Framing the Issue: 
Religion, Secular Ethics and the Case of Animal Rights Mobilization

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This article addresses social movement framing, generally, and within contemporary animal rights movements specifically by conducting focus group analyses of a non-activist population. This contrasts with previous studies of recruitment that have examined the conversion process retroactively, culling data from those already involved in a cause. By soliciting the thoughts of non-activists, the efficacy of recruitment efforts and resonance of movement frames can be gauged through the reactions of those whom the movement is attempting to reach: the uninitiated. Ultimately, the question is raised: is it preferable to get noticed in a negative way or not at all? The findings constitute a cautionary tale for social movement organizations that employ incendiary language or images in their recruitment efforts.

Social movement actors commonly attempt to persuade those outside the movement to join their cause. They typically do so by framing their criticism of the status quo and prescribing a remedy in a manner that resonates with potential participants (Snow, Rochford, Warden and Benford 1986). Animal rights groups are no exception. PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), the most visible group promoting animal rights, and one of the most successful contemporary social movement organizations, commonly makes use of moral claims as a framing technique (Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Snow et al.1986). I examine whether such strategies are effective and what types of frames resonate most effectively with the broader public and potential recruits.

Social movements have multiple audiences, including the devoted, casual participants and the media. This article addresses social movement framing, generally, and within contemporary animal rights movements specifically, by conducting focus group analyses of one pivotal audience: the non-activist population. This contrasts with and complements previous studies of recruitment in the social movement literature, which tend to examine the conversion process retroactively, culling data from those already involved in a cause. By soliciting the thoughts of non-activists, the efficacy of recruitment efforts and resonance of movement frames can be gauged through the reactions of one critical audience the movement is attempting to reach: the uninitiated. The dynamic and colloquial nature of focus group interviews further facilitates the ability to tap into the target audience’s interpretation of the movement. This combined theoretical and methodological focus builds on recent theoretical inquiry into...

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the microfoundations of political action. Jasper (2004), in particular, suggests that exploration of the choices, or agency, on the part of social movement actors offers a promising avenue for social movement scholars, as the relevance of structural models – so dominant in recent decades – wanes.

I begin with a review of animal rights mobilization efforts relative to social movement and framing literature, followed by a discussion of methodology. I then present extended excerpts from the focus group discussions detailing participants’ reactions to PETA media. Finally I discuss the results and suggest the relevance and application of this research for social movement framing specifically and for recruitment efforts generally.

Animal Rights and Social Movements

Jasper (1997) observed that “Moral protestors are often sensitive to moral dilemmas the rest of us ignore; they sometimes generate new ways of understanding the complexities of the human condition.” (p.13) PETA and other animal rights organizations are prime examples of the “moral protestors” who are agents of social movements to which Jasper refers.

PETA was founded in 1980 and has experienced exponential growth, paralleling the arc of the contemporary animal rights movement as a whole. PETA’s membership exceeds 500,000 worldwide and they have an operating budget of more than $13.4 million (Peterson 1998). Their mission statement is: “Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment” (PETA website), and their mission is: “to protect animals from exploitation and cruelty, and to prompt people to reevaluate their relationship with other species.” (Peterson 1998:89) PETA has garnered success in several of their campaigns; for example, stopping major cosmetics companies from testing on animals. They are easily the most visible and recognized contemporary animal rights organization based on sheer celebrity power alone; among others, Paul McCartney, Pamela Anderson and Charlize Theron have been spokespersons for the organization.

As the best-known animal rights group, PETA sets the tone for the entire movement – and that tone is often shrill and fundamentalist (Jasper and Nelkin 1992). Animal protection groups operate along a philosophical continuum, from “reformist to radical.” Fundamentalists or radicals demand “the immediate abolition of all exploitation of all animals, on the grounds that animals have inherent, inviolable rights.” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992:9) PETA, perhaps the ultimate example of a radical animal rights group, has attracted controversy for its opposition to any use of animals in biomedical research, including testing for AIDS and cancer research (Peterson 1998). Critics have decried their alleged attempt to commandeer the entire animal rights movement: “PETA is on a Sherman’s March through the animal liberation movement, a warpath where anything goes if it’s ‘for the animals’ in their view.” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992:31)

Social movements, including those pertaining to animal rights, often provide a medium for moral expression in the increasingly secular and communally fragmented Western world (Jasper 1997). Moral claims have particular salience for many animal rights activists, who do not typically engage in traditional forms of religious practice (Maurer 2002). Social movements have long channeled their
moral energy into causes in the name of the dispossessed. According to d’Anjou and Van Male (1998:207), “Social movement actors often challenge authorities on behalf of people whose needs and interests are not addressed.” They quote “the American Quaker genius of anti-slavery,” Benezet, who, in working on behalf of “the outsiders par excellence,” stated: “God gave Man Dominion over the Fish and the Sea, and over the Fowls of the Air, and over the Cattle &c., but imposed no voluntary subjection of one Man to another.” (1998:217)

Animal rights activists seek to extend the logic of treating all humans with dignity to non-human animals as well. Indeed, for animal rights activists, non-human animals are the marginalized, powerless other, the new ultimate outsiders. The rise of terms such as speciesism — defined as discrimination against all other species deriving from the superiority of one’s own — and claims that rights apply to non-humans indicate a willingness to entertain the idea of animals having a moral presence and agency beyond mere utilitarian purposes (Gaard 2002; Jasper and Nelkin 1992).

