Social Noise and Segmented Rhythms: News, Entertainment, and Celebrity in the Crusade for Animal Rights

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Building out from a case study of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), this essay offers a cultural account of popular social protest in the narrowcast era. Founded in 1980, PETA has grown into the world’s largest and highest profile animal rights group. I trace the evolution of the group’s public relations efforts and describe them via vocabularies of sound— as creating social noise and generating popular rhythms. Through the mid-1980s, PETA made public noise primarily by orchestrating news-based controversies, but by 1987 they were increasingly turning to narrowcast and broad circulation music and entertainment media as a way to spread the word to outsiders and ritually express the beliefs of the group. I argue that these cultures of entertainment and celebrity provided structured rhythms of affection that took the cause further than the more discordant sounds of news-based controversy.

Keywords Animal rights, social movements, controversy, public relations, entertainment media, celebrity, sound, PETA

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withheld from them but by the hand of tyranny.—Jeremy Bentham (1789).

The shelf life of these causes is usually fairly short.—Dan Mathews, PETA (1999)

As public confidence in mainstream institutions faded in the 1970s, faith in alternative ideas and practices grew. Christians revived old-time evangelical and fundamentalist religion, while more pagan-minded seekers turned to the New Age.

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For others, new pieties were directed toward care of the natural world and collapsing rigid distinctions between human and non-human life; the ecology movement drew moral energies toward the environment in general, while animal rights advocates focused more specifically on its wild and domestic animal forms. Establishment institutions may have been in decline, but new moral constellations vied for the hearts and minds of the disaffected.

Spiritual revivalism and moral reform have long histories in the Anglo-American world, and the line between them is blurry. Both typically involve evangelistic and liturgical communication, broadly construed: spreading the word to outsiders and re-enacting the shared understandings of the group (cf. Carey, 1988). And both have made deft, sometimes pioneering use of new techniques and technologies to achieve these communicative ends. From the frontier camp meeting to the radio revival, from consumer boycotts to non-violent direct action, from associational newspapers to mechanically reproduced folk songs, revivalists and reformers have been innovators in developing and harnessing popular forms of communication to spread and collectively express the faith. Unsurprisingly, this trend has continued over the past three decades.

Building out a from a case study of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), this essay offers a cultural theory of mass-mediated moral revivalism in the contemporary era. This is a story with implications for central issues of public communication in our era: the respective roles of news and entertainment media in public debates, the relation between broad-distribution and narrowcast media, and the meaning and power of celebrity for social movements and other causes. Begun in 1980 as a small, grassroots group, PETA quickly became the largest, most energetic, and highest profile animal rights organization in the world. They have inserted their message into popular media with great success. PETA's history thus provides a particularly illuminating window upon the shifting contours of public spheres in the late twentieth century.

I describe PETA's work through vocabularies of sound: as making social noise and establishing popular rhythms. It has become a calcified truism to say that we live in an image age. I argue that sound offers a better way to think about the public agendas, controversies, and collective identifications actualized in contemporary media. To that end, I offer a communicative biography of PETA divided into two main phases. Before 1987, the group primarily gained attention by publicizing news-oriented controversy, but after that time they turned increasingly toward music, entertainment, and fashion, and the growing number of media structured to track them. I argue that this shift needs to be understood as something more than a rational instrumental choice to generate publicity or set deliberative agendas. It also has expressive, group-enacting dimensions, captured by the concepts of noise and rhythm.

Noise can be defined as a loud sound, a sound that interrupts signaling systems, or an aesthetically discordant sound. Each sense of the term picks out aspects of the public communication of moral reform groups like PETA. They aim
to be noticeable, they hope to interfere with practices and systems of meaning, and in the process of doing those things they strike some sensibilities as jarring or discordant. The third, aesthetic sense of noise is important for groups that want to attract members and generate collective identifications. It serves as a reminder that audiences can be turned from messages whose communicative form does not resonate with them, even as the messages are setting public policy agendas elsewhere. I argue that news-based controversy is social noise with aesthetic limits for some types of audiences. Consequently, it can be an ineffective means to evangelize outsiders or address the faithful.

Cultures of music, entertainment, and celebrity contain different communicative opportunities than does news-based controversy. From a public relations standpoint, they offer a burgeoning array of media outlets in which to insert messages free of charge. These media reach audiences who may be distant from cultures of news, so they represent new potential for publicity. But they also provide a different aesthetic than news, one tied to distinct and deeply resonant structures of affection and everyday attention. When PETA expresses the moral word through these cultures, it takes on a new kind of popular rhythm, one that can be used both to hail the unconverted and symbolically reconstitute the group. At the same time, PETA must cope with the style-driven vicissitudes of mass-mediated popular cultures and effectively conduct their moral revival at late-capitalist market speed.

**Born Again Activism for Animals**

The birth of the animal rights movement is often dated with the 1975 publication of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, but the cause is identifiably older, and groups like PETA are best understood against a longer historical backdrop. In the Anglo-American world, philosophical arguments for the kindly treatment of animals date back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while organized efforts to reduce animal suffering began in the 1800s. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824, its U.S. counterpart in 1866. These formed the organizational basis for the humane societies of the twentieth century.¹

Some narratives stress discontinuity between animal *rights* groups and their predecessors, labeled animal *welfare* organizations. Proponents of this distinction point to conceptual and organizational differences. While animal welfare is about kindly and humane treatment, animal rights pushes a more radical agenda: animals should not be *used* at all, for there are no essential moral differences between human and non-human species—all can feel pain. Organizationally, the animal rights movement emerged in the early 1980s and often self-consciously distinguished itself from the more established and staid cause of animal welfare. The key groups were formed in 1980-81—PETA, Trans-Species Unlimited (now Animal Rights Mobilization!), and In Defense of Animals—and in 1982 the Animal Liberation Front, a clandestine group with connections to PETA, conducted
its first raid on a scientific facility. Drawing upon Singer’s writings and Henry Spira’s pioneering protest efforts of the late 1970s, the new animal rights groups tended to be more aggressive in their tactics, less sentimental in their rhetoric, and more radically egalitarian than their humane society predecessors about the relation between human and non-human animals.

