



Vegaphobia: derogatory discourses of veganism and the reproduction of speciesism in UK national newspapers¹

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Abstract

This paper critically examines discourses of veganism in UK national newspapers in 2007. In setting parameters for what can and cannot easily be discussed, dominant discourses also help frame understanding. Discourses relating to veganism are therefore presented as contravening commonsense, because they fall outside readily understood meat-eating discourses. Newspapers tend to discredit veganism through ridicule, or as being difficult or impossible to maintain in practice. Vegans are variously stereotyped as ascetics, faddists, sentimentalists, or in some cases, hostile extremists. The overall effect is of a derogatory portrayal of vegans and veganism that we interpret as 'vegaphobia'. We interpret derogatory discourses of veganism in UK national newspapers as evidence of the cultural reproduction of speciesism, through which veganism is dissociated from its connection with debates concerning nonhuman animals' rights or liberation. This is problematic in three, interrelated, respects. First, it empirically misrepresents the experience of veganism, and thereby marginalizes vegans. Second, it perpetuates a moral injury to omnivorous readers who are not presented with the opportunity to understand veganism and the challenge to speciesism that it contains. Third, and most seriously, it obscures and thereby reproduces exploitative and violent relations between human and nonhuman animals.

Keywords: Discourse; media; newspapers; nonhuman animals; speciesism; veganism

Introduction

Human violence towards and exploitation of nonhuman animals is endemic in 'developed' industrial societies, including the UK. For example, over 850 million nonhuman land-dwelling animals are annually slaughtered for human

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food in the UK (DEFRA 2010a, 2010b). The number of aquatic animals slaughtered is not recorded, their individual deaths being subsumed by aggregate weight statistics. Veganism represents an opposition to violent and exploitative human-nonhuman animal relations. Veganism is defined by The Vegan Society (2008) as:

... a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practical – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose [. . .] In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.

The institutionalization of human oppression of nonhuman animals is evidence of the pervasiveness of speciesism. Speciesism was first conceptualized by Richard Ryder as a form of prejudice against nonhuman animals, analogous to sexism and racism, that:

overlook[s] or underestimate[s] the similarities between the discriminator and those discriminated against and [. . .] show[s] a selfish disregard for the interests of others, and for their sufferings. (Ryder 1983: 5)

As David Nibert argues a *sociological* account of speciesism requires an analysis of its manifestation in social institutions and relationships, ‘the social construction of speciesist reality’ (2002: 195). This moves beyond the philosophical roots of the term in the works of Ryder, Peter Singer (1995), and more recently, Joan Dunayer (2004). These authors, while making vital contributions to understanding the embeddedness of speciesism in language, thought and action, effectively limit speciesism to an individual attitude or practice. Just as anti-feminist discourse perpetuates and legitimates patriarchal social relations (see Walby 1990), so, we argue, does anti-vegan discourse perpetuate and legitimate speciesist social relations.

Empirical sociological studies of vegans are rare (McDonald 2000; Cole 2008). When vegans are present as research participants, they are usually treated as a subset of vegetarians and their veganism tends to be viewed as a form of dietary asceticism involving exceptional efforts of self-transformation (see for example Beardsworth and Keil 2004). However, research also reveals the prominence of animal rights² as a motivation for many vegetarians (Amato and Partridge 1989; Beardsworth and Keil 1992, 1993, 1997). Given the subsumption of vegans among a larger group of vegetarians in much of the research literature, the importance of animal rights as a particular motivation for vegans is underexplored. When vegans are researched specifically, animal rights clearly emerges as the primary motivation (McDonald et al. 1999; McDonald 2000; Larsson et al. 2003). It is therefore plausible to assert that on the basis of existing evidence, veganism is understood by most vegans (though not necessarily in these terms) as an aspect of anti-speciesist practice.

However, the focus on diet, and specifically on dietary 'restriction', in much of the extant literature, tends to perpetuate a veganism-as-deviance model that fosters academic misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the meaning of veganism for vegans (Cole 2008). In terms of broader societal dispositions against veganism, the mass media are arguably of far greater significance than academia in that they represent a key site of contestation for the meaning of veganism. However, to our knowledge, no empirical sociological study of the representation of vegans or veganism in the UK media has previously been undertaken.