Taylor (1996) argues that individual choices and activities, and efforts at self-improvement, “are linked directly to larger social and cultural changes taking place within the postmodern societies of the United States and Western Europe.” Many of these changes involve efforts to address and eradicate “-isms,” with animal rights seen as another stream in the confluence of isms — or the “matrix of domination” — to combat. Correspondingly, according to Dan Matthews, PETA director of campaigns:

> We've established women's rights, children's rights, gay rights, and I think the final frontier of social evolution is animal rights. I see it as much more a social cause than a political cause. It's not a movement you need to join by sending a donation. It's a movement you can join at your next meal. (Peterson 1998:87)

Gaard (2002) similarly notes that:

> vegetarian feminists have argued for the moral treatment of non-human animals on the basis of sympathy, on the conceptual linkages among sexism, racism and speciesism; on the recognition of flesh-eating as a form of patriarchal domination; and on the basis of culturally constructed associations among women, animals, people of color and nature, that are used to subordinate these groups in Western patriarchal thought. (P. 127)

**Animal Rights and Vegetarianism**

Of all the movements that are associated with the animal rights movement, vegetarianism has, perhaps, the most natural connection. Those who take animal rights seriously are likely to correspondingly see that breeding and raising animals to slaughter and eat is the ultimate violation of rights.
Vegetarians, however, are not necessarily animal rights supporters; concern for animals is just one path to vegetarianism. In fact, issues concerning personal health are the original motivation for most vegetarians (Maurer 2002). Nevertheless, a great degree of overlap exists among animal rights and vegetarian movement actors. For example, vegan (a vegetarian diet excluding all animal products) cuisine is served at the annual national animal rights convention in Washington, and animal rights conventions often share many of the same featured speakers with organizations such as the North American Vegetarian Society.

Many activists are devoted to both movements. The demographic makeup is, in fact, strikingly similar. Women comprise 70 percent or more of membership in animal rights groups, with membership in some groups reaching almost 100 percent women (Jasper and Poulsen 1995). PETA's own membership exceeds 80 percent women: "one of the most consistent findings in studies of attitudes about animal rights and animal research has been the gender difference." (Simonson 2001:402) Similarly, vegetarians are most likely to be "white, middle class females." (Maurer 2002:8) There is a congruous joint preponderance of college graduates and professionals. Perhaps the most striking commonality between the two groups, however, is their lack of traditional religious affiliation. Vegetarians are "less likely to participate in conventional religions." (Maurer 2002:13) Similarly, 65 percent of animal rights activists claimed to be atheist or agnostic when queried about their religious affiliations (Jasper and Poulsen 1995:502). "This lack of conventional religious beliefs most sharply distinguishes both animal rights activists and vegetarians from the population at large." (Jasper and Poulsen 1995:502)

Why do these movements attract so many women, particularly agnostics and atheists? Eating light has been associated with femininity (Maurer 2002). Women have also been socialized to be compassionate to suffering (Adams 1991; Jasper 1995; Maurer 2002). Being victims of systemic and historic oppression, Adams (1991) suggests that it is easier for women to empathize with the plight of animals destined for the butcher's block.

Revisiting Jasper's conceptualization of social movements as moral outlet, and mindful of their unconventional religious orientation, it is easier to understand how vegetarianism and animal rights activities could also fulfill the spiritual needs of the members of these groups. For many, commitment to the principles of vegetarianism and animal rights is part of an individual, even communal, spiritual ethic.

Despite similarities, there are important differences between vegetarians and animal rights activists. "Neither vegetarian nor animal rights groups nor their constituents are coterminous." (Maurer 2002:59) Not all animal rights activists are vegetarians (in a recent study by Maurer 37 percent were not) and, as noted above, many vegetarians are not motivated by concerns about animal rights (Maurer 2002). The process of coming to identify with these movements also frequently differs. Most vegetarians become so gradually, usually after an incubation of a few years. The process often entails interaction in intimate social networks with other vegetarians, typically including a family member or friend. In the absence of either, local vegetarian groups provide this personal support. One
organization leader advises, “If you want to see a vegetarian world, be the nicest, friendliest person you can be.” (Maurer 2002:129)

Moral Shocks and Condensing Symbols

Examining recruitment patterns in the animal rights movement, however, Jasper and Poulsen (1995) found most members have not been brought in through camaraderie and social networks, but rather through exposure to movement literature, moral shocks and condensing symbols. Moral shocks are events or situations that raise such a sense of outrage that individuals are inclined to react politically in response to them. For example, the most significant upward spike in the membership of pro-life organizations occurred in the year immediately following Roe v. Wade (Jasper and Poulsen 1995).

Social movements attempt to generate moral claims and shock through rhetorical appeals or the use of condensing symbols: “...verbal or visual images that neatly capture – both cognitively and emotionally – a range of meanings and convey a frame, master frame, or theme. Organizers use such symbols to recruit members, especially strangers.” (Jasper and Poulsen 1995:498) Effective condensing symbols represent “god terms” or “unquestionable moral absolutes.” Shock appeals are no stranger to the animal rights movement; indeed, “Shocking visual images are perhaps their most powerful tool.” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992:44) Some of the more powerful condensing symbols offered by animal rights social movements in recent memory include graphic images of baby seals with heads bloodied from being clubbed to death for their fur and “kittens with their eyes sewn shut” in experimental laboratories (Jasper and Nelkin 1992:44).