Still, there are important continuities in the longer cause. Like the Victorian anti-cruelty societies, the newer animal rights groups have aimed to reduce animal suffering, have targeted working-class and scientific practices, and in membership are overwhelmingly female and well-educated. Victorian anti-cruelty societies were made up of middling reformers intent on disciplining the work and entertainments of the humbler classes. They aimed to stop working men from beating horses and farm animals and to ban blood sports such as cockfighting and bull baiting. At times, they targeted scientific vivisection as well. Their leaders were typically male, but by the 1890s anti-cruelty, and especially antivivisection, were expressly women’s crusades (Buettinger, 1997). In similar fashion, the animal rights movement has criticized predominantly working-class practices like hunting and fishing, drawn attention to conditions on farms and ranches, and protested the scientific use of animals. Moreover, the movement continues to be middle class and overwhelmingly female: PETA’s membership is over 80% women, and “one of the most consistent findings in studies of attitudes about animal rights and animal research has been the gender difference” (Pifer, 1996, p. 37; see also Jamison & Lunch, 1992). Indeed, as PETA’s Kathy Snow Guillermo has said, “The very typical animal rights supporter will be a woman with a higher degree” (telephone interview, 19 June 1998).

What sets the 1980s revival off from the longer tradition of moral concern for animals is this: it has occurred in distinctive media contexts and at late-twentienth century cultural velocity. Relevant media developments over the past quarter century have been wideranging and sometimes contradictory. In the 1970s, news media took on more activist roles and journalists gained new kinds of visibility and public prestige. At the same time, “the media” became a widely circulated cover term that stood for a broad and sometimes ill-defined array of forces thought to be pressing down upon contemporary life. The era of hard-edged investigative reporting also saw the explosion of celebrity-focused journalism. People magazine was begun in 1974, and its immediate success spurred imitators in the magazine, television, book, and newspaper industries. Meanwhile Rolling Stone, started five years earlier, had established a high-profile media beachhead for a more specialized focus on youth music and its celebrities. Finally, the moral revival of animal rights occurred as media were experiencing new forms of both segmentation and globalization: the development of cable and satellite television; the continued growth of specialized magazines and narrowcast radio formats; the acceleration of transnational distribution of music, television, and film; and the popularization of entertainment-related global media events like the Olympics,
the World Cup, and the Live Aid concerts (see Baughman, 1996; Turow, 1996; Tebbel & Zuckerman, 1991).

Though most of these media involve images and visual texts, they have created what is best described as a loud public environment. Better than the eye, vocabularies of the ear can describe the phenomenon Michael Schudson (1995) calls “the present uneasy feeling of media omnipresence” (p. 171). Sight is limited by bodily directionality—I must turn toward an object to see it—but sound comes from all directions. The panopticon is a machine, but the human condition is panauditory. We are apparently surrounded by mediated discourse which we overhear even if we are not paying attention. Proliferating channels compete with one another, barker on the mass-mediated midway who call for our attention and proclaim their wares. They amplify events and issues, products and personalities, shows and showmanship, and together create the busy ambient din of mediated public life in the late twentieth century.

**Making Social Noise**

In the context of that ambient din, one of the tasks of moral reform groups is to make social noise. Noise is a concept with several interrelated meanings. It is audible conspicuousness, a sound loud enough to be heard. It is also a disturbance of a signaling system, something that interferes with the transmission of information or meaning. Finally, noise is an unpleasant sound, one that is discordant or unmusical to certain ears (Schafer, 1994). Each of these senses gets at part of what social movements and reform groups do in their public communication. They aim to command attention and to disrupt social practices and cultural meanings, and in the process they make sounds that cause some people to turn away. This audible quality of protest and opposition is evident in various observations, from sociologist James Jasper’s comment that “American society is rife with loud, moral protest” (1997, p. 2), to Dick Hebdige’s claim that “subcultures represent ‘noise’” (1979, p. 90), to Richard Nixon’s praise for the “silent majority” as against the louder voices of shouting and demonstration (see Bochin, 1990).

The three senses of social noise can work at cross purposes. As loud sound, social noise carries over distance and creates regions of common sensation that help structure social life. As sound theorist Murray Schafer (1994) points out, Plato’s ideal republic was limited to the number of citizens who could be reached by a single human voice, the area of an English parish was defined by the reach of the church bell, and early North American long farms were established within shouting distance of each other. Media expand the geographical sounding range of social objects, give them added power to command the attention of outsiders, and help them to address the faithful in new ways. This loudness can aid the disruptiveness of social noise and hence make it interfere more effectively with practices and meanings. But in its third, aesthetic sense, as an unpleasant sound,
social noise can undermine itself, for it becomes something to be tuned out, ignored, or eliminated. And though media may amplify and hence help with interference, they may also contribute kinds of aesthetic discord, and thus help undermine the same moral reform efforts they aid.

In the mid-1990s, PETA made social noise that helped put animal rights on the public agenda and began to disrupt dominant meanings about the human use of animals. Founded in 1980, PETA initially described itself as "a local animal rights group" and "a grassroots, nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C." (PETA, 1980a, 1980b). Their early public work was quite traditional: live protests (at a slaughterhouse, an animal skinning exhibition, a fur sale, and the National Institutes of Health) supported by locally distributed press releases. News of these events did not travel beyond the Washington metropolitan area.