In this paper, we approach the news media adopting a Foucauldian conceptualization of discourses, recognizing them as 'structured ways of knowing' which become 'institutionalized as practices' (Ransom 1993: 123). As Teun van Dijk suggests, there is 'probably no other discursive practice, besides everyday conversation, that is engaged in so frequently and by so many people as news in the press and on the television' (1991: 110). While it cannot be asserted that audiences are passive consumers of media, news stories are interpreted and consequently reinforced within frameworks which derive at least in part from the assumption that there is a consensual nature of society (Hall et al. 1978). Given that often, news stories lie outside the audience's direct experience, the media's job is to render these stories comprehensible, placing them within a realm of understanding which makes them appear natural (Hall et al. 1978; Gitlin 1980; see also Herman and Chomsky 1994). Although the media does allow for disagreement with dominant discourses, these take place within often already established frameworks of understanding. Counter-discourses are therefore in a more difficult position, competing against pre-existing terms of reference (Hall et al. 1978). Consequently, as Foucault notes, there are parameters placed on what becomes possible to discuss and which help to explain 'why a certain thing is seen (or omitted) [and] why it is envisaged under such an aspect' (Foucault 1989: 61). It is in any case more difficult for those representing minority opinions to access the media than for mainstream groups or opinions (Danelian 1992). When access is granted, the tendency is to present dominant perspectives as coming from a professional – someone of 'high status', whereas alternative perspectives are less likely to be attributed to an expert (Kruse 1998).

With reference to vegans and veganism, it is not only media representations which send out a message to audiences about how such issues should be viewed, but also the way that the dominant practices around meat-eating are used to set the discursive parameters. This is not to argue that vegan discourses are completely absent from the media. For example, empirical evidence suggests that a transition to veganism often follows exposure to messages which are critical of speciesism and exploitative human-nonhuman relations. This includes non-mainstream media, such as vegan activist leaflets, books, films and websites (Amato and Partridge 1989; McDonald et al. 1999; Larsson et al.

2003). Therefore, mainstream media messages about veganism are contested. However, contestational messages are not as widely distributed and require more effort on the part of social actors to seek them out.

In this paper we critically examine the language used to describe vegans and the practice of veganism in UK national daily and Sunday newspapers, for the calendar year of 2007, with a view to understanding one instance of speciesist discourse. In the next section, we describe the method used to analyse newspaper discourses. We then discuss our results in terms of the frequency of particular discourses, before turning to an interpretation of the meaning of each in turn. We conclude with some thoughts on possible strategies for combating derogatory media discourses of veganism, centring on the assertion of veganism as anti-speciesist practice.

Methods

LexisNexis, an online archive of content from printed sources, was used to search all UK national newspapers for the keywords 'vegan', 'vegans' and 'veganism' for the calendar year 2007, chosen as the most recent complete calendar year available when research began. This method had several advantages. It facilitated quick data gathering relative to manual archive searches. It allowed us to ascertain with some confidence the range of discourses in which keywords were embedded, in that, barring technical glitches, no use of the keywords in any UK national newspaper was missed. This was particularly useful in that it revealed discussions of vegans and veganism in unanticipated contexts, such as in 'celebrity vegan' stories. A drawback of LexisNexis is that it does not illuminate instances where veganism is discussed implicitly or tangentially, for example in the case of articles critical of the role of 'livestock' farming in climate change. LexisNexis is also less useful for detecting neologisms such as 'veg', used as a generic term to describe vegans and vegetarians simultaneously. Searching for the keyword 'veg' would have proved unwieldy given its ubiquitous use as shorthand for 'vegetables'. A further limitation is that LexisNexis does not provide accompanying images with articles. Analysis of visual representations of vegans and veganism would merit a separate study.

The assembled sources were read and broadly categorized as 'positive', 'negative' or 'neutral' according to our interpretation of the overall tone of each source. Letters from readers were included, as editorial decisions to publish them may reasonably be interpreted as constituting part of newspapers' discourse on vegans and veganism. During this process, recurring discursive themes emerged that were used to generate subcategories of 'negative' discourses. After initial coding, sources were re-read and 'negative' subcategories adjusted to more accurately reflect the discourses contained within them.

Finally, sources were read for a third time, with particular attention paid to those that contained more than one ‘negative’ discourse, or combinations of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ discourses. Final allocations to categories were carried out on the basis of our interpretation as to the dominant discourse in each case.

Results

Our search yielded 397 articles in which one or more of the keywords were used at least once. The articles were collated and read, and organized under three broad headings: ‘positive’, ‘neutral’ and ‘negative’ (see Table I). Of the 397 articles 22, or 5.5 per cent, were categorized as ‘positive’; 80, or 20.2 per cent, were categorized as ‘neutral’; 295, or 74.3 per cent, were categorized as ‘negative’.

‘Positive’ articles were those deemed to be favourable towards vegans or veganism, for example giving glowing reviews of vegan food or providing an explanation of one or more argument for veganism. ‘Neutral’ articles mentioned vegans or veganism in passing without evaluative comment. Nearly all neutral articles were travel or food service reviews. ‘Negative’

