Background paper for the campaign: „Stop animal suffering in social networks"

Animal suffering: Definition and approach

The Welttierschutzgesellschaft envisions a world in which animals are treated with respect and in an animal-friendly manner. Our animal welfare work focuses on regions in which measures for the protection of animals are scarce. Our projects – in collaboration with partner organizations in over 25 countries worldwide – aim to sustain the living conditions of the stray, farm, and wild animals. We also create the prerequisites necessary for a better relationship between humans and animals in Germany through publicity campaigns.

For us, global animal welfare work is not restricted to physical locations on a world map. **Animal suffering must be prevented, and respectful coexistence between animals and humans promoted in the digital space and on platforms like social networks.**

The spread of animal suffering in social networks is often unrestricted

Most social networks define the framework conditions for users of their platforms in so-called Community Standards. Animal suffering often plays no or only a subordinate role in the formulation of these Community Standards. A distinction for the depiction of animal suffering for informational purposes and documentaries does not occur. Faced with a large amount of animal suffering content, moderator teams (employees of the networks, who monitor compliance with the Community Standards and decide on the deletion of posts) only react in cases of particular severity or not at all.

This allows animal suffering content to spread among millions of users worldwide – also in German-speaking regions – without restriction. If the abuse and mistreatment of animals becomes socially acceptable, this can lead to a significant decrease in the identification and consequently in the reporting of animal suffering. This is an obvious threat to animals and their protection worldwide.

Our demands:

Animal suffering must be comprehensively recognised and prevented.

It is the responsibility of the social networks to stop the presentation and dissemination of animal suffering content on their platforms that do not serve an informational purpose. The social networks would thereby promote a respectful coexistence of humans and animals.

Our campaign aims to stop the presentation of all animal suffering content in social networks that do not fulfill an informational purpose. This does not include content that is deliberately disseminated to inform about abuse – such educational measures are critical to raising awareness about animal welfare. Animal suffering content that does not serve to inform and is presented for the purpose of supposed entertainment or to generate reach should not be posted or disseminated.

The following definitions of animal suffering content differ in how conspicuous animal suffering is. While animal suffering can be clearly identified in some cases, in other cases, there is evidence indicating animal suffering. Furthermore, following our vision of a respectful coexistence of humans and animals, the topic of respect towards animals must be brought into focus.

Obvious animal suffering

Content with obvious animal suffering that no context can relativize

We define obvious animal suffering as animal suffering content that depicts a type of physical and/or psychological suffering of animals, such as that caused by brute force.

The German Animal Welfare Act states:

> "*§1 No one may cause an animal pain, suffering or harm without good reason"* as well as in *§17: Anyone committing the following offenses shall be liable to up to three years' imprisonment or a fine: 1. killing of a vertebrate without good reason or 2. causing a vertebrate: a) considerable pain or suffering out of cruelty or b) persistent or repeated severe pain or suffering."*

In examples of obvious animal suffering, physical and/or emotional pain inflicted on an animal is depicted and could not be relativized by any context. The following examples fall under this definition:

a)   The depiction of raw violence against animals:

- Animals are thrown off cliffs or wantonly injured
- Animals are severely mistreated or trampled like in the so-called "Animal Crush Challenges."
- Animals' muzzles are taped shut because they were disruptive (see: https://www.dogingtonpost.com/katie-brown-found-guilty-sentenced-for-animal-abuse-for-duct-taping-dogs-muzzle/)
- Animals' paws are covered in glue, as observed in the #cattape challenge (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUMZKAtTWbU and https://www.instagram.com/p/CHtQeUBDLPh/)

- Animal fights are promoted
  (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vB-23hOYzQ)
- Live animals are prepared or directly consumed
  (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3qELp9F9dI)
- Animals are hunted, slaughtered, or killed in an inexpert manner and violation of animal welfare.
- Animals are mutilated by means of tattoos and piercings for the purposes of fashion (see: https://www.n-tv.de/mediathek/videos/panorama/Mexiko-will-Taetowieren-von-Haustieren-verbieten-article22505247.html)
- Animals are depicted uncritically or euphemistically with docked tails or ears. In many cases, the reduction or taping of ears, whereby the ears are tied up or down or bandaged (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDwptZZ-_5s and https://www.instagram.com/p/COkXHTCDtzk/), especially with dogs such as Dobermanns, as well as the operative removal of tail vertebrae, which typically applies to the tails of dogs but also horses, is shown.

b) The depiction of animal suffering through avoidable human contact:

- Wild animals that are evidently being kept private and not in an animal-friendly manner as pets in a household
  (see: https://www.instagram.com/p/CJNrAD8H02I/, https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ1NK4uFgCy/, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkRQvd93fdE) https://www.instagram.com/heresyourmonkeycontent/ and https://www.instagram.com/p/B2zmCMBlIZS/,
- Wild animals whose animal-friendly housing and care is only possible with great effort and knowledge or whose procurement is relevant for animal welfare (for example, because they are wild-caught or illegal wildlife trade and poaching are promoted) that are offered for private pet keeping (see #buyalion and price in description: https://www.instagram.com/p/CNNrCSIB1li/), or
- Wild animals that are obviously used by tourists for selfies and therefore perpetuate wildlife selfie tourism and wildlife trade.

c) The depiction of animal rescues from precarious situations but which, following research, turn out to be staged:

Content of this type – often with a simple title, for example, "Man saves dog from python" – is the result of deliberately bringing animals into these situations

in order to increase reach with a supposed rescue video
(see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQkVBZ5RDRY&t=5s,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/19/youtube-must-remove-videos-of-animal-cruelty-says-charity).

d) The depiction of supposedly "funny animals" in situations of animal suffering:

Although usually, only a small part of the sequences of a video depict obvious animal suffering, these videos must be considered in their entirety. These are often compilations of recordings
   - in animal clinics (the first sequence herein depicts obvious animal suffering: https://fb.watch/3ikfVyX_aq/)
   - of animals that are overheating or are massively restricted in their freedom of movement, for example, through costumes, like in some of these sequences: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qonN0GtpsHY
   - or of animals that are scared on purpose, like in the context of the #kulikitaka challenge, as a consequence of which animals died: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1eaOId9Zts

e) The depiction of animals with physical disabilities as a result of selective breeding:

According to their breed, we do not fundamentally define such animals (in German: Qualzuchten; literally translated as torture breeds) by the suffering individuals. Due to the mostly uncritical presentation of overbred animals, animal suffering becomes normalized, and a dangerous trend is promoted. Examples of this are dogs with severe breathing problems or even deadly Pug Dog Encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) and cats of short stature or with conditions such as short-headedness (brachycephaly) that endure lifelong suffering
(see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAzIiRF5Gyc, https://pugsandfrenchbulldogs.tumblr.com/post/615209020430696448,
and https://www.instagram.com/p/CIlnitTguk0/). We also define hybrid animals such as Savannah and leopard cats or wolfdogs of the first generation, as well as animals bred to be extremely large or small – the latter are, for example, so-called teacup dogs and cats – as torture breeds (from the German word "Qualzuchten") and thus the product of selective breeding associated with animal suffering. The uncritical depiction of these animals and particularly sales offers on profiles and in groups on social networks should be consistently rejected. (see:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/962860077080439/,

https://www.facebook.com/AKCTEACUPYORKIES1 and
https://www.facebook.com/wolf-hybrid-puppies-226044220808)

We demand that operators of social networks revise their Community Standards with regard to obvious animal suffering. It must be ensured that such content is deleted immediately. The creators – whenever necessary and possible – are reported to the responsible authorities for prosecution under the Animal Welfare Act.

Suspicion of animal suffering

Content that may depict animal suffering, but which cannot be determined conclusively without knowledge of the context

We assign content to the definition of suspicion of animal suffering if it indicates clear animal suffering but cannot be declared without further context. The criminal liability of the actions depicted in the content would not be clear since the "good reason" for animal suffering mentioned in §1 of the Animal Welfare Act could be present in many of these examples.

For a conclusive categorization, information such as the animal's body language, the context, and the underlying relationship between animal and human is decisive. In the following examples, this is not sufficiently provided, which is why the suffering of the animal shown is possible and even probable but not verifiable.

- Frequently shared content includes images or footage in which people maintain close contact with wild animals (https://www.instagram.com/p/o_Rq1FkqFW/, https://www.instagram.com/p/BtELor1Ajxv/, and https://www.facebook.com/CharlieSheen/videos/445089006943497/), but the location or reason for the proximity remain unclear. However, this is the essential context required to be able to assess the situation. For example, the rehabilitation of rescued wild animals in wildlife sanctuaries may necessitate human attention and care to a certain extent. For these wild animals, contact with humans may be decisive in ensuring their survival, and the animal suffering possibly associated with this must therefore be accepted. On the other hand, wild animals seen in photographs or videos could have been removed from the wild illegally or bred to be kept as pets or for selfie tourism. Only when the circumstances are apparent can we assess

the cases.