In 1981, however, PETA began making national sounds by spearheading a case that would make waves for the next decade. That year, PETA co-founder Alex Pacheco went undercover at the Institute for Behavioral Research (IBR) in Silver Spring, Maryland, and documented abuses to monkeys in Dr. Edward Taub’s laboratory. His exposé resulted in the seizure of the monkeys and the first U.S. arrest and conviction of an animal experimenter on cruelty charges. The case received immediate national publicity: ABC news interviewed Pacheco and showed police officers removing the monkeys from the IBR, and Nightline discussed the case; the Washington Post ran a front-page article, and other newspapers featured the story; and both science and general-interest periodicals debated the issue. Over the next 10 years, PETA fought for custody of the 17 monkeys, continued litigation that eventually reached the Supreme Court, and organized live protests to draw attention to their efforts (see Guillermo, 1993; Silverstein, 1996).

Then in 1984, PETA amplified a second highly audible story about the scientific mistreatment of animals. The Animal Liberation Front, a clandestine group with ties to PETA, broke into the University of Pennsylvania head injury lab. They confiscated dozens of videotapes showing monkeys hit with forces of up to 3,000 g’s while researchers laughed and otherwise made light of their suffering. The ALF gave the tapes to PETA, which edited them into a widely distributed 20-minute video, entitled “Unnecessary Fuss,” that the group released at a September press conference. That break-in and others in 1984 and 1985 prompted a more intense round of publicity for the cause. The New York Times ran a front-page story on the movement, science journals took notice, and polls were commissioned on the subject of animal experimentation (e.g., Robbins, 1984; Eckholm, 1985; Boffey, 1985; “Poll finds support,” 1985; and Franklin, 1987). The cause was not fully legitimized culturally—the New York Times would still put animal rights in quotations as late as 1987, and The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature did not see fit to add “Animal Rights Movement” to its list of headings until 1988—but the movement was by the mid-1980s loud enough to be on the media-defined national public agenda, and PETA’s membership ranks were expanding accordingly—from 8,000 people in 1984 to 84,000 by 1987.
PETA was orchestrating the sounds of controversy and creating social noise that interfered with dominant patterns of cultural meaning. PETA communiques asserted that animal experimentation represented moral cruelty, not scientific progress. Edward Taub was not pursuing important knowledge. He was incarcerating primates "whose emotional requirements parallel our own" and who were being driven by the stress "to self-mutilate, bite off their own fingers and gouge holes in their arms" (PETA, 1981). Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania head injury lab were not engaged in a compassionate quest to minimize suffering. They were torturing complex beings who felt pain. Litigation, exposé, and protest disrupted moral consensus about the use of animals in scientific research. Prodded by the noise, legislators debated new animal lab regulations. By 1985, bills had been introduced in 21 states, and the U.S. Senate was forced to tighten its Animal Welfare Act. The scientific community was put on the defensive.

In the late 1980s, then, PETA and other animal rights groups redoubled longer standing anti-fur efforts and took their noisemaking strategy to the streets. "We intend to make the social climate such that the only practical accessories for a fur coat are earplugs," PETA announced in 1989. A press release promised reporters that "aggressive anti-fur activists will take over Georgetown's busy street corners on Saturday... to verbally confront fur wearers" (PETA, 1989a). In New York, Trans-Species Unlimited generated significant media attention for similar tactics. "We encourage members to confront people wherever they are," its director told New York magazine in 1990. "We tell them to say whatever they want, to go right up to the point of legal harassment but not to harass them. We have lawyers instruct our people how far they can go" (Kasindorf, 1990; see also "TSU's Fur-Free Friday," 1989). Anti-fur groups used loud, confrontational protest to disrupt the semiotic connection between fur and glamour (see Goodnight & Olson, 1994). Street-level noise drew the attention of news media attuned to the sounds of moral disorder, which they then amplified for the culture at large.

**Noise and the Limits of News-Based Controversy**

The value of controversy is deeply inscribed in the classical traditions of rhetoric and dialectic that modern liberalism inherited. The sophist Protagoras, for instance, taught that for every *logos*, there is a corresponding *anti-logos*, and he required that his students debate both sides of an issue (see Billig, 1987, ch. 3). Without advocating sophistic relativism, Socrates practiced dialogic clash as a mode of inquiry. Cicero made *controversia* the preferred mode for both rhetoric and philosophy: it was a dialogic method of inquiry where both sides of a question are heard, brought into the conflict of irreconcilable debate, and judged on the basis of which one appears most true (Buckley, 1970). Cicero and other Romans made this argumentative clash an internal component of a single speech as well: *refutatio*, raising and answering an opponent's claims, was one of the six main parts of a oration and part of what gave a speech formal propriety and beauty.
In different ways, disputation was part of both medieval scholasticism and the Renaissance humanism that drew upon Cicero (see Sloane, 1997). The classically educated John Stuart Mill was well aware of these traditions. On Liberty, the canonical modern defense of free expression, both models Ciceronian controvertia and makes it central to the pursuit of truth, justice, and freedom in the modern, liberal state (1859/1989, esp. ch. 2).

For Mill and contemporary liberals like Thomas Goodnight, argumentative controversy is the music of democratic life. Mill demands “full, frequent, and fearless” discussion of opinions in “active controversy with opponents,” or with an imaginary opponent in one’s head (pp. 37, 46). Such clash is good for the participants, but even more important for public audiences. “It is not on the impassioned partisan, [but] on the calmer and more disinterested bystander, that the collision of opinions works its salutary effect,” namely moving them closer to apprehending and deeply feeling the truth of a matter (p. 53). For Goodnight and others in speech communication working in Habermas’ broad wake, controversy is an “extended rhetorical engagement that critiques, resitutes, and develops communication practices that bridge the public and personal spheres” (Olson & Goodnight, p. 249). It offers “new opportunities and obligations to learn, to decide, and to argue” (Goodnight, 1991, p. 6) and can push society toward “a universal, i.e. intersubjectively valid ethics of collective responsibility” (Olson & Goodnight, p. 273). In short, controversy is understood to be one of the engines of democratic progress.