Table I: *Frequency of discourses of veganism by newspaper**

Newspaper	Positive		Neutral		Negative		TOTAL
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
<i>Daily Express</i>	0	0	1	100	0	0	1
<i>Daily Mail</i>	3	6.5	2	4.3	41	89.1	46
<i>Daily Star</i>	0	0	0	0	13	100	13
<i>Daily Telegraph, The</i>	1	4.8	1	4.8	19	90.5	21
<i>Financial Times</i>	1	7.7	7	53.8	5	38.5	13
<i>Guardian, The</i>	10	10.5	36	37.9	49	51.6	95
<i>Independent, The</i>	1	6.7	2	13.3	12	80	15
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	0	0	1	12.5	7	87.5	8
<i>Mirror, The</i>	2	12.5	1	6.3	13	81.3	16
<i>News of the World, The</i>	0	0	1	20	4	80	5
<i>Observer, The</i>	1	2.7	2	5.4	34	91.9	37
<i>People, The</i>	0	0	4	66.7	2	33.3	6
<i>Sun, The</i>	0	0	2	9.5	19	90.4	21
<i>Sunday Express, The</i>	1	9.1	2	18.2	8	72.7	11
<i>Sunday Mirror, The</i>	0	0	1	14.3	6	85.7	7
<i>Sunday Star, The</i>	0	0	0	0	2	100	2
<i>Sunday Telegraph, The</i>	0	0	1	12.5	7	87.5	8
<i>Sunday Times, The</i>	1	3.1	7	21.9	24	75	32
<i>Times, The</i>	1	2.5	9	22.5	30	75	40
TOTAL	22	5.5	80	20.2	295	74.3	397

Notes: * N = Number of articles. Percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth of a percent and therefore do not always total 100.

articles were those which deployed one or more derogatory discourses, usually featuring one, or a combination, from a routinized set of anti-vegan stereotypes. In some cases, more than one derogatory discourse was present in the same article. These discourses, in order of frequency of occurrence, were:

- Ridiculing veganism
- Characterizing veganism as asceticism
- Describing veganism as difficult or impossible to sustain
- Describing veganism as a fad
- Characterizing vegans as oversensitive
- Characterizing vegans as hostile

Table II shows the occurrence of each ‘negative’ discourse in each newspaper.

Some articles were ambiguous in that they synthesized ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ elements. However, with one exception, we judged that all such instances had the rhetorical effect of the ‘negative’ elements undermining any ‘positive’ content. Such examples were therefore categorized as ‘negative’. In practice, ‘negative’ discourses shade into, recall and reinforce each other, and their separation here is for analytical purposes only. Some of these interconnections will become apparent in the following sections, in which each of these discourses is considered in turn, before some reflection on the ‘positive’ and ‘neutral’ categories.

Table II: Frequency of negative discourses of veganism by newspaper

Newspaper	Ridicule	Ascetic	Difficult	Fad	Oversensitive	Hostile	TOTAL
<i>Daily Express</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Daily Mail</i>	14	10	10	3	4	0	41
<i>Daily Star</i>	5	2	1	2	2	1	13
<i>Daily Telegraph, The</i>	3	4	5	5	1	1	19
<i>Financial Times</i>	2	1	1	0	0	1	5
<i>Guardian, The</i>	17	14	7	7	2	2	49
<i>Independent, The</i>	4	3	1	1	3	0	12
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	1	4	1	0	1	0	7
<i>Mirror, The</i>	5	2	3	0	0	3	13
<i>News of the World, The</i>	2	1	1	0	0	0	4
<i>Observer, The</i>	10	6	9	3	5	1	34
<i>People, The</i>	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
<i>Sun, The</i>	5	4	5	0	3	2	19
<i>Sunday Express, The</i>	1	1	2	2	2	0	8
<i>Sunday Mirror, The</i>	0	3	0	3	0	0	6
<i>Sunday Star, The</i>	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
<i>Sunday Telegraph, The</i>	3	4	0	0	0	0	7
<i>Sunday Times, The</i>	9	9	3	1	1	1	24
<i>Times, The</i>	5	16	3	2	0	4	30
TOTAL	88	85	53	29	24	16	295

Ridiculing veganism

The ridicule of veganism usually proceeds through ‘guilt-by-association’, often drawing on a presumed status of veganism as self-evidently ridiculous in the newspaper readers’ imagination:

VEGAN back-packer Tammy Andrews, [. . .] is taking her dead gran’s crocodile bag to Australia . . . so she can bury it where it came from. (*The People* 2007b: 22)

In this case, the acceptance of the rightful objectification of crocodiles as ‘providers’ of skin for handbags, is implicitly deployed in order to make the respectful act of posthumously restoring subjectivity to that crocodile(s) appear ridiculous. Elsewhere, veganism is juxtaposed with other cultural phenomena that are presented as self-evidently ridiculous. One example comes from a *Guardian* story about the internet:

Among the bizarre personal lists of UFO sightings (pictured) and vegan-friendly cafés . . . (*The Guardian: The Guide* 2007: 31)

Such examples attempt to define veganism as an inoffensive eccentricity. Others juxtapose veganism with the language of human oppression, as in this homophobic example from a reader’s letter on the subject of ‘counciltax [*sic*] snoopers’:

[t]hey will leave my home thinking I am a Devil-worshipping vegan naturist, hopelessly gay, with a much-kissed photo of John Prescott by my bed. (*Mail on Sunday* 2007: 80)