Framing

The values that social movements such as PETA promote may not resonate with, and may even be antithetical to, popular beliefs (Snow et al 1986). It is the defining task of these movements to “[devise] packages that are culturally contrary and resonant by using specific strategies.” (d’Anjou and Van Male 1998:212) Accordingly, groups such as PETA must frame their arguments with care. Framing refers to the way social movement actors present their arguments in a manner that may resonate with those outside the movement.

Frames are...‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective. (Snow 1986:464)

A stark and accessible example of framing is seen in the abortion debate. “Pro-life” organizations characterize abortion as the murder of an innocent unborn child, and often depict graphic images of aborted fetuses in their literature. The pro-choice movement argues for women’s rights to autonomy and control of
their bodies, free from governmental and societal control, without any equally strong, visceral image as a counterpoint.

Frame alignment refers to the linkage of individual and social movement organizations’ interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values, and beliefs and social movement organization activities, goals and ideologies are congruent and complementary. (Snow 1986:464)

Snow et al. (1986:467-72) discuss four frame alignment techniques: frame bridging, amplification, extension and transformation. Frame bridging refers to “the linkage of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem,” essentially, drawing in those with similar ideological inclinations via mass media, such as mail or email solicitation. Frame amplification refers to the “clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue problem or set of events” or the psychological unearthing of issues one may have previously considered, which are invigorated with a nudge from a social movement organization’s proselytizing efforts. Frame extension refers to the expansion of a social movement organization’s “boundaries of its primary framework” so as to address or include issues that may be of immediate concern to potential adherents, yet of peripheral import to its main objectives. For example, when leaders of the Austin Peace and Justice Coalition were concerned that their appeal was mostly to “white, middle-class baby-boomers,” they attempted to reach out to minority groups with the addition of a fourth goal to their promotional literature: “To promote social justice by non-violently confronting racism, sexism, and all forms of discrimination and oppression.”

Frame transformation is the most extreme and personal form of framing. New values are planted, old ones jettisoned, and contrary beliefs reframed, resulting in a transformation of frame. A phenomenon is reconceptualized so that what was once tolerable is now immoral and unacceptable. Animal rights groups, in particular, have often successfully used moral shock tactics to transform frames. A practice common at regular public meetings of one animal rights group is “giving witness to one’s conversion” to the movement, relating the experience or stimulus that shocked one into activism (Jasper and Nelkin 1992).

Another method of framing, pioneered by the vegetarian movement, is to attempt to evoke the donor animal from which the food on one’s plate originated. The goal is to make present the “absent referent,” or make one see on the plate not “meat” but rather, “dead cow” or “dead pig.” (Adams 1991)

**The Risks of Moral Shocks and Condensing Symbols**

Incendiary or extreme arguments, demonstrations, campaigns or literature may prove effective at connecting with subjects on an immediate and visceral level, engendering an instantaneous frame transformation. Short of this, images designed to morally shock might catch the attention of a subject when less controversial images might be ignored altogether. While the subject may not be
instantly transformed or may even react negatively, the incendiary image may represent the beginning of a journey of transformation. In short, an image may be effective simply by catching a subject’s attention. The success of moral shock tactics is well documented in the animal rights movement literature (Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Jasper and Poulsen 1995).

However, it is equally plausible that such an approach may deeply offend, resulting in a backlash against the organization, undermining its credibility and tainting the movement as a whole. According to Jasper and Nelkin (1992):

\[ \text{Rhetoric that compares animal suffering with the holocaust, that equates speciesism with racism, has emotive power for those who blur boundaries between humans and other species. For others, these metaphors appear outlandish, threatening, dangerously defying accepted categories. (P7)} \]

The possibility of backlash is particularly salient for a group such as PETA, which represents for many the entire animal rights movement. Framing an argument in extreme terms carries many risks. As the media often “detextualize” events by focusing on sensational aspects of a protest – indeed, are compelled to do so by the dynamics of news reportage – a situation may arise in which “the actions of a small minority may come to represent, in the eyes of the public, an entire movement.” (Kruse 2001:69; Gitlin 2003) When demonstrators create disturbances or engage in sensational acts, the demonstrators, not the issue in which they are engaged, become the focus of attention. This may “isolate protestors from the larger public who otherwise might have agreed with their cause... this situation also has the potential to reinforce the perception that the group is a fringe element of society.” (Kruse 2001:69) Of course this affects the way the organization is portrayed in the media, and how the public perceives it. “If interest groups are portrayed positively, their respectability may be enhanced. On the other hand, if they are portrayed in a negative light, their legitimacy may be undermined, and the public may be discouraged from identifying with the group.” (Kruse 2001:69) Legitimacy then becomes an issue for the success of future attempts to frame the group’s messages.