But controversy, particularly as it is reported and amplified by news media, in also a species of social noise, and as such has aesthetic dimensions occluded by the process-oriented logic of Mill, Goodnight, and others. Though controversy may lead to opinion or policy change in the future, it also has “obvious aspects” (Rappaport, 1999, p. 26f) sensed in the present. In Cicero’s world of oral disputation, controvertia is heard in full argumentative form by audiences whose bodily presence indicates some minimal level of interest, and who might be drawn in by artistically crafted stylistic splendor and oratorical mellifluosity. In the modern nation state, public controversies circulate as mass-mediated fragments of discourse among audiences rarely exposed to full, artistic presentation of logos and anti-logos. As Walter Lippmann presciently observed some 80 years ago, news “signalizes” events (1922/1997, p. 226). News of controversy signals public disorder and so has built into it an aesthetic discord that can be exacerbated by the cacophony of mass-mediated discourse in the contemporary world. In other words, news-based controversy can easily become noise in the third sense—an unwanted, unmusical sound. This third dimension of noise is subjective and variable, for one person’s despised sound is another’s personal anthem, but it draws attention to an important aspect of public communication: its quasi-aesthetic capacity to attract or repulse audiences on the basis of form as much as specific content.

Like other cultural forms, the musical theater of news-based public controversy is an acquired taste. Some who worship the gods of democracy have sufficient faith to hear controversy as the sacred noise of the poll-born anew. But that
faith needs to have been cultivated and cannot be assumed. Cultures of argument and news are socially specific formations that cannot be taken for granted in an age of widespread cynicism and disinterest in public affairs. The resonance of Nixon’s “silent majority” locution points to a body of people repulsed by social noise. We might couple it with Walter Lippmann’s (1925) description of the modern public as a spectator in the back row of a theater, barely able to make out the stage, knowing he ought to follow the play but not quite able to discern the action or stay awake. That image describes all of us some of the time and some of us nearly all of the time. For those in the back row, tone deaf to the melodies of protest and argument, news-based controversy may only sound an undifferentiated and vaguely irritating din.

There is then an irony to the noise of public controversy. Though it may be loud enough to set public agendas in the press and legislative bodies, it always carries the capacity to turn away those who hear no music in democratic disagreement and news-based social conflict. There is evidence that perceived controversy may contribute to cynicism and thus social distance on the part of news audiences (see Simonson, 1999), so that mode of address has limits as a means of spreading the word to outsiders and collectively expressing it for the faithful. This is a lesson that PETA seemed to recognize in the late 1980s.

“We’ll Slut It Out with the Best of Them”: Celebrities and the Rhythms of Popular Culture

In generating social noise through news-based controversy, PETA remained firmly rooted in established traditions of moral protest, but in the late 1980s, they added new modes to their communicative repertoire. Increasingly, the group expressed the cause through cultures of music, entertainment, and fashion. PETA enlisted broad-appeal and cultic celebrities and gained access to the burgeoning media complex structured to follow their lives and projects. These performers presided over well-established attention aggregates that gave PETA new routes for moral evangelism and new styles to address the faithful. Many of their higher profile efforts displayed post-punk irony and irreverence, but the group also established inroads into other taste communities and used both mass and narrowcast channels to piece together a common faith for a generationally disparate congregation of believers. Instead of the noise of news-based controversy, this turn to entertainments might be called the popular rhythm method of social protest.

In 1998, PETA co-founder Ingrid Newkirk could describe the group’s niche rather confidently. “We are pretty feet on the ground, tangible, mainstream, popularistic, youth culture, pop culture, celebrity culture oriented,” she said, “a cross between the radical philosophical line and popular culture, MTV, easy attention getting, pleasant and not unpleasant thoughts about animals.” “You can’t afford any snobism,” she went on to say. “We want the maximum number of people, so we’ll slut it out with the best of them” (personal interview, 4 June 1998).

That niche only began to solidify in the late 1980s, largely under the direc-
tion of Dan Mathews. A former PETA receptionist and now Director of Campaigns, Mathews is duly described in women's magazines and the gay press as a 6'5" hunk, a former model with a good feel for popular culture and an easy manner with celebrities. He brought PETA a queer, post-punk irreverence and has been the driving force behind the popular rhythm method of the past 15 years. Soon after joining the organization in 1985, he connected with an alternative music scene then singing for animal rights, organized a compilation album, and discovered the instrumental and expressive benefits of media cultures not tied to news and public affairs.

"Like a Mallet on the Back of Your Neck"

Like other aspects of the U.S. tradition opposed to animal suffering, rock music for the cause was a British import. In 1980, punk rockers Siouxsie and the Banshees recorded "Skin," an anti-fur anthem that was important for Mathews' own nascent animal rights consciousness (telephone interview, 27 June 1998). In 1984, the Smiths cut an album entitled Meat is Murder which they supported with a U.S. tour the following year that Mathews documented for the animal rights press (1985). Synth-popper Howard Jones was also singing for animals at that time in his "Assault and Battery": "I hear the screams/With the knife, the jolt, the wring."

Mathews drew from this music for Animal Liberation, a 1987 compilation album described by New Musical Express as "literally stunning, like a mallet on the back of your neck" (PETA, 1987a). The British version of the album included songs by Siouxsie, the Smiths, and Jones. The nine-song American version, released on the small independent Wax Trax label, could not secure permission to include the first two artists, but it was still significant enough to make New York Times music critic Jon Pareles' (1987) album of the week.