Sometimes ridicule combines quasi-scientific claims with anti-vegan stereotyping. In response to a reader’s letter about a flatulent work colleague, Joe Joseph of *The Times* wrote:

. . . your colleague may recently have adopted a vegan diet for health or ecology reasons. Switching to such a diet can apparently result in the creation of half a litre of gas a day; which is paradoxical given that environmentally concerned people often switch to a vegan diet because they deem cows an eco-menace [. . .] because they produce clouds of methane. (*The Times: Times2* 2007b: 3)

This subversion of environmental arguments for veganism appears out of context with the reader’s question, especially because the vegan diet of the offending colleague is a fiction of the journalist. It is also telling that only ‘health or ecology reasons’ are mentioned – the absence of animal rights philosophy as a basis for veganism is a consistent theme throughout newspaper discourses of all kinds. Commitment to animals’ rights, unlike the ‘strangeness’, environmental or health claims of vegans, is rarely a target for ridicule in the

context of veganism. This represents a discursive divorce of veganism from animal rights debates, thereby defusing veganism of its most radical content. Given the prominence of animals' rights as a motivation for moving towards veganism (see the introduction to this paper) this represents a major distortion of the lived experience of veganism. This finding on the absence of the anti-speciesist content of veganism from newspaper discourse is supported by the prominence of the next derogatory discourse – veganism as asceticism.

Characterizing veganism as asceticism

The ascetic stereotype operates in more or less explicit forms. At the more implicit end of the scale comes the prefixing of 'vegan' or 'vegans' with adjectives that remind readers of the acts of self-denial or the abstemious disposition that vegans allegedly adopt. Most common is the phrase 'strict vegan' (for example, in the *Sunday Express* 2007: 13). Other examples include 'staunch vegans' (*The Sun* 2007b); 'ardent vegan' (*The Times* 2007a: 7) and 'fervent vegan' (*The Mirror* 2007b: 25). These adjectives reinforce an image of veganism requiring some more or less extraordinary effort of will in order to go against the omnivorous grain of British dietary culture. However, research indicates that vegans³, especially those motivated by animal rights, find their diets aesthetically preferable and no hardship (Rozin, Markwith and Stoess 1997; Hamilton 2006). The ascetic image also clears veganism of any associations with pleasurable eating experiences, despite research findings on the broader variety of plant-based foods enjoyed in vegetarian and vegan diets (Haddad and Tanzam 2003).

Vegans are more explicitly defined as ascetics in a number of ways. Asceticism is sometimes compounded by association with other stereotypes of self-denial, as in: '... a lifespan exceeding that of a vegan bank manager' (*The Observer* 2007: 35). Alternatively, hedonistic behaviour is deemed remarkable when displayed by a vegan: '[h]e may be a vegan, but that doesn't prevent him from being a party animal' (*Daily Mail* 2007d: 11). The tension between multiple forms of asceticism and hedonism was neatly illustrated in an interview with a musician:

No matter how rock'n'roll you become, how f***ed up you get, people still think you are Buddhist vegans. (*The Times: The Knowledge* 2007: 28)

In contrast, multiple forms of self-denial are the presumed norm for vegans, in this case commingling with an assertion that 'women's rights' amounted to the right to alcoholic intoxication:

QUEEN Dullard Gwyneth Paltrow had plumbed new depths of boring, by announcing it is "inappropriate" for females to get drunk. The teetotal vegan, 34, set the women's rights movement back 20 years by declaring: "I think it's gross [...]" (*Daily Star* 2007b: 14)

Another image of multiple asceticism was conjured up in an article about actor Demi Moore: '[i]f you are a vegan and you have to wear support stockings, where is the joy in life?' (*Daily Mail* 2007g: 22).

The meaning of asceticism discourses is complex. One interpretation might be of a grudging respect for vegans succeeding in remaining 'strict' in a consumer-oriented omnivorous world full of temptations – 'be really good and go for vegan, organic booze!' (*The Observer Food Monthly* 2007a: 82). However, as we discuss below, the anticipated newspaper reader is almost never vegan. Instead, the image of asceticism serves to reassure the omnivorous reader of the normality of their dietary ethics, and by association the normality of their selves in contrast to the weirdness of vegans: 'scrawny hippies [. . .] vegan bones' (*The Daily Telegraph: Art* 2007: 16). If veganism were portrayed as pleasurable and easy to maintain, discourses of omnivory would be in a more precarious position on discursive terrain landscaped by vegans themselves, and populated with difficult debates about speciesism, violence and exploitation. Derogatory discourses therefore serve to keep veganism at arm's length, a way of acknowledging its existence without ever having to really think about the challenges it offers. Asserting the difficulty of a vegan diet fulfils the same function.