**Data and Methods**

Jasper and Poulsen (1995) suggest that one limitation to their research is that it worked in reverse, from protestors to their worldviews, derived from surveys and interviews with activists after their recruitment into a movement. Most notably, this may have led respondents to reconstruct their initiation and construct a linear narrative that may not have so neatly existed. Correspondingly, they conclude that future research should “examine members of the public and tease out their cultural understandings, as Gamson has done through the use of focus groups. Then we could see how movement organizers try to find condensing symbols that appeal to these understandings.” (Jasper and Poulsen 1995:488) Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) elucidate the reasons for the applicability and relevance of focus groups for harnessing visceral reactions and thoughts to stimuli.
Focus groups are ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns. The method is particularly useful for allowing participants to generate their own questions, frames and concepts, and to pursue their own priorities on their own terms, in their own vocabulary. (P. 5)

By initiating the discussions with open-ended questions, discussants are allowed to express immediate and visceral reactions and introduce language and relevant terms untainted by the moderator's preconceived ideas. Consequently, focus groups "can also provide insight into the way social movements' targets interpret the movement." (Blee and Taylor 2002:107)

I moderated eight focus group discussions in May 2003. The size of the groups ranged in number from 4 to 10, with 52 discussants ultimately participating. Discussants were recruited through an open plea in a large introductory sociology class at a major university, with approximately 350 students. Compensation for participation took the form of exemption from an upcoming paper project comprising 5 percent of the overall grade. Enrollment in this class should imply neither interest in the course content nor any particular intellectual or academic leanings: Sociology 101 is a general education course cutting a wide swath across many majors on a campus of tens of thousands. The sample is thus representative of the larger student body - not merely sociology majors. Because PETA has also actively targeted college campuses in many recent campaigns, the participants reflect an audience PETA has explicitly sought to recruit.

The data are admittedly limited to college students; thus, general conclusions need to be tempered. Nevertheless, within the sample there is significant heterogeneity reflective of the larger public, specifically with regard to gender, religion and political affiliation. This bolsters confidence that the findings may be generalized to a larger, more general population, and particularly to the key target and recruitment audience to which PETA is directing much of its effort.

Participants are on average 20 years old, with a range from ages 19 to 27. This age group is a prime target audience for such a campaign, as "...college students are particularly likely to lean toward vegetarianism; about 15 percent select a vegetarian dining hall option on any given day." (Maurer 2002:18) This is far greater than the 1 percent to 2.5 percent of the population estimated to be vegetarian in the United States. Thirty-one of the 52 (60 percent) participants are women and 45 (87 percent) are white, with the remaining seven African-American, Asian and Hispanic. In response to a brief demographic survey, 24 responded that they are non-partisan, 16 (31 percent) identified themselves as Republican and 12 (23 percent) as Democrat. When queried about religious affiliation, Christians and Catholics predominated (15 and 13, respectively), while eight claim no religion. The rest self-identified among these faiths: Buddhism, Lutheran, Judaism, Jehovah's Witness, Methodist, Mormon and Greek Orthodox.

Prior to the focus group discussions, visual materials were obtained from PETA itself, descriptions of which are detailed in the following section. The images represent a variety of media available for purchase (billboards, print ads,
buttons, stickers and literature). Some are lone visuals. Some are part of a larger thematic campaign, such as “The Holocaust on Your Plate” or JesusVeg.com. According to PETA organizer Noah Cooper, the images first appeared in different media outlets, targeting both niche audiences and the general public. PETA debuted the “Meat is Murder” image on their teen-oriented website, peta2. The Holocaust image was part of a traveling multi-media exhibit erected on college campuses and at city halls in major downtown areas. The “Jesus Was a Vegetarian” literature was distributed largely at Christian youth conferences (personal interview Feb. 3, 2006).

One copy of each image was passed among the focus group participants. Discussion then proceeded in two steps. First, participants were asked to react to the images at their own pace and in the order that suited them. This allowed for investigator evaluation of transformation, extension and absent referent frames, especially the frames that provoked the most visceral reactions. The second step involved a more general, probing discussion of the various images taken as a whole, and the participants’ reactions to them.

PETA’s ad campaign uses various framing techniques. I categorized them in a manner consistent with the frame alignment distinctions defined by Snow et al. (1986): transformation with special emphasis on moral shock, extension, absent referent and bridging.

Transformation

Three images utilize transformation framing. One simply states, in bold letters, “Meat is Murder.” Another, which also has religious overtones, shows a sheep suspended by a single back leg, showering blood on a nearby wall, with the accompanying text: “Lamb of God. Choose Life! Go Vegetarian.” Over the course of the focus group discussions what emerged as the most shocking ad is an image of emaciated concentration camp victims juxtaposed with chickens in factory farm cages with the caption, “To Animals, All People are Nazis.”

Extension

Seven images use extension to frame appeals to the public. One features, simply, a waving American flag, accompanied by the words, “Proud to be a Vegetarian American.” Two others feature attractive female models, scantily clad in garments composed entirely of foodstuffs, with the accompanying text: “Let vegetarianism grow on you!” Both ads seem to attempt to appeal to a male audience that otherwise might have little interest in pursuing either animal rights or vegetarianism.

The most provocative of the extension frames are the four religiously-oriented ads. The “Blessed are the Merciful” ad offers a vision of a Caucasian, blue-eyed Jesus with an orange slice for a halo, presenting a lengthy Biblical quote beseeching us to care for all animals. The “Jesus was a Vegetarian” ad features the statue of Jesus with outstretched arms above Rio de Janeiro, accompanied by Biblically-based arguments to “Go Vegetarian.”
"Animals are God’s creatures, not human property, nor utilities, nor resources, nor commodities, but precious beings in God’s sight. ... Christians whose eyes are fixed on the awfulness of crucifixion are in a special position to understand the awfulness of innocent suffering. The Cross of Christ is God’s absolute identification with the weak, the powerless, and the vulnerable, but most of all with unprotected, undefended, innocent suffering."

—REV. ANDREW LINZEY
JESUS WAS A VEGETARIAN

Did you know:

• Jesus opposed animal sacrifice in the temple, which preceded the consumption of animals.