Described by Pareles as "ominous-to-danceable electronic dance rhythms," Animal Liberation was a rhythmic foray into the narrowcast, youth-oriented cultures of alternative music and clubs. The album opened with the 96-second "International Intro," the phrase "Animals are not ours to eat, wear, or experiment on" repeated in 11 different languages, male and female voices backed by the heavy, industrial hum of synthesized organ punctuated by sharp, atonal chimes of a bell. Not a collection for pop ears, the nine songs were interspersed with sampled aural fragments of animal rights protests and news reports. Besides Jones, the best-known performers on the U.S. release were Nina Hagen and Lene Lovich. Their "Don't Kill the Animals" became a dance-club hit and yielded a video that included footage of scientists burning a pig with a blowtorch and midnight animal raids as well as a staged raid by the "punk princesses in spiked heels," as the Washington Times described the duo (Hammons, 1987).

The project gave PETA significant new routes for moral evangelism. Mathews guided mailings and press releases that accessed a system of musical publicity well-formed by the mid-1980s. Both Lovich and Hagen were established per-
formers, particularly in Europe, and they made themselves available for numerous pre- and post-release interviews in a music press structured around stars and their work. As with other new albums, free copies of Animal Liberation and promotional literature were distributed to metropolitan dailies, alternative weeklies, the college press, and music and trade magazines. Among others, the New York Times, the Chicago and Los Angeles Readers, Rolling Stone, Billboard, The Gavin Report, and Tower Record's Pulse magazine all reviewed the album, and all made at least passing notice of PETA and animal rights.

Beyond print, Animal Liberation tapped other structures of musical publicity. PETA encouraged its members to establish two-step flows of music-based moral evangelism. A 1987 mailing offered bulk rates for five or more albums and "HUGE color promo posters to attract attention to your display." PETA urged supporters to contact local radio stations, newspapers, and MTV and promised Mathews' help if they wanted to organize local musical benefits (PETA, 1987b). Through free distribution of the album to radio stations, especially college stations, they spread the word to music directors, disc jockeys, and their listening audiences. The group helped stage album release parties, record signings, and live concerts around the country in support of the compilation. Dance clubs played Hagen and Lovich's rhythmically "Don't Kill the Animals," sometimes accompanied by their music video. In sum, Animal Liberation circulated fluidly through the communicative infrastructures of alternative music cultures, which then became vehicles to spread the gospel of animal rights.

Equally important, Animal Liberation offered new modes for believers to express their commitment to the cause. With it, PETA and animal rights became indexed to the hip sensibilities of alternative rock music. These were sensibilities that youthful converts could palpably feel in bodily rituals of communal affirmation that marked album release parties and club-based benefit shows. In the wake of the album's success, PETA organized an Animal Rights Music Festival in 1988 followed by the more aggressively named Rock Against Fur concerts the following three years. In these settings, believers could experience the collective faith bathed in the full sensory surround of the live crowd, where the moral liturgy was coordinated with the dance rhythms and affective structures of youth culture.

Animal Liberation represented a different kind of noise than news-based controversy. It was unquestionably loud, and powerfully amplified by music media that drew attention to it. But these media sounded in more segmented demographic regions than news-based controversies like the Silver Spring-Monkeys and the lab break in at the University of Pennsylvania. Even more important, this was social noise with a different aesthetic than news-based controversy, one with post-punk attitude and a danceable beat. Distribution literature stressed the desired edge: "Key new music names join forces with the most volatile, snowballing movement of our time to produce the most explosive and controversial album ever... 'ANIMAL LIBERATION!'" (PETA, 1987a; see also 1987c). In this campaign, bourgeois sentimentalism was right out: "We're being very, very careful to
steer away from a bleeding-heart kind of attitude," Mathews emphasized to reporters (Popson, 1986). Here were narrowcast moral sounds designed to hail audiences distant from news cultures and give them a revolution they could dance to.

**Golden Girls and Naked Supermodels**

As *Animal Liberation* communicated the cause through post-punk music cultures, PETA also turned to mainstream forms of popular entertainment in the late 1980s. The process started in 1988 when the group enlisted Rue McClanahan, Emmy-award winning star of the popular *Golden Girls*, the NBC sitcom featuring three strong women on the far side of middle age. McClanahan commanded a rather different attention aggregate than the "mallet on the back of your neck" crowd, and her work signaled a new turn to popular celebrities that took off over the next five years. Globally recognized stars like Paul and Linda McCartney gave PETA access to mass audiences on an international scale, while less widely known performers took the word to more segmented groups of outsiders. At the same time, PETA increasingly used celebrities and celebrity-oriented media conventions to address its own members and all but abandoned news-oriented controversy as a mode of addressing the faithful.

While the *Animal Liberation* album had infused PETA with an aggressively hip attitude, Rue McClanahan sounded echoes of Victorian female reform. In 1988 she shot a series of public service announcements (PSA's) for PETA. The print versions included a photo of McClanahan holding a puppy to her cheek and shoulder. "What Would You Do To Save An Animal?" the boldface headline asked, while a letter signed "Rue" began "Animals have long held a special place in my heart." PETA was called an "advocate on behalf of animal protection" as the ad steered clear of the then-controversial "animal rights" label. McClanahan represented compassion and sentiment, a warm domestic world of cuddly pets that was light years away from pulsating techno beats and blowtorched pigs on dance club music videos.

By 1988 PETA was a multi-voiced organization that cultivated a demographically and ideologically diverse membership. Today more than 80% of PETA members are female, but there as many members over 50 as under 30. The group has often exuded an uncompromising philosophical radicalism about animals—"they are not ours to use or abuse in the first place"—but PETA also has nearly as many Republican members as Democrats. The *Animal Liberation* album and McClanahan PSAs represented this diversity and meant that the group could appeal to both hip 21-year-olds and their more conservative *Golden Girl*-watching mothers. This was a moral society constituted out of disparate demographic segments.

