



Connecting Parties for Change; a Qualitative Study into Communicative Drivers for Animal Welfare in the Food Industry

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Abstract

One of the optional topics of Corporate (Social) Responsibility (CSR) is animal welfare. This exploratory qualitative study reveals which communicative factors stimulate an attitude of responsibility towards animals in companies in the animal-based food industry. It shows that a manager who is made responsible for animal welfare can strengthen the company's ethical position in two ways using communication. The first one is to connect with stakeholders within and outside the company. The second way is to facilitate, as a moderator, communicative connections between these stakeholders in which the manager is not involved per se. In both cases, if these connections take the form of personal meetings, this is extra helpful for a responsible attitude, because in that way insight, trust and collaboration are gained and sustained. We present a model outlining all supportive communicative connections, a summary of communication channels that are used to effectuate them, and practical advice for managers.

Keywords Animal welfare · Food industry · Communication · Responsibility · Managers

Introduction

Communication by companies plays an important role in Corporate (Social) Responsibility (CSR) (Golob et al. 2013). Without communication, customers or corporate buyers would have no extra stimulus to buy responsibly produced products or services. On the other hand, CSR communication can lead to accusations of greenwashing and window dressing, even if

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the communication is honest and accurate (Schlegelmilch and Pollach 2005). Fear of this type of accusation may be one of the reasons for doing the opposite and keeping silent about a decent CSR performance (Mausser 2001; Nielsen and Thomsen 2009), a phenomenon we propose to name ‘window blinding’.

Communication with internal and external stakeholders is of importance for CSR in several ways and on several levels. CSR communication studies so far have focused merely on communication with consumers and other external stakeholders (Golob et al. 2013). Communication is not only supportive of CSR, it can also trigger responsibility (expression is followed by action), or be an act of responsibility itself by virtue of its performative role (Schoeneborn and Blaschke 2014; Schoeneborn and Trittin 2013). Writing on a website that animal welfare should be taken seriously, for example, is a way of taking animal welfare seriously. In addition, communication can lead the right employees to the right company. Jobseekers and employees increasingly value the CSR achievements of companies (Grayson 2010; Rodrigo and Arenas 2008), and therefore want to be informed in order to make the right career choices. Finally, and in addition to these topics of public communication, it has been argued that organisational values can be integrated in organisations through (internal) organisational communication, for example by writing about them in vision documents that are shared with employees (Begley and Boyd 2000).

Animal welfare is a rather special CSR issue. In business ethics literature, it is a relatively new and unexplored topic, and in business practice it appears to be a blind spot for many (Janssens and Kaptein 2016). In a previous exploratory study, we presented a model explaining differences between companies in the food industry regarding the corporate responsibility they take for animals (Janssens and Van Wesel 2018). In the present paper, we build on data from that earlier study to deepen the topic of *communicative* factors and will therefore explore the role of communication in gaining and strengthening an ethical corporate stance towards animals. Furthermore, we offer practical advice to those who are involved in this aim.

Why are we zooming in on communicative drivers and not any other type of drivers? Because communication is an instrument that is relatively easy to handle and that is already there in practically any company. It does not require extreme innovations. A few points of attention and practical adaptations can make the beginning of a change or strengthen an existing change process. Specifically, we will focus on communication in relation to corporate responsibility for animals in the food industry. Our central research question is: *Which factors of communication help food companies to take responsibility for animals, and how do these factors interact?* We take as a starting point the Laswell Formula for ethical communications: *Who says what to whom in which channel and with what effect?* (Schlegelmilch and Pollach 2005). In this case we start from the *effect*: we will look specifically for those factors which strengthen an ethical stance of the corporation towards animals. In addition, we focus on *who* and *in which channel*, so that we can explore the routing of the communication. Analysing the content (*what*) is beyond the scope of our research question, aside from our starting point that the content relates to animal welfare.