• Jesus counsels mercy and compassion, which are the opposites of torturing, killing, and eating God's creatures.

• The multiplication miracle did NOT include fish. The fish in the story are symbolic of Christians, the multiplication a sign of the burgeoning church.

• In the United States, more than 8 billion animals are killed every year for food. Every one of those animals has a capacity for pain and suffering, just as our own cats, dogs, and other companion animals do. In fact, just as we do.

Jesus was the “Good Shepherd,” not a bloody butcher.

Show respect for God's creatures—go vegetarian!

For free vegetarian recipes, call 1-888-VEG-FOOD.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
501 Front St., Norfolk, VA 23510 • 757-622-PETA
Web site: PETA.org

For more information on the vegetarianism of Jesus: JesusVeg.com
The third religiously based ad features Moses brandishing a bunch of carrots, admonishing, “I said, Thou Shalt Not Kill! Go Vegetarian.” The “Lamb of God” ad, which also represents use of moral shock as a framing technique, is the fourth religiously oriented image that utilizes extension.
Bruce Friedrich, a senior campaign coordinator for PETA, in defense of the “faith-based argument for vegetarianism,” asks to “consider, please, that every social justice movement has had religious support. Given the level of religious commitment in society, it seems unlikely that we will achieve animal liberation without it.” (Friedrich 2002:36) But to whom will this campaign appeal? After all, extension frames resonate with those who are already predisposed to accept the movement’s worldview or perspective (Jasper and Poulsen 1995). Will this argument appeal to those most likely to become vegetarians: atheists and agnostics? One should think that most would not care what Jesus would do. Will it resonate with Jesus’ followers, imbued with the Judeo-Christian ethic of man’s dominion over the earth and its creatures? It seems to run counter to those beliefs.

**Absent Referent**

An image of a naked woman, sitting with her back to the observer, with different cuts of meat demarcated on her body, nicely reflects the absent referent technique. The accompanying text, “All animals have the same parts,” considers a fellow human (more specifically, for male audiences, a fit and attractive woman) in the same terms as we consider the animals we consume, and thereby makes present the absent animal. A more benign evocation of the absent referent is the image of a smiling cartoon pig, with the accompanying text “Meat’s No Treat for Those You Eat!”

Making present the absent referent, or donor animal, is disconcerting, as the specific animal that was killed is invoked. “Once meat is recognized as flesh like the consumer’s own flesh, then the sight of fragments of the dismembered animal... represents an all too evocative vision of that consumer’s own animal origins, and ultimate physical dissolution.” (Beardsworth and Keil:286)

**Bridging**

Finally, analysis of bridge framing is possible, at least to a limited degree. We know that bridge groups for animal rights organizations include women and political liberals. Participants in the focus groups were identified on the basis of their sex, and at least in two cases, on the basis of their ideology. We would expect that women and liberals would view the ad campaign, generally, and specifically the ad that features a peace sign more favorably than other types of respondents. This information allows an investigation of whether PETA’s ad campaign was more effective for members of bridge groups than it was for other participants.

The literature suggests that each of the framing techniques used by PETA in their ad campaign has been effective in recruiting supporters to social movements. The questions for this research, then, are whether PETA has effectively used these frames, individually and collectively, to recruit new members, whether their use has created a backlash, or whether these frames have had little to no impact.
at all. Here, effectiveness is measured both as the valence of participant reaction and the strength of that reaction.

**Findings**

Reactions to PETA’s framing techniques were mixed. Reaction was strong and negative to ads that either shocked or challenged the participants’ deeply held cultural beliefs, or those that lacked credibility with the participants. The campaign’s effort to base its animal rights appeals on vegetarianism seemed to be especially problematic. Some ads were viewed more positively, but with less interest. Still others generated almost no reaction at all. Below I detail these
One purpose of the three moral shock ads used in the campaign (Figures 1-3) is to engender a frame transformation in the uninitiated. The reaction to this imagery by the participants in this study was visceral, immediate, strong and negative. The Nazi image was deeply offensive to many, particularly those of the Jewish faith, who were outraged by the comparison of concentration camp victims to animals:

Female (F): I’m Jewish, and that Holocaust thing really bothers me. You can’t take our biggest tragedy of exterminating six million people and say don’t kill an animal or eat a chicken!
An unprompted and consistently made comparison was that of this image and the bloody lamb to the “abortion trucks,” small trucks that roam college campuses with billboard-sized graphic images of aborted fetuses:

Male (M): I think it’s almost too much shock value where people would just not even, if they had to glance at it, they would just sort of turn around in disgust and just want to forget about it; whereas, if they did something less shocking, you might actually have people consider it maybe or discuss it, but when you see something that shocking, you just say, “Oh, that’s gross, that’s wrong,” and then you just, you... you almost like become more angry at the advertiser than you do at people who are aborting babies.

F: Yeah, like the trucks and whatever, it’s like, it’s really extreme. They be going really extreme like that... Oh, that was making me like, oh, that’s so disgusting. They’re sick. I think they’re sick. They got sick minds to drive around with a dead fetus on the thing. I wouldn’t be, “Oh, abortion’s bad.” I would be like, “Oh, they’re (those who display the image) sick people.” That’s what I would think.