Describing veganism as difficult or impossible to sustain

The 'difficulty' of veganism in newspaper articles typically boils down to the ridiculing of vegans' food as bland, unsatisfying, or impossible to obtain. This sometimes manifests as a pitying tone for the alleged paucity of vegans' diets and their exclusion from the supposed pleasure of eating nonhuman animals:

The Labour MSP [. . .] admits to supporting Kilmarnock FC, but she can't have a pie at Rugby Park because she is a vegan. (*Daily Mail* 2007f: 13)

A segue with asceticism is achieved through othering vegans' food as morally worthy yet unappetising: 'as . . . wholesome as one of those pots of vegan yoghurt' (*Sunday Times* 2007f: 4). Meanwhile, the taken-for-granted blandness of vegan food is asserted even in the face of evidence to the contrary: 'suitable for vegans – though you'd never guess it from the taste' (*The Guardian: G2* 2007: 23). 'You' are not a vegan, otherwise the deliciousness of the 'vegan' Easter egg being reviewed would be unremarkable. In contrast, the deliciousness of the bodily secretions of nonhuman animals is presented as unimpeachably beguiling: 'she loves cheese too much to become a Vegan' (*Daily Mail: Weekend* 2007: 49). While the asserted difficulty of veganism is typically limited to these subtle phraseologies, ridicule, asceticism and the difficulty of veganism combine with overt speciesism in this spectacular example of 'you are what you eat' derogatory discourse:

If the choice is between swopping [*sic*] a balanced diet of food stuffs I can get at my local supermarket, for a faddish, fanatical diet cult [veganism, as promoted in the book *Skinny Bitch* . . .] I'd rather be a fat pig. (*Daily Mail* 2007c: 57)

This tacit, but ambiguous view of the easy life as the good life (supermarket omnivorous convenience versus cultish veganism) re-emerges in celebratory stories of the failures of vegans, typically centring on the irresistibility of nonhuman animal's flesh . . .

Liv Tyler went vegan for love when she met Joaquin Phoenix, but returned to beef when the relationship went sour. (*The Observer Food Monthly* 2007b: 27)

. . . or nonhuman animal's milk:

[. . .] he is a vegan, unlike her – she still cannot resist occasional dairy products. (*The Sunday Times* 2007c: 24)

Such examples reassure omnivorous readers that veganism is doomed to failure, and that they are not to feel guilty for not attempting it. It is a short step from celebrity vegan failure to a more thoroughgoing derogation of veganism as nothing more than a dietary fad.

Describing veganism as a fad

While it is straightforward to dismiss vegans in the abstract through ridiculing them or their diet, or by portraying vegans as ascetics, prominent individual vegans generally invite different derogation strategies. The most common is to dismiss their veganism as a fad, and thereby to taint all vegans by association with faddism. Although several celebrities are situated as vegan faddists, two examples deserve special attention for their consistent vilification throughout the year: Gwyneth Paltrow and Heather Mills. Paltrow is established as the celebrity vegan faddist *par excellence*:

Gwyneth Paltrow is so green she's practically salad. Charged by macrobiotic, wholegrain fuel and wielding a child called Apple, she and Chris Martin are Britain's first family of meatless food. (*The Observer Food Monthly* 2007b: 27)

This despite the questionable status of Paltrow's identity as a vegan:

One wonders whether strict vegan Gwynnie has thought this madcap foodie adventure through. Although she insists: "I won't be eating meat on this trip – I'll get by on fish and rice". (*Sunday Express* 2007: 13)

The genuineness of Paltrow's veganism is irrelevant to her usefulness as an icon of vegan faddism. Her apparent willingness to eat the flesh of sea-dwelling

animals is useful discursively as it feeds another stereotype – that of the hypocritical vegan who is vulnerable to the temptations of nonhuman animals' flesh. The article goes on: '[Q]uite what the mother-of-two will do when faced with a plate of chorizo is anybody's guess'.

The treatment of Heather Mills is more hostile and overtly sexist. In the early part of the year, her veganism was dismissed as the hysterical response of a jilted lover, jealous of the place of Linda McCartney in Paul McCartney's affections:

WHY can't Heather Mills see that she will not endear herself to the public by copying Paul McCartney's former wife Linda by going vegan and producing beauty products to rival former step-daughter Stella? (*Sunday Mirror* 2007: 43)

Later the press vilified Mills for hypocrisy, supposedly revealing her vegan commitment as a sham and serving to ridicule veganism by association. Coverage of her launch of Viva!'s (Vegetarians International Voice for Animals) campaign highlighting the role of 'livestock' farming in contributing to climate change, focused on her arrival in 'a gas-guzzling Mercedes 4 × 4' (*The Sun* 2007c) and a misrepresentation of comments aimed to highlight the bizarreness of the cultural practice of drinking the milk of other species: 'Heather said people should ditch drinking cow's milk and find alternatives – even dog's or rat's milk.' (*The Mirror* 2007a: 27). Mills later commented:

I said that if you drink cows' milk you may as well be drinking rats, dogs or cats milk, not that you should. I never said: Drink rats' milk. I'm vegan I wouldn't drink anything like that. (*Daily Mail* 2007a: 8).

