

Exhibitors, Ethics & Exploitation

The Enforcement of Exhibitor Licenses on Social Media Platforms

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Questions to Consider

- Why do most humans enjoy watching animals?
- Why do many humans infantilize the animals we see and have no relationship within our life?
- Is this different than infantilizing the animals you have a relationship with?
- Would I know animal cruelty content when you see it?
- Are there differences between watching live-streams of wild animals in the wild versus curated content?
- Is it ethical to “own” wild animals?

Internet exhibition fuels wildlife trafficking and cruelty.

When “cute” is cruel: Social media videos stoke loris pet trade, study says

wildlife trafficking in the age of social media:
the story of the slow loris

‘CUTE’ SLOW LORIS VICTIM OF
OWN INTERNET STARDOM

The world's only venomous primate has become popular in recent years thanks to a proliferation of YouTube videos portraying them as cute and cuddly.

Normal redefined: Exploring decontextualization of lorises
(*Nycticebus* & *Xanthonycticebus* spp.) on social media platforms

VIDEO: Endangered wildlife being sold over social media warn animal rescuers



Algorithmically Designed to Tickle Your Brain

The data driven model knows humans want to watch animals – but not just any animals.

- The animal must be cute.
- The animal must be “baby.”
- The animal must be anthropomorphized.
- Bonus points if they are wearing a funny hat.



Infantilizing Wild Animals

- Infantilized animals tend to be the most exhibited in the digital and physical worlds.
- Pandas, for example: Giant babies, terrible at sex, dependent upon humans for their very survival. Wobbly little toddlers whom we must nurture lest they go extinct.
- Conservation centered on captive breeding efforts that are heavily filmed and distributed
 - Micromanaged lives



Enter the Digital World: anthropomorphized “stories”

- Understanding the negative impacts and unintended consequences of internet content, particularly viral animal videos.
- Searching for connection, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- But our search for connection feeds industries like illegal wildlife trafficking, continued overpopulation of companion animals, and active suffering for likes, shares, and reposts.



Exhibiting Animals on Social Media: Data and Analysis

- Animal exhibitors who use social media & other online platforms to share animal content online only rarely comply with relevant licensing requirements.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic platforms saw a surge of new users and increased usage among existing users.
 - Only a fraction of those content creators were licensed to exhibit their animals for profit.
- Social media permits a direct feed into unregulated, or poorly enforced where regulated, exotic animal content.
 - Trafficking
 - Misunderstanding trafficked animals, exotic animal trade, and the relationships



Promotion of the Exotic Animal Trade

- The YouTube Study: Determining whether the platform encourages or enables access to the animal trafficking industry via engagement.
- Content that features primates and big cats had the most “positive” user engagement.
- Interactions featured behaviors that normalized the keeping of exotic animals in homes and captivity.
- Cute! Precious! Adorable! Baby!
- The “Cute” factor substantially enhances the desirability and likelihood of a consumer acquiring an exotic pet.
- “Cute” animals have been an integral part of YouTube since its inception – the first video ever posted to YouTube featured exotic animals.



Wild West of Content Creation

- Considerable published content remains unregulated due to poorly established policies & limited enforcement.
 - Disproportionate to the volume of data upload.
- YouTube <\$ > Content Creators <\$ > Users
 - With no incentive to properly regulate or enforce, the content remains and the normalization of “owning” exotic animals thrives.



Strengthening Animal-Content Policies

- Platforms can strengthen their policies to:
- Flag content that includes exotic animals;
- Remove content that features
 - free handling of exotic animals,
 - unlicensed exhibitors, or
 - otherwise illegal content where the video is captured.



Instead, Platforms Incentivize Infantilized Wild Animal Content

- Platforms incentivize users to create as much content as fast as possible.
- Little content garners as much engagement as “cute” animals.
- Beyond the tens of thousands of dollars individual creators can earn per video, Platforms themselves rake in millions from “horrific animal cruelty videos.”
- YouTube may earn \$12million USD from sharing animal cruelty content, creators earning a likely \$15million aggregate.