We looked into Western food companies because they are relative frontrunners in taking animal welfare into account (Janssens and Kaptein 2016). In these companies, factors influencing the process towards a responsible position will stand out extra clearly. In addition, there is the fact that qualitative data were available. We will elaborate on this in the next section. In the third section, we will present our findings, followed by discussion, conclusions and recommendations in the final section.

Method

In this exploratory study, we use part of the data from a former exploratory, qualitative study, collected in 2015 and 2016 during nine interviews with different types of managers who had in common that they were responsible for animal welfare, whom we called Responsibility Managers (RMs), of 9 large (1000+ employees), internationally operating, Western-Europe based companies in the animal-based food production chain (Janssens and Van Wesel 2018). The companies were producers, processors, wholesalers and retailers. The methodology used was based on grounded theory (Boeije 2010; Corbin and Strauss 2015). We searched online and in real life for companies fitting the above requirements, and approached them by email. We were directed to new companies by asking the interviewees for potential participants (snowball sampling). In total, we invited thirteen companies to participate. Four companies rejected our invitation. Within the sample of nine, seven companies were based in the Netherlands, one was based in the United Kingdom and one in Switzerland. The RM could be the CSR manager, the quality manager, or any other manager, but in all cases there was a manager who was responsible for animal welfare. By offering the research plan beforehand by email, promising confidential use of data, trust was created.

The interviews were semi-structured using an interview guide, which provides the richest source of data for theory building (Boeije 2010; Corbin and Strauss 2015). In each of the interviews, information on communicative factors was given spontaneously as well as by answering open questions. The length of the interviews was 40 to 90 min. The interviews were done in person by one of the researchers, who had more than 25 years of experience in journalism and communications. One interview was done by telephone due to geographical distance. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For reasons of data triangulation we combined the interview data with data from the companies' CSR reports and their websites. Data were entered in NVivo and analysed in a cyclical process of interviewing, coding, identification, comparison, and analysis. When saturation occurred, one last participant (the ninth) was added, and the saturation was confirmed.

For the study reported here, which focuses on communication, we re-analysed the complete data set with a strong focus on communicative factors that were mentioned as positive drivers for a responsible stance of the company towards animals. Because of our focus on communication, we added extra data from social media. We checked the companies on the most current social media used by companies: Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. We read the companies' posts, going back several months (the exact number of months depending on the frequency of the posts, varying from 2 to 12), looking for information on animal welfare. By comparing and analysing the extended data set, we identified the model we will present in the following section. In validating our findings, the constructed model was presented and explained to the RMs by email, asking them whether they recognised it from their practices. Their comments were incorporated in our discussion and conclusions.

Findings

Based on our data, we found several communicative factors that appeared to enhance the level of responsibility for animals taken by the company, which we called drivers. By grouping these drivers, and drawing communicative connections between the stakeholders involved, we could design a model illustrating how these elements interact. This model is shown in Fig. 1.