Only the *Daily Mail*, covered this clarification. In contrast, *The Mirror* (2007a: 27), *The News of the World* (2007), *Daily Star* (2007a: 31), *The Sun* (2007c), and *The Sunday Times* (2007d: 17) all reproduced a fallacious report of Mills exhorting the consumption of rats' milk and/or highlighted her allegedly hypocritical use of a 'gas-guzzling' car, while substantially ignoring the environmental arguments behind Viva!'s campaign. The nadir of the coverage of this story came from the *Daily Star*, who, ironically and offensively, described Mills as '[t]he eye-rollingly crazy amputee':

The anti-Mills army are royally cheesed off with the mental vegan, 39, for becoming the most high-profile ambassador for rats' milk since The Simpsons character Fat Tony tried to feed it to Bart. (*Daily Star* 2007a: 16).

It is significant that the vegans singled out for press vilification are women. Faddism is frequently associated with women's subculture as a trivialization strategy (McRobbie 2000). Similarly, the discourse of the 'over-sensitive' vegan plays to a gendered stereotype of sentimentality. Available evidence suggests that vegans are approximately twice as likely to be female as male (Cole and Stewart 2010; Imaner Consultants 2003; Amato and Partridge 1989).⁴ Possible

explanations for this include a greater capacity for empathy with nonhuman animals on the part of women as a result of a shared experience of (patriarchal) oppression (Adams 2000) and a gendered socialization process that disproportionately predisposes women to compassionate feelings towards nonhuman animals relative to men (Maurer 1990). Vilification of women's responses to nonhuman animal exploitation therefore combines sexism with a trivialization of a compassionate ethical response as 'sentiment'. Rod Brookes and Beverley Holbrook (1998), for example, highlight the gendered nature of press debates around the Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis (BSE) crisis in Britain in 1996. Women, including leading female politicians, were largely depicted as hysterical in their calls to stop eating beef while the voices of 'reassurance' were provided by male experts. The recent vitriolic backlash against Mills, inflamed by the back-story of her acrimonious divorce from Sir Paul McCartney, is reminiscent of the depictions of irrational women which proliferated at the time of the 'beef crisis'. Even more explicit vituperation is reserved for Mills, because she is seen as going *against* nature in her alleged advocacy of rats' milk. The questionable 'naturalness' of humans drinking the milk from any other species, including cows, is obfuscated in the newspaper reports. Such explicit antipathy is unusual however. A more typical press approach is to decry the thin-skinnedness of vegans.

Characterizing vegans as oversensitive

The image of the oversensitive vegan plays to stereotypes of the sentimental 'animal lover' unable to cope with the harsh realities of nature red-in-tooth-and-claw. The typical form for this discourse is weak jokes at the expense of vegans. These jokes usually explicitly or implicitly associate meat-eating with toughness and realism in comparison:

[. . .] looks about as comfortable as a vegan in an abattoir. (*The Guardian: Sport* 2007: 20)

like [. . .] inviting a vegan to a fondue night. (*Daily Mail* 2007e: 56)

they will spit him out like veal at a vegan dinner party. (*The Sunday Times: Culture* 2007: 14)

When the target is female, anti-vegan and sexist discourse may be combined. But even when discussing veganism in the abstract, the oversensitive discourse is also a form of tacit feminization as it draws on gendered stereotypes of women as 'over-emotional' or irrational. The usually unstated 'oversensitivity' argument goes as follows:

[Vegans and/or women] are excessively sentimental. They are incapable of coping emotionally with the harsh realities of animal predation. Objecting to

violence against other animals, gives evidence of their irrationality. They are therefore unsuited to rational debate on human relationships with other animals. They are therefore to be ridiculed and excluded from such debates.

The effect of this rhetoric is that, by definition, only humans who consume nonhuman animals demonstrate themselves as not 'too sensitive'. Thereby anti-speciesism, as practiced by vegans, is excluded from discourse about human-nonhuman animal relations.

Occasionally 'oversensitivity' is used to legitimate direct attacks on vegans. The following letter to The *Sunday Times* editor entangles vegaphobia and Islamaphobia in its response to a report of a Muslim supermarket worker being exempted from handling alcohol:

If they are to allow Muslim staff to opt out of serving alcohol, then can the Jews refuse to serve bacon and the Hindus beef products or indeed vegans any kind of meat product? It's time to draw the line I fear. (The *Sunday Times* 2007e: 18)

This kind of indignation at real or imagined vegan claims to being treated with respect for their beliefs is relatively unusual, as it implies the exercise of a threatening agency to the speciesist order that is absent from the passivity imputed to the ascetic, faddist, or sentimentalist. On occasions, derogatory discourses take the imputation of vegan agency further, when they vilify the 'hostile vegan'.