The SMACC Report

- The Asia for Animals Coalition released the Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition Report which found that in
 - 13 months researchers found
 - 5480 videos on social media platforms promoting animal cruelty.
 - Mostly monetized
 - 77.5% of cruel content involved birds, companion animals, wildlife, reptiles, snakes, and primates.
- Most of the content was considered “obvious and intentional.”



Dressing Up Bae

- SMACC found that many primates were specifically infantilized by dressing them up in children's clothing or having them do human tasks, also dressed in human clothing.
 - Withholding bottles from baby macaques, forcing chimpanzees to spray disinfectant while dressed up.
- In one instance, a macaque was punished for breaking a bowl by being forced to stand straight against a wall while wearing doll clothing.
 - This was viewed 551,882 times at the time the report was compiled.



Comparative Laws & Licensures for Exhibiting Animals

- Common threads:
 - Where regulations exist, they are poorly if at all enforced against social media content creators.
 - Laws may not include the digital world and still regulate only the physical exhibition of animals.
 - Some jurisdictions still don't have a unified cruelty law at all.



The United States: Animal Welfare Act

- The Animal Welfare Act (“AWA”) is enforced by the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (“APHIS”), which is part of the Department of Agriculture (“USDA”).
- Anyone who exhibits a certain number of animals for a profit must have a license.
- Few content creators have a license despite many digitally exhibiting the requisite number of qualifying animals for profit.
- Even if they did, APHIS does not enforce the AWA against digital content creators.



United Kingdom

- Specifically numerates digital content exhibition as an activity that must be licensed & comply with relevant protective measures.
- Must obtain a license where the exhibition occurs (in this case, filmed).
- Licensing requires meeting specific animal welfare, care, facility, and veterinary provisions.
- Several different enforcement branches have roles and responsibilities in enforcing the law.
- The Welfare Act authorizes that any individual or body can prosecute for a welfare breach, and several organizations do.
- Enforcement broadly remains an issue. But the tools are there.



China

- Wildlife Protection Law governs the protection and management of wildlife “resources.”
 - Includes provisions for the exhibition of wildlife species and sets requirements for obtaining permits, protecting endangered species, and ensuring the welfare and wellbeing of exhibited animals.
- Regulations on the Management of Terrestrial Wildlife in Captivity are issued by the State Forestry and Grassland Administration, governing terrestrial wildlife held in captivity, including those kept for exhibition.
- Regulations on the Management of Public Welfare Exhibitions are issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and govern public welfare exhibitions, including those involving animals.



But where's the cruelty law?

- China does not have a broad animal cruelty law.
- Animal torture is frequently filmed and shared on QQ and other regional platforms.
 - Legal Daily, a Chinese news outlet, found a flourishing underground market where abusers were paid for producing clips or live streams of torture.
- China accounts for nearly 80% of TikTok's revenue. With no comprehensive animal cruelty law or small-time exhibitor oversight, animal abuse content is relentless.



Bearing Reality

- “Go, go, go said the bird: humankind Cannot bear very much reality.”
- The demand for animal driven content feeds not just the content creator and platform’s pocketbooks.
- Tributary industries
- Ouroboros of exploiting animals via breeding, buying, selling, hunting, trafficking, content creation.



Who bears the moral weight?

- Platforms and governments have a resource issue driven by the volume of content, where even were policies to exist the millions of videos are too numerous to adequately moderate.
 - Yet both earn millions from the creators as revenue or taxes.
- Viewers fail to report or recognize cruelty when they see it, thus permitting visual digital consumption.
- Viewers devour content in a never-ending quest for connection.



What about AI?

Wildbook: An AI System that can detect whether videos are displaying exotic animals. Platforms may then obscure, add content warnings, and implement pop-ups notifying that the content may support wildlife trafficking or animal cruelty.

Then, after review, removal of the content that supports wildlife trafficking and cruelty.

WildMeOrg/
wildbook-ia



Wildbook's Image Analysis (WBIA) backend service
supporting machine learning for wildlife
conservation





Thank you!

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