McClanahan offered PETA popular access not available through their alternative music projects. After shooting the PSAs, for instance, McClanahan flew to New York and appeared on *CBS This Morning*, a show unlikely to include Lene
Lovitch. Later that day, she kicked off the ad campaign at a luncheon that included the Chippendales dancers, fellow “Golden Girls” Betty White and Bea Arthur, Christopher Reeve, Ted Danson, and soap opera star Linda Dano—a stable of performers with quite different demographic appeal than Animal Liberation. McClanahan appeared in PETA direct mail in 1988, and provided access to those able to write checks for the cause, but she was also versatile enough to speak at the Animal Rights Music Festival that same year. Finally, along with White and Arthur, PETA used McClanahan in their anti-tur campaign and featured her in taxi ads in New York and Washington (PETA 1988a, 1988b, 1989b; Pritzker, 1988).

Over the next several years, PETA enlisted a wide range of celebrities for the cause. Doris Day, Kim Basinger, Patrick Swayze, and John Denver signed a letter on behalf of the Silver Spring Monkeys, which was published in the New York Times in December 1988. In 1989 Las Vegas entertainers and Hollywood actors spoke out against animal trainer Bobby Berusini. In 1990, PETA’s Tenth Anniversary party featured, among many others, teen idols Johnny Depp and Winona Ryder. The organization’s musical efforts continued with a number of live concert events and a second compilation album, Tame Yourself, released in 1991 on the larger Rhino Records. That record featured better known artists of the mainstream-alternative variety: the Pretenders, k.d. lang, Indigo Girls, the B-52’s, members of REM, 10,000 Maniacs, and the Go-Go’s. Many of these artists were also involved in other PETA projects and performed at animal rights concerts or cut PSAs such as lang’s 1990 “Meat Stinks” ads, which made additional sound waves when some country music stations responded to it by banning her music from airplay.

Like Animal Liberation but on a much larger scale, this celebrity presence allowed PETA to make deep inroads into wide-appeal and narrowcast media structured to track music and entertainment performers. This was a lesson that Animal Liberation had taught the group, but by 1989-90 they were moving through a broader circle of media outlets that included the morning soft news shows, People, and women’s magazines. The vegetarian banquet created for the Tenth Anniversary celebration by New York chefs occasioned a long story, complete with recipes, in the New York Times food section.

The popular rhythm method appeared to be paying off. Media attention and membership ranks swelled. According to group figures, calls from the media rose from 60 a month in 1988 to 200 a month in 1989 and 250 a month in 1990. PETA’s Media Department, until 1985 a collection of volunteers using the yellow pages, responded to and fueled the interest by dramatically increasing their use of press releases: from 83 in 1989 to 204 in 1990. Media response was also becoming more international and by 1990 included coverage in Western Europe, Australia, and Japan as well as North America. As the celebrity presence grew, so too did membership, which increased steeply from 1988 to 1992. News-based controversy had fueled growth in the mid-1980s, but far less dramatically than in the period of celebrity-based popular outreach. While ranks had expanded by an average of about 25,000 members a year between 1984 and 1987, they swelled by
an average of nearly 80,000 a year from 1987 to 1992.” There were clear indications that celebrity-driven publicity was an effective means of outreach.

Stars contributed in fundamental ways to PETA’s new global sounding range. Two carriers were especially important—Paul and Linda McCartney, and a group of international supermodels. Longtime vegetarians, the McCartneys became global messengers for PETA in 1990 when Linda sent the group a videotaped message from Paul’s Earth Day concert in Rio de Janeiro (PETA 1990a). Linda went on to play a prominent role in PETA’s “Meat Stinks” campaign, but even more significant, the McCartneys sponsored a PETA information booth and showed a 10-minute animal rights/environmentalism video during concerts on their 1993 New World Tour. Then in 1994, PETA used an international group of supermodels in their “We’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur” campaign. The European version of the ads included Britain’s Naomi Campbell plus models from Sweden and Belgium, while in the U.S. Christy Turlington and actress Kim Basinger appeared. PETA kicked off the European campaign at the Lillehammer Winter Olympics, a global media event that put the image of supermodels-for-animals before a worldwide audience and their journalistic surrogates.10

Like the visual violence Hollywood can sell foreign audiences, the McCartneys and the supermodels offered powerful forms of cross-cultural communication: Beatles music and bare flesh. As a result, both could draw the attention of international audiences to the cause. Beyond the wide cultural appeal of their respective talents, both the McCartneys and the models had careers that took them to different countries where interviews and public appearances were part of the routine. As a result, they could support ad campaigns with in-person communication amplified by media around the world. Both aspects were crucial: the celebrities’ favored positions in international networks of media institutions and practices, and their ability to command the attention of a global array of audiences. As a result, PETA gained new potential for cosmopolitan appeal.

The McCartneys and supermodels offered avenues for mass evangelism, but PETA also continued to make narrowcast appeals to particular constituencies. Spanish models posed naked in 1999, a campaign PETA also ran in Hispanic media in the United States. Meanwhile, “Chris P. Carrot,” a six-foot tall walking orange vegetable, appeared outside schools with juvenile forms of the gospel: “Eat your veggies, not your friends.” PETA even made sure to enlist deaf celebrities when they targeted Boys Town for conducting deafness experiments on cats. Theirs is a fluid and revolving strategy of outreach and publicity. “We’re always bringing new people in,” Dan Mathews says. “We use the old people, too, but we’re always bringing new people in” (telephone interview, 27 June 1998).

**Celebrity-Based Liturgies**

If celebrities gave PETA access to both mass and narrowcast groups of outsiders, they also shaped how the group addressed the polymorphous and geographically
dispersed faithful. Supplemented by direct mail, PETA's newsletter-magazine is the central communicative form by which the far-flung congregation is symbolically reconstituted. The newsletter is a kind of print-based liturgy through which the group's common faith is expressed. Since its inception in 1982, the form of that print ritual has changed. Initially informed by cultures of news, in the late 1980s it came to mimic cultures of entertainment, music, and celebrity and the media that track them. The magazine shows that fame is not just an instrumental resource for spreading the word to outsiders but is also a form of cultural life that symbolically structures the group itself.