Characterizing vegans as hostile

The rarest derogatory discourse was that of the hostile vegan. Examples ranged from the milder 'outspoken vegan' (The *Sun* 2007a) through 'militant vegan' (The *Times: Times2* 2007a: 6) to the outrageous 'vegan terrorists' (The *Times* 2007b: 12). But these examples referred to a fictional character in a television programme, a lead actor from the film *Babe*, and a character from a novel respectively. More unusual in its direct characterization of vegan hostility, though still tongue in cheek, was this allusion to the connection between veganism and animal rights activism: 'It's always: "I'm a vegan. Stop murdering animals, you bastards."' (The *Sunday Times* 2007b: 54).

The major example of vegan hostility in 2007 was rather different in character, coming in the form of strident reports on the trial of 'vegan parents' for the murder of their baby in the USA: 'Vegan Killers' (The *Sun* 2007d); 'Vegan diet kills baby' (The *Mirror* 2007c: 23); 'Strict vegans guilty of murder' (The *Times* 2007c: 43). The veganism of the child's parents was stressed, despite the prosecutor's statement that '[t]he child died because he was not fed. The vegan diet is fine.' (The *Guardian* 2007b: 17). These reports indicate clear anti-vegan bias, in that, as the prosecutor stated, the veganism of the parents was

irrelevant to the death of the child from starvation. When non-vegans starve their babies to death, they are never reported as ‘Omnivorous killers’, and nor are we informed that a ‘Meat and dairy based diet kills baby’. In this instance, a hostile, literally murderous, discourse is informed by the more usual ascetic discourse of veganism. The real hostility of vegans is implied here as visited upon their own, as an extreme, tragic, instance of the denial of the flesh.

The rarity of the hostile vegan discourse, in the context of the much more common strategies of ridiculing vegans and their food, accusations of asceticism or sentimentality, makes sense if we consider derogatory discourses as a coherent whole. The overall effect is to defuse the most unsettling aspect of veganism – the calling to account of omnivorism for its complicity in violence towards nonhuman animals. The association of veganism with some or other form of eccentricity amounts to a dissociation of veganism from animal rights activism, in spite of the links between the two within the activist community (Animal Aid 2009; Viva! 2009; and see Maurer 1990), and as discussed earlier, in vegans’ own discourse.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of vegans and veganism thus far discussed, there were some apparent exceptions, to which we now turn.

Positive and neutral discourses

Articles that were ‘neutral’ in their treatment of veganism were almost all examples of products and services ‘suitable for vegans’, for example:

Like most places in Cuba, it is not ideal for vegans, considering most dishes contain meat, usually pork, but Liz is a vegetarian and she coped okay. (The *People* 2007a: 44)

The apparent effect of these examples is to ameliorate the monolithic effect of derogatory discourses. They appear to be well-meaning attempts to help vegan readers, or those looking after or catering for vegans, to negotiate the food service and travel industries. But on closer inspection, overtly ‘neutral’ discourses reinforce the conception of ‘veganism as difficult’, in that they make clear that special arrangements must be made in order for vegans to be ‘catered for’. For a non-vegan reader, being vegan is therefore made to seem more difficult. One cumulative effect of ‘neutral’ newspaper discourse is that veganism among readers is only ever anticipated as a ‘lifestyle’ or consumer choice. This is especially evident when ‘vegan foods’ are promoted alongside meat:

Bestsellers include the Beet Burger (Cornish beefburger with beetroot, watercress and horseradish and roast garlic mayo) or the vegan Sunflower Burger (ginger, coriander and chilli tofu burger with tahini sauce, sweet roast peppers and salad sprouts). (The *Sunday Times* 2007a: 33)

The interests, concerns and experiences of vegans are almost never addressed, and almost never heard directly, save a handful of letters from vegans themselves in the course of 2007. Sometimes, the outsider-consumer status of vegans is made explicit: In *The Guardian*, ‘chef and committed carnivore’ Tom Norrington-Davis advises the anxious ‘meat-eater’ unfortunate enough to live with a vegetarian or vegan. Asserting that ‘chefs hate vegetarians’, he informs ‘us’ that ‘[i]f you thought eating out was bad, wait till you get a vegetarian round to meet the family’ and later alludes to negative stereotypes of ‘vegan food’ in the statement ‘[t]hen, of course, there is bean curd (oh, stop making that face)’ (all quotations *The Guardian* 2007a: 18). The article, written as a sympathetic guide to the uninformed ‘meat-eater’ in how to cope with the mysteries of vegetarians and vegans, instead reinforces our ‘otherness’ through deploying discourses of the difficulty of veg*n diets (eating out and in familial relationships) and the asceticism of veg*n diets (the allusion to the ‘well-known’ unpleasantness of tofu). Therefore, even in a newspaper that gives more visibility to veganism than others, such as *The Guardian* (see Table I), that visibility comes at the price of relegating veganism to a ‘lifestyle’ issue.

