It is a common notion that ‘ignorance is bliss’ in many aspects of life, including food. When a cattle industry representative was interviewed about a state-level initiative involving agriculture in Oklahoma, he told the reporter that, “Most of us choose [italics added] not to think about what went into making those two all-beef patties on a McDonald’s Big Mac”. How many people in the state of Oklahoma really exhibit wilful ignorance in regards to livestock and agriculture? This short communication reports the results of a survey of over 1,000 Oklahomans answering that very question. It provides a simpler and more direct methodology, and a different population, than that used by Onwezen and van der Weele (2016), but arrives at the same conclusion that roughly one-third of individuals exhibit wilful ignorance in regards to meat consumption. It also explores other explanations for wilful ignorance than just guilt-avoidance.

Objectives and survey

An internet survey of 1,000 Oklahomans was conducted in June 2016, where expressions of wilful ignorance were measured using the topic of pork production. The sample was purchased from Qualtrics and although the sample demographics differed from that of Oklahoma, as a whole, in a number of dimensions, correcting for this using sample balancing had only minuscule impacts on the results. Respondents were first asked whether or not