Public perceptions of undercover investigations in livestock farming: An end that justifies the means?

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Abstract

Secretly taken photographs of livestock production systems, representing animal welfare violations, regularly appear in the media and initiate discussions as to the legitimacy of overriding legal regulations in order to document animal welfare standards. This paper focuses on the public perspective and compares different forms of undercover investigation, weighing animal welfare against the invasion of farmers’ privacy. For this purpose, an exploratory online survey was conducted in Germany (n = 292). Participants were carefully selected to ensure that age range, education level and sex reflected the distribution of the society as a whole. In a split-sample survey, each participant was confronted with three scenarios. The scenarios were mapped using pictures showing various levels of farm conditions combined with small information segments describing the invasion of farmers’ privacy. Participants evaluated the scenarios for their perceived legitimacy and whether entering the premises should be punished. All forms of undercover investigation were perceived as legitimate by most respondents. Perceived legitimacy was considerably higher when obvious animal abuse was uncovered. Apart from where damage to property was involved, which was mostly considered as unacceptable, harsher punishment for animal welfare organisations generally obtained little social approval. The public’s increasing awareness of farm animal welfare overruled social norms regarding farmers’ privacy, and thereby demonstrated the importance of animal welfare in society. Approval of undercover investigations indicated that changes in housing and handling conditions as well as improvement in control mechanisms are necessary to increase animal welfare and thus public acceptance of livestock production.

Keywords: animal welfare, livestock production, pigs, secret pictures, undercover investigation, whistle-blowing

Introduction

In recent years, the media has repeatedly released undercover investigations showing injured or sick animals as well as improper housing and handling conditions on farms (eg Animal Recovery Mission [ARM] 2019; NBC 2019). In the United States, the idea of ‘whistle-blowing’ is widespread. There, most undercover investigations are conducted by animal welfare activists who work at farms under false pretences to document housing and handling conditions (Associated Press 2017). Under strong pressure from the US livestock industry, special laws (so-called ‘ag-gag’ laws) have been introduced during recent years, making undercover investigations a punishable offence (Shea 2014). More than half of US states have already introduced ag-gag laws (Marceau 2015), but fewer than ten have actually enacted such laws and some accuse ag-gag laws of being unconstitutional since they violate the right of freedom of speech (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [ASPCA] 2019).

In contrast, in Europe, animal welfare organisations mostly access premises at night without farmers’ knowledge (Deter 2017). Resultant damage to property is sometimes accepted as necessary to force the intrusion (Lenfers 2019). Additionally, media reports are often supported by interviews with employees describing the abuse from their perspective (eg FAKT 2019). To date, no ag-gag laws have been introduced in Europe. However, in Germany, the first political attempts to introduce harsher punishment for animal welfare activists have been observed. Nevertheless, the handling of undercover investigations remains controversial and is the subject of fierce debate.

The livestock industry, as the main opponent of undercover investigations, argue against hidden camera observations. They complain that emotionally loaded footage of the ‘black sheep’ may be assumed to apply to the entire industry. In addition, released material showing standard practices, such as tail docking, might lead to social loss of acceptance of these production methods (Johnson 2014).