Among the few ‘positive’ articles on veganism, there is barely a mention of the ethics of non-violence, compassion, or anti-speciesism that underpins it. The sole example of a lengthy report on some of the advantages of veganism to be found in 2007, Edward Batha’s report on living as a vegan for a month, was substantially defused by his confessed identity as a ‘devoted carnivore’. After enumerating a list of health and well-being benefits accrued at the end of the month, Batha concedes that ‘[i]t’s not so bad, this vegan thing’ (*Daily Mail* 2007b: 38). Batha’s article is also revealing of his own (at least initial), and wider societal vegaphobic attitudes:

My decision to go vegan elicited a variety of responses, but not one was enthusiastic. Meat eaters thought it ludicrous, even vegetarians weren’t convinced it was possible, and one person told me he’d rather eat his arm. With ill-disguised glee they ran through lists of things I wouldn’t be able to eat. [. . .] The doctor was deeply sceptical [. . .] and said he wouldn’t recommend veganism as the body needed meat to function. (*Daily Mail* 2007b: 38)

When it is borne in mind that Batha’s article contained by far the greatest amount of pro-vegan content of 2007, it is reasonable to assert that newspaper discourses remained vegaphobic for the entire calendar year.

Conclusion

In this article we have described a set of interconnected derogatory discourses that produced an overall vegaphobic bias in UK national newspapers in 2007.

There are three interlocking effects of derogatory discourses of veganism. The first is the marginalization of vegans themselves, evidenced through the ubiquity of the imagined omnivorous reader and the lack of articles addressing the beliefs, experiences or opinions of vegans. A partial recognition of the existence of vegans comes only through 'lifestyle' articles, especially in broadsheet newspapers, which suggests an anticipated reader disposed to lifestyle experimentation and therefore interested in veganism only as a consumer choice. Secondly, the derogation of veganism helps non-vegans to avoid confronting the ethics of exploiting, imprisoning and killing nonhuman animals. As Batha put it,

It is an uncomfortable fact that, as a meat eater, I am very happily complicit in being removed from the knowledge of how my meat [*sic*] gets to be on my plate, but vegans do not believe in burying their heads in the sand (*Daily Mail* 2007b: 38).

Making veganism sound outlandish or difficult, and misrepresenting the motivations of veganism as consumer choice, enables non-vegans to treat veganism as a curiosity, at best, or a dangerous obsession at worst, as in the case of the 'Vegan Killers'. The disarticulation of veganism from animals' rights obliterates the anti-speciesist heart of veganism and protects the mainstream omnivorous culture from criticism. This evokes parallels with Stanley Cohen's discussion of 'condemnation of the condemners' (2001). Those who highlight behaviours they believe to be wrong find themselves to be the target of accusations of hypocrisy or deviance as those they condemn deflect attention from their own actions.

Thirdly, and most importantly, vegaphobic discourse facilitates the continued normalization of human violence on an unimaginable scale. Instead of veganism being used as an opportunity to open up debates about our relationships with nonhuman animals, it is abused as a reason not to care, or even think, about these issues. Given that the majority of journalists (as with the general population) are not vegan, this is unsurprising. It has been suggested that journalists will tend to highlight reports from those who possess similar viewpoints and opinions and will largely ignore those with which they disagree when making their own reports (Manning 2001). Our findings provide inferential support for that suggestion.

It may be a vain hope that speciesist Western culture is to be imminently overthrown in favour of a peaceful and compassionate vegan utopia. As Carrie Packwood Freeman notes, in terms of moral progress, 'the news poses no threat to the anthropocentric worldview that enables animal exploitation' (2009: 98). However, an understanding of the elaborate interplay of anti-vegan stereotypes, the near silencing of vegan opinion and experience and the absence of animals' rights viewpoints from discussions of veganism is suggestive of fruitful anti-speciesist strategies *vis-à-vis* the media. The sheer effort to

discredit veganism may be evidence of Brian Luke's (2007) view that human violence towards nonhuman animals is deeply problematic to most humans. If it were not, there would be little purpose to vegaphobic discourse as it was manifested in our research findings. Therefore, the effort to continually reassert the connection between veganism and nonhuman animal liberation remains worthwhile, and the temptation to promote veganism under the non-confrontational guise of convenient healthy lifestyle choice may be unwise. This is not to argue that education about the practicalities of living a non-violent life is not important, but it is prey to co-option. An effective practical interim strategy to combat media vegaphobia might be for vegan academics and NGOs to position themselves to newspaper editors and journalists as 'experts' or consultants on veganism and the real life experiences of vegans.

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Notes

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2. We use the term 'animal rights' as a catch-all description of ethical concerns with human uses of nonhuman animals, not as an indication of a particular philosophical position.

3. 'veg*n' indicates both vegan and vegetarian.

4. Social research has tended to treat vegans as a subset of vegetarians without presenting distinct gender statistics, and is therefore an unreliable source of information. However, it does also suggest an approximate 2:1 ratio of female to male vegetarians (for example see Beardsworth and Keil, 1992, 1997; Beardsworth and Bryman, 1999, 2004; Beardsworth, Bryman and Keil 2002).

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