The overwhelmingly negative reaction to the moral shock ads may relate to the differences in pathways to protest that characterize animal rights and vegetarian groups. It makes sense that PETA, with movement leaders operating within the paradigm of moral shocks, would use similar tactics to try to persuade people to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle. The animal rights movement has a considerable degree of stranger initiation wherein members often are recruited through literature and moral shocks (Jasper and Nelkin 1992; Jasper and Poulsen 1995); whereas vegetarians are usually converted via close contact with other vegetarians in personal networks, and the duration of the transformation is typically lengthy (Maurer 2002).

The efficacy of moral shock framing for animal rights groups’ recruitment efforts may lie in the fact that the enemy or object of moral outrage is typically external to the target audience. It is easy to vilify and speak in morally damning terms about another person or entity. After all, it is the other who is clubbing baby seals, planting electrodes in cats’ heads at research laboratories, and running a circus: “Most moral shocks inform the viewer about what others – scientific researchers, circus trainers, and cosmetics companies – do to animals.” (Jasper and Nelkin 1992:44)

However, when one is confronted with personal and aggressive attacks condemning meat consumption, it is one’s own behavior being condemned: the enemy is thyself. The discussants took umbrage at both the content and the portrayal of themselves as culprits. Thus, it could be that moral shock campaigns are ineffective when promoting vegetarianism, because condemning meat consumption (as opposed to other violations of animal rights) inevitably forces people to confront their own behavior (as opposed to that of others), and they
are less likely to join a cause that requires them to make fundamental changes in what is such a deeply ingrained lifestyle.

Based on what was a nearly unanimous reaction to these images, it is safe to conclude that they were ineffective in evoking a positive response – positive in the sense that the audience accepted the logic of or were persuaded by PETA’s efforts. Indeed, more than one discussant expressed the belief that these images undermined the credibility of PETA, which clearly is not conducive to recruiting members. The only potentially encouraging result for PETA is that the moral shock ads caught the attention of nearly every discussant and the responses were notably strong. Some of the other ads went unnoticed or elicited only tepid responses.

This raises the question, is it preferable to get noticed in a negative way or not at all? The latter seems to hold virtually no potential for recruiting members. The former may not fare much better, but holds at least some potential for being part of a long process of conversion and recruitment. Although the initial reaction was negative, these images could linger and, combined with other reinforcing life experiences, might eventually change one’s outlook. Given the fundamental personal changes required for identifying with animal rights – specifically, vegetarianism – it would hardly be surprising that, for many, it would be a long, slow transition. Gamson notes, “…the process of adopting an injustice frame... takes time and is rarely compressed into a single encounter.” (1992:73) For some, attention-grabbing moral shock campaigns may be the first step in a process of transformation.

**Extension**

Seven images used a frame extending technique: the ad with a patriotic theme, four ads utilizing religious themes and the two ads that relied on sex appeal (Figures 4-10). Many took offense at the “Proud to be a Vegetarian American” image, angered that their “patriotism was being questioned” if they did not adopt a vegetarian diet. Others saw it as a shameless attempt to “jump on the bandwagon,” a transparent ploy to play on Americans’ post-September 11 emotions. Notably, many of the male participants – and none of the women – responded negatively:

*M: What are they doing sticking my flag on their vegetarianism? Because I’m not a vegetarian, I don’t have a problem with vegetarianism but it seems like they’re saying all Americans are vegetarians. I would hate to have that confusion and have to keep working at telling that to everybody I meet.*

*M: I was just going to say I bet they were jumping on the bandwagon and I bet that was made right after 9/11. And like everyone had American flags – they were just trying to say, “Hey, look, we’re patriotic, too!” I think that’s what they did here. After 9/11 everyone had American flags and they were just trying to fit in with everybody else.*
M: It sorta makes me almost go against what they're saying because of some of the messages like that flag there. They try to make it sound like if you're not a vegetarian you're un-American.

The opinions regarding the religious themes were consistently strong and negative. Similar to the reactions to the moral shock ads, most discussants disliked being made to feel guilty and expressed resentment at what they considered a personal attack:

M: OK. I mean, I guess I can just agree with everybody else, like if I saw any type of advertisement that was calling me a bad person I'd more, like, resent it than go along with it or think about it, but if I saw something that was like clever and humorous like the “Let Vegetarianism Grow on You,” like they're not making a statement that's like giving you an ultimatum, they're just giving you another option... than feeling trapped or backed into a situation where they feel like they have to defend themselves.

F: I don't like being told what to do. And I don't like being told somebody’s better than me. ...like [if it's] just worth somebody being proud of, like, to me that’s more interesting, I'd like be a lot more willing to listen to somebody that was approaching it in a pride way and telling me it's good to be a vegetarian, like, why they’re proud to be vegetarians. To me that's a lot more reasonable for me to listen to than somebody telling me why I’m wrong and why they hate me and why they think they’re better than me.

A second common reaction was that the religious messages were factually wrong. Many discussants offered an informed rebuttal to the Biblical interpretation offered by PETA:

M: Yeah, I didn't like the one about Jesus Was a Vegetarian and stuff. It's like...

M: He was a fisherman. Catching fish. I mean, come on now...

F: I think all the religious ones are kind of offensive because I don't think it says anywhere in the Bible that you can't eat meat... I'm a Christian and I think that's kind of dumb saying that you can't eat meat.
F: Using the Bible to turn people into vegetarians... It's in the Bible that, you know, they talk about the feasts they had and there was meat there, and they're (PETA) talking about how He's a vegetarian. They're, they're lying, and I mean they're using religion, they're using Jesus, to say, “Be a vegetarian.” They're lying about... that's not true, that's wrong.