- We view the commercial sale of animals on profiles or in groups on social networks critically, however, due to lack of context, in most cases, we can only express a suspicion of animal suffering. Many times, evidence points to insufficient knowledge on the part of the breeders and/or to criminal structures in the puppy trade, for example, when the animals offered are very young. In addition, the creators of these sales offers usually offer more animals than would be expected in a natural litter, which is indicative of breeding in violation of animal welfare.

- If numerous animals are depicted in too small a space in a household, the suspicion may arise that animal hoarding is taking place, whereby animals are collected as a result of a mental illness, an obsessive-compulsive disorder. With the abundance of animals these people keep, the needs of the single individual can hardly be met and severe animal suffering occurs due to lack of feeding, hygiene, care and veterinary treatment. At the same time, the abundance of animals can also, for example, be a snapshot of an animal shelter, which disproves the suspicion – the context is therefore crucial (see: https://www.instagram.com/p/CMmUQN2Ms7y/).

- When photographs or videos depict animals whose freedom of movement is restricted, for example, through costumes, this may initially indicate suffering. A series of such examples is offered by the #ScrunchieCat Challenge, in which cats' ears are tied together with a hair tie (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbaEI414n40- and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QSmhPDQjBY). Content may be considered a depiction of animal suffering if the animal's movement is severely restricted or restricted over a long period, and the animal is obviously stressed.

- Footage of "dancing" animals is also often ambiguous. Although the sight may displease animal lovers, these pictures or videos often do not depict animal suffering but instead enrich the animals or reinforce the human-animal bond. Whether recorded dance performances depict animal suffering depends on the circumstances, including the animal's habits, anatomy, and training. If, however, the photographs or videos clearly show that the animals were forced into or trained to be in these situations, or if the movements obviously do not correspond to the animal's natural locomotor system and could result in injury, then the context and thus the categorization of animal suffering is given.

- Often difficult to classify are photographs or videos in which animals are fed inappropriately, such as dogs that are fed avocadoes, seasoned meat, or chocolate in the #Mukbang Challenges (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcQJWJKoZmM). In our view, it is clearly animal suffering if the type and amount of feed can have life-threatening consequences.

- Pictures of animals lying in microwaves and washing machines often do not initially depict suffering. The animals may be lying in their favorite spot. It is, however, clearly animal suffering if the animal was obviously locked in and is noticeably stressed, or when the machine is in operation (https://flic.kr/p/aDhf56).

- Aggressive dogs, for example, that are treated or restrained violently may experience suffering while they need to be controlled. The emergency legitimizes this treatment (which is therefore not criminal, and we do not classify it as obvious animal suffering). This does not apply in a famous case where a dog's muzzle was taped shut because it was barking (https://dogtime.com/trending/32139-woman-tapes-dogs-mouth-shut-uploads-photos-facebook). This situation does not legitimize the action taken and is an example of obvious animal suffering.

- Similarly, it is essential to differentiate between abuse and cases when animals are depicted in their natural positions while swimming – like hedgehogs or rabbits. In the context of necessary veterinary treatments, this may need to be accepted. At the same time, the procedure can be staged and thus be unnecessary and very distressing (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_J0AMPPD34&t=4s).

Only the context and often also the clarity and accuracy of the video or photograph allow a conclusive assessment of the situation. In our animal welfare work, however, we adhere to the principle:

When in doubt, in favour of the animal

This means that we have to assume animal suffering occurred until the opposite becomes apparent. We, therefore, demand that operators of social networks carefully examine all relevant content. Suppose the context remains unclear, and the content raises suspicion of animal suffering. In that case, the networks should request the creators for supplementary information, which can be used to rule out animal suffering.

If this does not occur, the content should be deleted.

Another significant part of the animal-related content in social networks does not fall under either of the two previous definitions of the depiction of animal suffering, but we still consider it alarming.

Lack of respect – precursor to animal suffering

In our view, many of the images and videos of animals, which are spread in social networks particularly rapidly and often without reflection, portray disrespectful treatment of the animal. In some cases, the content encourages imitation – and could lead to situations of animal suffering.

This includes content for which animals are staged. This may not cause suffering, but against one's better judgment regarding the animals' indisposition, fear or irritation, the animals are brought into unnatural situations. Furthermore, there are examples of disrespectful behavior in which dead animals are staged in a supposedly funny manner. That content of this kind is often created to be "entertaining" and thus gain reach is evidenced by the frequent use of hashtags like #trynottolaugh or challenges that encourage imitation.