Before 1988, *PETA News* read like an issue-based newsletter. It was printed on paper and featured stories like the Silver Spring Monkeys case or exposés of animal abuse in scientific laboratories, food production facilities, and the fur and cosmetic industries. In 1988, in the midst of the group's forays into entertainment cultures with *Animal Liberation* and Rue McClanahan, *PETA News* went glossy and started to look like a contemporary mass circulation magazine. The new version included a section entitled "Pop Goes the Movement," devoted to musical expressions of the cause, as well as a 12-page pullout, *PETA Kids*, whose first page was adorned with pop musician Howard Jones striking a classic teen idol pose.

That summer *PETA News* featured its first celebrity cover, Rue McClanahan. Calling up the nineteenth-century trope of female moral sentiment against the market, it read "'Anytime compassion takes a back seat to greed, we're in trouble,' says "Golden Girl" Rue McClanahan. "Clad in PETA t-shirt, hands on hips, chin titled up with confidence and resolve, McClanahan was a model of middle-aged activism for animals (PETA, 1988)." Over the next five years, *PETA News* had other celebrity covers, but the magazine continued to follow some news-based conventions of public communication and continued to run relatively long investigative reports of animal abuse. That would all change.

In a self-conscious decision to avoid the conventions of news-based media, PETA'S *Animal Times* replaced *PETA News* in 1994. According to Kathy Snow Guillermo, first editor of *Animal Times*, the change "was very deliberate. We looked at *PETA News* and worried that people were reading it and then shoving it aside because they didn't want to be saddened by so many things. . . . So we took a look at the magazines that were popular in general, as did our designer in England. Specifically we looked through lots and lots of women's magazines because we felt we were trying to appeal to a general segment of the population, the kind of people that would go through the grocery store line and pick up a Woman's Day or something like that" (telephone interview, 19 June 1998). PETA co-founder and current *Animal Times* editor Ingrid Newkirk describes the difference this way: "*PETA News* required you to sit down and carve out some time to read it. *Animal Times* is very visual. You really don't have to read any of it. You can just flip through it and you get it" (personal interview, 4 June 1998). Accustomed to using celebrity-oriented media for evangelistic outreach, PETA was now relying on their
conventions to address their far-flung congregation of believers.

When PETA News became Animal Times, PETA Kids transformed into Grrr!, “the ‘zine that bites back!” Both publications hail the reader through formal conventions of popular entertainment and fan magazines. Animal Times uses a cover with a full-page photograph and a smaller boxed image. Almost invariably, one photo shows an animal’s face, the other a celebrity’s. The first issue had a cat lying on a floral pillow and a Lily Tomlin insert. Its 32-pages included a call to action (“Help Lily Tomlin Get Gillette!”), a four-page section on cats (with articles on naming your cat, building your own cat tree, and determining if your cat is “purrfectly happy”), consumer tips (“Traveling with your companion animals”), recipes, and two- to four-page spreads on zoos, a PETA investigation of a Mexican meatpacker, and brief accounts of everyday activism along with suggestions for how readers might participate.

Grrr!, meanwhile, targets 10- to 14-year-olds with cooler versions of similar fare, indexed to teen music and entertainment cultures. It includes calls to action (“Let MTV know you think animal rights is a hot topic and you want to see more, more, more!”); testimonials by young stars like Roseanne’s Sara Gilbert (“Why Sara Gilled Went Veg”); and brief accounts of animal injustice (“Ex-Dolphin Trainer Ric O’Bany: ‘Captivity Sucks’”). While their moms leaf through Animal Times, Grrr! aims to remind pre-teen activists that the animal rights cause is hot, hot, hot.

Celebrities and their entertainment cultures play several roles in the print-based reconstitution of the PETA faithful. For one, stars confer status upon the group (Simonson, 1999, see also Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). They lend their “glow” (Braudy, 1986; see also Gamson, 1994; Mills, 1956), their aura, their public ethos, and in the process give the group new modes for collective self-recognition. Celebrities carry a public stature acquired from appearance in mass media and other performative realms, and in PETA’s mediated liturgy offer it up to the particularistic congregation. Celebrities also provide additional grounds for PETA’s collective confidence, the faith-in-common of a geographically dispersed group that does not meet in the face-to-face (Simonson, 1999). The main shared focus is the moral cause of animals itself, but broad-recognition celebrities offer personified symbols of the congregation’s common commitment and prominently display their own moral styles as models for participation in the group. Finally, PETA offers up these personalities in “lifelike” environments of popular media, since Animal Times is formatted to look like mass-circulation entertainment, lifestyle, celebrity, and fashion periodicals. In so doing, the group sets their liturgy to the rhythms of popular culture and the structures of audience attention coordinated with them.

Conclusion

By the early 1990s, PETA was making sounds with a variety of timbres, coordinated to the frequencies of disparate and multiform media cultures. Evolving from
a group that generated most of its public attention through news-based controversy, PETA had become extraordinarily adept at inserting itself into cultures of entertainment, music, fashion, and celebrity as well. Paralleling more general trends in media and advertising, the organization pursued targeted populations—children, pre-teens, techno-dance fans, Hispanics, gays, middle-aged soap opera watchers, and deaf people, among others. At the same time, they drew upon wide-appeal, globally recognized celebrities to broadcast the cause to the winds and to give it new kinds of style, stature, and common focus. Meanwhile, they continued to toil in more traditional cultures of news and public issues. As a result, they were positioned to evangelize social segments and mass societies (cf. Turow, 1997), and to address a demographically diverse body of believers. Through narrowcast and mass communication, PETA pieced together a kind of mediated *e pluribus unum* devoted to the cause of reducing the suffering of animals. From radicals who conduct laboratory break-ins to grandmothers who quietly adopt abused pets, from hipster vegans who hit city sidewalks in plastic shoes to Golden Girls who leaf through *People* magazine in housecoats, PETA hailed a stylistically variegated congregation of the far-flung faithful.