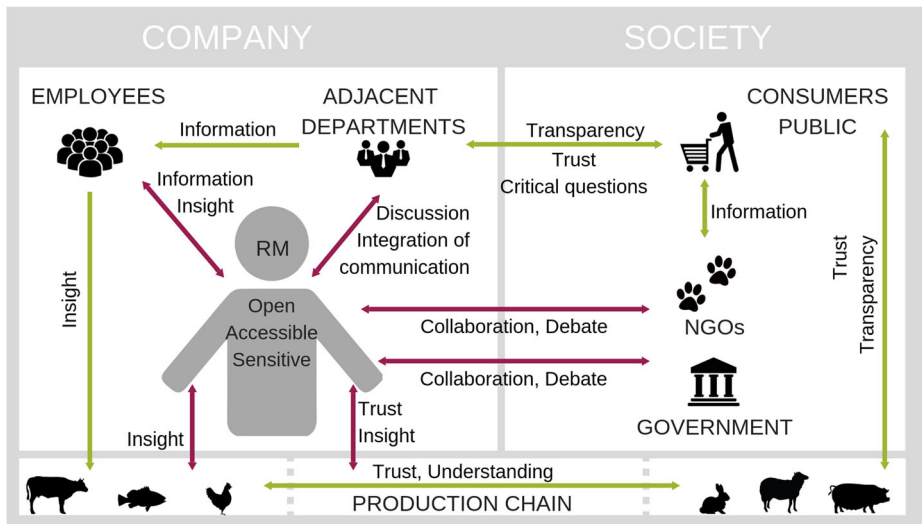


Fig. 1 Communicative connections functioning as drivers for corporate responsibility for animals in the food industry. RM = Responsibility Manager (CSR manager or any other manager responsible for animal welfare). UPPERCASE TEXT + icon = stakeholder involved in communication. Dark/red arrow = driver in the form of a direct communicative connection with the RM. Green/light arrow = driver in the form of a communicative connection in which the RM plays moderating role. Arrow point = direction of the communication. Lowercase text = what is exchanged or gained through the connection. Dotted lines = borders between companies within the production chain (one stakeholder group, but different companies: producers, processors, wholesalers and retailers of different types of animals and animal-based products)

Furthermore, we made an inventory of the communication channels involved in each of the communicative connections in the model. This inventory is shown in Table 1.

We stress that our model and table do not reflect the average situation. We combined all positive factors that appeared to enhance corporate responsibility for animals from the way they were presented in the data. Therefore, we view our model and table as an overview of what works well in frontrunner companies, and how these elements could interact if they were all put into practice in a variety of combinations. Consequently, the model reflects a combination of positive communicative factors, all of which can be found in practice. All companies in the study use a selection of the connections and channels. Some use many, in interconnected combinations, while others use only a few. From here on, when we talk about RMs it can mean either one of them or all of them, or any number in between. As our study has a qualitative and exploratory design, we do not make statements about the *quantity* of the influence of drivers, nor do we draw conclusions about how many companies make use of them.

We will now explain Fig. 1 and describe each connection (shown as an arrow), including the communication channels that are used, as listed in Table 1. In Fig. 1, arrows pointing both ways express a dialogue, while the arrow pointing one way expresses communication in one direction. Now and then we will illustrate our delineation with a statement from our data¹: RMs (marked RMx), annual reports (marked ARx), websites (marked WSx), and social media (marked SMx).²

¹ The examples are not offered as sufficient argumentation for our findings, but as illustrations. There is no room in this paper to offer all the relevant quotes. Full research data are available on request.

² Some of these quotes have been used before in Janssens and Van Wesel 2018.

Table 1 Communication channels used by managers responsible for animal welfare in food companies

Communicative connections	Communication channels used
Connections of the responsibility manager (RM) with stakeholders	
RM ↔ employees	Intranet, meeting, event, game
RM ↔ adjacent departments	Meeting
RM ↔ NGOs	Event, award, campaign, stakeholder debate
RM ↔ government	Meeting
RM ↔ production chain	Visit, meeting, extranet, newsletter, stakeholder debate
Connections between stakeholders, in which the RM plays a moderating role	
Employees ↔ production chain	Visit, events
Adjacent departments → employees	Newsletter, intranet, company website, press release, social media
Adjacent departments ↔ consumers/public	CSR report, packaging, website, press release, social media, traceability system
NGOs ↔ consumers/public	NGO website, company website, social media, joint press release, label
Production chain ↔ consumers/public	Visits, website
Production chain ↔ production chain	Visit, meeting

The RM Connecting to Stakeholders

As can be seen in Fig. 1, the RM connects with several parties, and additionally builds connections between those parties. An open, accessible, and sensitive attitude of the RM as a manager and as a person is beneficial as well, as we will see in the following examples. The RM can make direct communicative connections about animal welfare in five directions: inside the company with (i) employees and (ii) adjacent departments (management, communications, marketing, etc.), outside the company with (iii) NGO's, with (iv) the government, and with (v) parties in the production chain. We will now describe some characteristics of these connections as they emerge from our data, going clockwise through Fig. 1.