The abovementioned examples of disrespectful treatment of animals have in common that the animals are not perceived as fellow sentient creatures and not appreciated. This content could be imitated, resulting in an escalation of the poor treatment depicted and result in animal suffering. Such content also bears the risk that the general view of humans on animals changes, potentially leading to a weakening of measures aimed at improving animal welfare.

The assessment of whether the treatment depicted is disrespectful towards the animal lies in the eyes of the beholder and must be defined individually. In addition to the examples as mentioned earlier, Welttierschutzgesellschaft views the display of the following as evidence of disrespectful treatment of animals, which can be of use in assessing content in social networks:

- offensive gestures or insults

- threats and threatening gestures
- situations of discomfort, which people film/photograph instead of providing the animal with assistance

- scenes of (for example, dead or anthropomorphized) animals, which are staged for comedic purposes

In addition to our wish that users recognize this content and do not spread or imitate it, we would particularly like to appeal to this type of content creators. Please ask yourself the following questions before creating content:

-   Are you placing a core motivation such as amusement or the goal to generate reach above the animal's needs?

-   Does your animal feel unwell during the moment of filming/photographing, and should you solely be providing assistance?

-   Could the post result in imitation and escalation that could lead to animal suffering?

If you answer one or several of these questions with yes, then you should not create or post the content.

From the social networks, we expect the insertion of a notice regarding the content of disrespectful treatment of animals, which could, for example, lead to websites that provide a guide to the respectful treatment of animals. The notice would caution users not to recreate such images or videos.

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Summary

Stop animal suffering in social networks: No likes for suffering

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It is imperative that social networks consistently react to animal suffering content. We demand the following action in the spirit of animal welfare:

-   The networks must expand their Community Standards to include the topic of animal suffering and ensure that, with their registration in the network, users commit to not publishing or disseminating content depicting animal suffering or disrespectful treatment of animals.

-   Content with obvious animal suffering – severe animal suffering that no context could relativize – must be recognized as such by the networks and deleted immediately. Whenever necessary and possible, this content should be reported to the respective law enforcement authorities. Legislation must impose a legal obligation for this, at least at the federal level.

-   Suspicions of animal suffering – content with evidence indicating animal suffering but cannot be determined conclusively without the context – must be reviewed by the networks. If the creators cannot establish a context that rules out animal suffering, the networks must act in favor of the animals and delete the content when in doubt.

- The operators of the social networks are required to provide their moderator teams with comprehensive training on animal suffering so that they can react appropriately to relevant content

- Content that advertises disrespectful treatment of animals and that could result in animal suffering through imitation does nothing to promote the appreciation of animals. To ensure that efforts to increase awareness of animal welfare are not thwarted, this content should be accompanied by an information notice.

If animal suffering content serves an informational purpose or is included in documentaries, it must provide warning notice, i.e., accompanying information – continue to be available.

Compliance must also be ensured by means of:

- opportunities to report both animal suffering and disrespectful treatment of animals that encourage users to speak out against corresponding content

- consistent action by the moderator teams not only in response to users' messages but also through in-house technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

At this point, we would also like to appeal to the animal welfare awareness of users of social networks: Before disseminating any animal-related content, users should ask themselves whether the content is beneficial in terms of animal welfare. Is the context clear or supplemented by meaningful information? If not, and when in doubt, we request users to act in favor of the animal – and not to disseminate the content.

- Do not react to content with obvious animal suffering – severe animal suffering that no context could relativize – and consistently report this content.

- In cases of suspicions of animal suffering – content with evidence indicating animal suffering but which cannot be determined conclusively without the context – you should use the comment section to ask for further information and background about the photograph or video. Point out that the context is missing and that you suspect animal suffering. If you do not receive a reaction, please also consistently report this content. Please do not share this content.

- If the content seems disrespectful towards the animal, point out to the creator that the content does not correspond to your understanding of the appreciative treatment of animals. At the same time, you should not disseminate the post but report it to the moderators.

Please always reflect on your own actions. For animal owners, this means:

- Do not give animal suffering a platform, and do not post photographs or videos of animal suffering that does not serve an informational purpose.

- As soon as an animal obviously feels uncomfortable, you should try to improve the situation for the animal – and not pull out your camera.

The goal must be that networks recognize and stop animal suffering. They must not provide animal suffering a platform but must take action against it. With the involvement of users like you, platforms can contribute to sustainably strengthening animal welfare worldwide.