The multiform appeal amounted to a syncopated cacophony of social noise, of loud sounds that interfere with signaling systems and strike some ears as musically discordant. Appearing in an international array of media, PETA's noise was strong enough to carry widely. Publicizing the message that animals are not ours to use and abuse, it interrupted dominant patterns of meaning and practice and put scientists, hunters, and the fashion industry on the defensive. But one of the group's most significant achievements was to temper the aesthetic discord that can accompany the disruptive aspects of social noise by expressing their message in forms that resonated with structured rhythms of pleasure contained within cultures of music and entertainment.

One might question the status or staying power of a moral cause that circulates through the cheap, easy, and commodified world of commercial entertainments. As PETA's Mathews told me, reflecting on the style-driven vicissitudes of mediated popular cultures, "The shelf life of these causes is usually fairly short. We've been voted out several times in the last ten years, but we've re-invented ourselves." In this world, celebrities and styles lose their pizzazz, what was hot, hot yesterday is not, not, not today, and organizations like PETA have to find a new face, a new technique of mediated theatricality, a new angle to work. There is pressure to stay stylistically current in their campaigns. There is also a bigger danger: that the cause itself might become last year's flavor, that celebrities and other opinion leaders of cool move on to the next big thing, and that PETA is left without the same points of public access. Still, the institutional matrix of media structured toward music and entertainment cultures is well established, so if groups like PETA can ride the wave of popular style, they will always have opportunities for free public exposure to audiences who are not plugged into news media.

Music and entertainment media do not simply provide new exposure, though.
They also tap into powerful kinds of cultural rhythms that are qualitatively different than the news. News is a relatively conflict-oriented genre which thus has a built in aesthetic discord that can amplify the social discord of moral reform groups. News is music to some ears, who hear democratic vitality in it or who use it as an opening to enlarge experience or to reconstitute friendship through civic-minded conversation. These were John Dewey’s (1927) hopes for the news. But conflict is not everyone’s preferred aesthetic, even if they are pursuing a life that departs from cultural norms, and not everyone experiences the pleasures of news. Cultures of music and entertainment resonate differently. In music, style, and fashion, in our feelings for celebrities we admire, there is a different kind of emotional pleasure and a different aesthetic. When social noise gets expressed through these forms, some of its dissonance can dissolve into the structured rhythms of affection and attention that popular culture contains. Entertainment cultures and their media include plenty of distortions, but they are also the symbolic worlds that many of us happily inhabit, as advertisers too well know. In claiming these worlds for their moral crusade, PETA is reminding us that democratic politics needs its popular pleasures.

Notes


2. Though he is often cited as the father of modern animal rights, Singer actually avoided the language of rights in his utilitarian defense of animals. Nonetheless, animal rights activists often cite him and his writings (e.g., 1973, 1975) in their autobiographies. PETA co-founder Ingrid Newkirk told me “Singer was certainly responsible for shifting my train of thought. He said what I hadn’t had the wherewithal to put together myself” (Newkirk, personal interview, 4 June 1998; see also Jasper & Nelkin [1992], pp. 29–33).

3. Older animal protection groups also experienced dramatic growth in the mid-1980s. The Humane Society of the United States, in existence since 1954, grew by about 15,000 members a year between 1978 and 1984, but from 1984 to 1988, it added 100,000 annually (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992).

4. For examples of coverage of Mathews, see Castro & Hannah (1995), Gabriel (1994), “Talk of the Town” (1994), Carswell (1993), and Peterson (1988). PETA’s homosexual presence and response to it has been enough to prompt at least one press release which observed that PETA spokespeople included k.d. lang, the B-52’s, and Elvira and noted that the group “routinely receives anti-gay threats on its answering machine and in hate mail” (PETA, 1993).

5. PETA files include clippings from New Musical Express, Melody Maker, and Record Mirror among others.

6. At least eight cities (New York, Washington, Denver, Chicago, Atlanta, Austin, Dallas, and Tulsa) hosted concerts in the summer of 1987.
7. PETA has limits to its irreverence and hipness. At Christian Dior’s 1999 haute couture show in Paris, British designer John Galliano produced an over-the-top display of dead animals and animal parts on his modeled clothes. The show drew from some of the same impulses and cultural resources as PETA has used—a post-punk appreciation for the aggressive and shocking, refracted through aestheticized expression—but the group refused to acknowledge these dimensions. "If it’s art," Director of Public Affairs Lisa Lange told me, “it’s garbage” (telephone interview, 9 August, 1999). Like the Victorian reformers who preceded them, PETA demands that art follow morals.

8. Membership statistics come from Director of Development Scott Anderson (telephone interview, 7 July 1998). Quote on use and abuse of animals is from PETA co-founder Ingrid Newkirk (personal interview, 4 June 1998).


10. The campaign actually dated back to 1990, when the five Go-Go’s posed naked for a poster they sold on their concert tour (PETA, 1990b). In 1992, one of the Go-Go’s, Jane Wiedlin, did a live version of that message with Dan Mathews at an international fur fair in Japan (PETA, 1992). The group kicked off their supermodel campaign with a series of press releases in the winter of 1994 (PETA 1994a, 1994b, 1994c).

11. McClanahan has continued to model that activism through the 1990s, most recently maintaining her opposition to animal testing while battling breast cancer as TV Guide’s “Hollywood Grapevine: Showbiz Buzz and Celebrity Scoop” section recently reported (Schwed, 1999).

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