F: I think they're taken out of context like a lot of things in religion. Some specific ones that I know are out of context, the, you know, the animal sacrifice... I know historically and religiously about the animal sacrifices in the temple... I mean obviously, I mean like the Nazi thing, like wow, I disagree with their method, I must disagree with them, same thing. If I can prove one of their facts are false then what's to say their other facts aren't false?

With these images PETA apparently has violated a major tenet of frame extending, which is to reach out to the target group in a way that is credible with its members. “Framing works when the statements are attributed to a credible source; framing fails when the same statements are attributed to a non-credible source.” (Druckman 2002:1059)

There was a somewhat positive reaction to the sex appeal campaign – though probably not what PETA intended. Many men noticed the women, yet said that the women were the only things they noticed, and did not or would not take the accompanying appeal into account.

M: (referring to a PETA anti-fur campaign when speaking of the sex-appeal ads) I'm partial to the PETA ads with celebrities in them where they're just like, “I'd rather not wear anything than wear fur.”

Moderator: And why are you partial to those?

M: Because they're beautiful celebrities. It doesn't make me want to be a vegetarian. It just makes me wanna see more posters.

The mildly positive reaction to the sex appeal ads might suggest nothing more than what anyone familiar with Madison Avenue already knows: sex sells. However, PETA might well ask in this case, “Sells what?”

Absent Referent

Absent referent framing uses imagery that invokes the hidden victim. This technique is used in the ad with cuts of meat drawn on a nude woman and in the “Meat is No Treat” ads (Figures 11 and 12). The former produced a reaction from a number of women, whereas the latter generated almost no response
from the participants. Perhaps it is not surprising that only women mentioned being affected by the image of the woman with the various cuts of meat demarcated on her body. Typical comments reflected a certain uneasiness that was generated by the ad:

\[ F: \text{The female all marked off as ground and ribs and chuck} \]
\[ \quad \text{– I don’t know. I can’t cook meat myself if I know what part} \]
\[ \quad \text{of the animal I eat, like I can’t eat chicken if I was to hold the} \]
\[ \quad \text{leg of a chicken. I get grossed out by that. It just kinda makes} \]
\[ \quad \text{me think of the different parts, you know, comparing it.} \]

\[ F: \text{I’ve gotta say the one where the parts are marked down only because, you know, when I eat a hamburger,} \]
\[ \quad \text{it doesn’t look like the cow... I don’t necessarily think} \]
\[ \quad \text{about what I’m eating.} \]

Perhaps significantly, no men expressed an interest in the attractive nude model, as some did in the case of the revealing images of the ads that were used in the extension frames. It is possible that the image of a beautiful nude model whose body is marked for cuts of meat is more disconcerting than scantily clad women sporting vegetables for clothes.

**Bridging**

PETA utilized the bridging technique in its “peace sign” ad (Figure 13). More generally, we would expect participants who identified with ideologically compatible groups to be more receptive to PETA’s campaign. Because there was no significant reaction to the peace sign ad, most of this analysis is based on the more general discussion following participants’ review of the individual images. Two women who fit the demographic profile for receptivity to animal rights (liberal, feminist, intelligent) provided the most trenchant insights.

First, a woman who had given the matter some prior thought and who was the only participant who had previously visited the PETA website:

\[ F: \text{There is a more informative way to go about it. I don’t eat... I have always eaten red meat, but I don’t eat red meat} \]
\[ \quad \text{anymore. I took a class at Ohio State, and it was not pushing} \]
\[ \quad \text{vegetarianism at all. It was an oncology class and it was} \]
\[ \quad \text{about cancer and like, just by presenting the facts on you} \]
\[ \quad \text{know, nitrates and stuff that are in red meat, carcinogens,} \]
\[ \quad \text{when the food is processed, it made me reevaluate my} \]
\[ \quad \text{own diet for a healthier lifestyle based on facts and not so} \]
\[ \quad \text{much opinion. So, I think that was a much more persuasive} \]
\[ \quad \text{method to get someone to see how maybe meat isn’t the} \]
\[ \quad \text{best thing for you because look at what it does to the human} \]
\[ \quad \text{body from a biological standpoint... I think that would make} \]
\[ \quad \text{a better argument than saying, well, Jesus was a vegetarian} \]
\[ \quad \text{because a lot of people say, ‘I don’t believe in Jesus, I don’t} \]
\[ \quad \text{care what He was.’} \]
Next, a liberal activist who has considered vegetarianism several times:

F: Well, I don’t know, it’s tough. I think none of them are particularly effective... Also the women ones – as a feminist, ads that compare women to food, consciously or subconsciously, turn me off completely. Especially PETA, as a liberal organization, I would expect a lot more from them and that would really disappoint me... I think a totally different type of advertising might appeal to me better as a person who is already liberal and involved in all different causes and has considered vegetarianism several times... Give me words, but not just pictures of what’s wrong with animal preparation and how. Give me a reason, not just a peace sign or a picture of Jesus or a half-naked woman. So I think none of these are really particularly effective towards me. They all kind of turn me against PETA.

Moderator: What would appeal to you most?

F: Something more logical and something that sunk in with my belief system that I already have and wouldn’t require an entirely different one. Like for somebody that is already liberal and already tries to think in more progressive ways. Something that isn’t trying to shock me so much as encourage me.

