

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Handling of livestock and modern sensitivities

Over a century ago, a journalist obtained employment in the meatpacking industry in Chicago intending to draw attention to the deplorable working conditions. When Upton Sinclair's book, "The Jungle" was finally published, the public reacted not to the conditions endured by the workers, but to diseased cattle and the lack of sanitation in an industry that provided the meat they ate.

Today we see the same sort of activism surrounding the meat industry. The differences between the two eras are mostly a matter of technology. Sinclair used a pen and paper and serialized his findings in a socialist newspaper before getting it accepted as a self-funded novel. Today, the tools are hidden video cameras and videos posted to the internet where some of them go viral.

No less than in Upton Sinclair's day, the battle today is an ideological one. He was a socialist hoping to end wage slavery; concern about tainted meat was the public's interest. Today's videographers issues range from the humane treatment of animals to making the eating of meat unpalatable to a large swath of the US public. For those concerned about animal welfare, the target audience is typically consumers who will pressure large restaurant and grocery chains to set standards for the meat/egg/milk products they sell.

One hundred years ago, the result of the work of Sinclair and other muckrakers was the passage of the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906 and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Today, state legislators debate ways to make it illegal for workers to surreptitiously make videos in meat production facilities.

The problem with legislation that aims to punish today's muckrakers is that it makes the meat industry look like it has something to hide. And, that only makes matters worse for everyone, all of the way back to the cow-calf operator.

If consumers think the industry has something to hide, they will switch products. With today's emphasis on a diet that includes a variety of whole grains, the only thing consumers have to do is add a complement of pulses and they can consume all of the essential amino acids needed for full protein utilization in humans—no meat or animal products needed.

As recently reported on the Drovers Cattle Network, Colorado State University and the Colorado Beef Council sponsored a "conference titled "Beef + Transparency = Trust." In an article, "Trust through transparency—Part 3," Drovers Managing Editor John Maday wrote, "Temple Grandin, known worldwide for her work in animal behavior and handling, told the group that if the livestock industry needs to show the public what they do. And if there is something we are unwilling to show, we probably shouldn't be doing it."

As economists, we agree. The availability of com-

plete-as-possible information to all market participants is a key expectation for economic transactions in free market economies. Information restrictions of all kinds are indefensible and totally foreign to the perfectly competitive models ascribed to by economists.

In this case one could argue that detailed information from producers, along with the reasons for practices, would provide a more balanced and real-world window into livestock production than an agenda-driven, highly-edited video that goes viral on the internet. As Maday writes, "Our challenge is [providing] the context in which members of the public see things. To someone with no background or experience in agriculture, processes or activities done for good reasons and considered acceptable within the industry could seem distressing."

Our only caution is that what is acceptable changes over time. When a quarter's worth of gas would get one an evening cruising the town square or strip, car mileage that was acceptable in the 1950s is no longer acceptable to consumers. Likewise there are animal husbandry practices that were acceptable within the industry at one time that are no longer considered appropriate. Just as carmakers have adjusted to a changing market, livestock producers and handlers may have no choice but to do the same.

In addition to transparency and adapting to a changing market, the industry has to be willing to speak out against bad actors, both companies and workers. For companies it may involve establishing a third-party verification process that includes standards that are developed with consumer input. For workers, it certainly involves training and supervision to ensure company policies with regard to animal welfare are adhered to. It also necessitates whistle-blower protection for workers who report being asked by supervisors to violate company policies.

Livestock producers and handlers are not used to being criticized for their animal husbandry. Their initial defensive responses to these criticisms might have felt appropriate early on, but could do long-term harm to the industry's credibility and growth potential. Programs like Colorado's "Beef + Transparency = Trust" seem to point the way to a defensible (and perhaps more profitable) posture for the livestock industry.

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