On the basis of comments from at least two participants, it seems that members of bridge groups desire more than an ad campaign heavy on imagery and shock value to sway them to the animal rights cause.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

At first blush, one might conclude that PETA’s recent campaigns have not served as an effective recruiting tool for the organization or for the animal rights movement. Certainly no participants in this study exhibited the transformational epiphany that has been identified in other studies of recruitment to animal rights groups (Jasper and Nelkin 1992). Indeed, the images designed to produce moral shocks, as well as the religious and patriotic ads, and the ad with the meat cuts on a nude woman were met with strong negative reactions. None of the other ads were met with either the strength or direction of feelings of these ads.

Yet, intensely negative reactions had distinct foundations. The patriotic ads, it seems, stretch credibility because they tend to be associated with shameless opportunism. The religious ads failed, in part, because of what is widely perceived as faulty interpretation of the Bible. However, the religious ads also failed to elicit a positive reaction because they raise contradictions in participants’ patterns of thought and force them to confront their own values and behavior as part
of the problem identified by the ad campaign. Similarly, the moral shock ads and the ad featuring the nude woman with meat cuts drawn on her body were viewed negatively because they challenge deeply ingrained cultural beliefs of the respondents. Many of the same participants who reacted negatively to the ads also struggle with the moral quandary that resulted from the contradictions in their beliefs that were exposed by these ads.

For some, the moral quandary will be resolved simply by not thinking about it, much less joining the animal rights movement. For others, however, exposure to the more challenging images of the ad campaign could represent the first step in a journey that will lead to joining the movement. Working out the moral quandary for them could mean the eventual transformation of their beliefs and lifestyles to bring them into alignment with the goals and values of the animal rights movement. Indeed, it is possible that a viewer may retain in one’s mind a vague connection between, for example, Nazis and animal consumers, and over time forget that they initially rejected the association. Therefore, it may be premature to conclude that the ads that produced the most strongly negative reactions were ineffective recruitment devices.

If it is credible to conclude that intensely negative reactions to PETA’s ad campaign might constitute an initial, albeit shocking, wake-up call for some potential recruits who have not considered animal rights or vegetarianism in any serious way heretofore, there is little support for the proposition that the ad campaign effectively reaches those who are closer to joining the animal rights movement. Tease ads and emotional appeals appear not to be enough to convince members of bridge groups who are considering joining the movement. At this stage of their development they likely require more reasoned factual information to make the transition.

This presents a problem for social movements, such as animal rights groups, which seek to expand membership. Potential recruits are diverse and at various levels of receptivity to an organization’s message. One type of campaign may be more effective for some types of potential recruits than others, and some campaigns might alienate some potential recruits while effectively reaching others. This suggests that groups that engage in broad based campaigns must target their audiences carefully, and deliver the appropriate message to each target audience.

Significantly, the four ads that were viewed most positively – the two sex appeal ads, the cartoonish “Meat is No Treat” ad, and the peace sign ad – also generated the least notice. Not coincidently, they were also the most innocuous and least threatening of the ads. This raises another problem facing social movement organizations in their efforts to recruit: Is it better to conduct strong visceral campaigns that, at least, initially turn people off, or is it better to offer more innocuous, less personally threatening campaigns that might not produce any significant reaction? If a movement opts for the incendiary route, there is a further risk in addition to directly alienating the immediate audience for the imagery: the more outrageous campaigns may catch the attention of the media, which may report on the specific campaign and larger movement in negative terms and reach an audience that far eclipses the outreach efforts of the
organization. Examples of this include both civil rights and Jewish organizations having publicly taken issue with recent PETA campaigns.

Animal rights groups such as PETA face a paradox when attempting to recruit vegetarians to the cause. Animal rights and vegetarianism are closely linked; we would expect the latter to serve as one of the former’s closest bridge groups. Yet, it is likely that the kinds of recruitment techniques, such as moral shocks, which have been documented as effective recruitment tools for animal rights groups, are ineffective for vegetarians. The reason could be that moral shock, and similar types of visceral framing, are most effective when the “other” is identified as the source of the problems. But because vegetarianism is typically an intense personal commitment, a vegetarian appeal grounded in traditional animal rights rhetoric inevitably implicates the self as, at least, part of the problem. For many, the moral quandaries created may result in rejection of the movement, at least in the short run.

When using the extension frame, groups such as PETA run the risk of losing credibility when their claims appear to have little relationship to the associated message and thus appear opportunistic (as in the case of the patriotic ad) or when they are perceived to contain factual errors. Attenuated claims that do not ring true with the target audience are not likely to be taken seriously.

These issues of rhetorical packaging are not specific to PETA; indeed they are universal dilemmas faced by social movement organizers for whom there is rarely one best solution. Jasper (2004) lists some of the major strategic choices with which social movement leaders must reconcile, both implicitly and explicitly, and with which PETA leaders have reckoned in their outreach efforts. One is the Extension Dilemma: “The further you expand your group (or alliance), the less coherent your goals and actions can be.” (P7) Negotiating this dilemma involves articulating the collective identity of a movement, and the degree to which membership should be open or closed. The “Reaching Out or Reaching In” Dilemma obliges leaders to choose which audience they wish to reach: those already within, or at least sympathetic to, a movement, or the uninitiated: “...two very different audiences.” (P. 10)

With finite resources and fragmented media outlets, diverse audiences with differing pathways to protest, PETA and other social movement organizations must craft their message and target their audience with care, lest they risk alienating those most likely to offer active, symbolic and financial support.

References


PETA Website: [www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org)