For connecting with employees (top, left), RMs use channels for dialogue by which they can connect directly. Channels we found in our data (see Table 1) are intranet, meetings, and live events such as celebrations of milestones. It is helpful for the dialogue if an RM is accessible to the people in the workplace. Both channels that facilitate dialogue and one-way channels are used.

RM5: “In every production unit with live animals, an Animal Welfare Officer is positioned. (...) And those people are empowered to stop production. – It can happen, as in any company, that a conflict emerges there. – And all those people are functionally connected to me. The site manager is their hierarchical superior, but functionally it's me. If we disagree, the power of decision immediately goes to the next level. And they will discuss it with one of my employees who's in charge of this kind of issues, or with myself. And in no time, there is a discussion about whether we think it's acceptable or not.”

One RM raises awareness about responsibility and sustainability dilemmas for companies by initiating a game for employees that explores this issue. This way the company helps employees understand its dilemmas, including those regarding animal welfare. Another finding was, that despite dialogue, the influence of the average employee on corporate decisions is limited, as is illustrated in the following quote.

RM7: “Let's distinguish between people in the workplace with the knife in their hands, who, like, cut into the animals or pluck their feathers, or [handle them] in other ways.

They know about these [animal welfare] things. There one sees differences, one sees developments. But, of course, they are not really involved in the direction of the company. (...) [We have] several meetings, informal worker meetings. There are ways to communicate these things with each other. But, with all due respect for what all the employees do, they are not very determinative for these transitions. It's much more a somewhat smaller group of people (...). And as soon as we have chosen that direction, one can start to communicate with those people what the changes will be."

The complexity of animal welfare as a CSR issue, concerning for example what is best for animals, makes it important for the RM to communicate with colleagues from adjacent departments (top, middle) in a sensitive way (the next connection in Fig. 1), especially those responsible for reputation, strategy, marketing, issue management, and product quality, including the management department. A strong connection between the RM and these departments is a driver (positive factor) for the responsibility for animals a company is taking. If the RM has a connection with these departments and involves them in the change process, more can be achieved. One of the RMs describes how an agreement on working with an animal welfare label for chickens came about. Another one describes discussion with adjacent departments as challenging.

RM8: "That initially was discussed between the CSR/Quality Department, that's us, and the Category Manager, the people who are responsible for what's on the shelf. (...) And that's how the first agreements were actually made. First [one should] talk about what [animal welfare] means; what are we talking about here? And is everyone aware what it means to work with a slow growth [chicken] breed, and what the impact will be?"

RM3: "Duck is simply duck. So, let's not do the misleading thing. If people perceive [the term "game"] as misleading, it's enough to write on the packaging that it's simply duck. (...) At Marketing of course they want to make swiping statements. They want to bring the game product group to people's attention. So then, again, this sticker appears: 'game and wine go well together'. So then, uh... there it is again: 'game'! And then we're being deceitful!"

Outside the company, RMs connect with NGOs (see the next connection in Fig. 1, middle, right). Programs for working together on, for example, meeting the requirements for an animal welfare label are helpful for getting companies to take a responsible stance towards animals. RMs invite NGOs to stakeholder debates about animal welfare. Some regularly organise a stakeholder debate or a 'materiality assessment' with stakeholders, in which the topic of animal welfare is introduced and discussed between other responsibility topics. In the next statements, the RMs are explaining how the animal welfare strategy of the company comes about and is revised now and then.

RM1: "You do a materiality analysis. So, you ask your stakeholders what they see as the important issues we should pay attention to. And then 'animal health/animal welfare' just scores high."

RM9: "When we hold these stakeholder meetings, we do invite the animal welfarist organizations."

Governmental organisations (middle, right) were mentioned occasionally in the data. RMs expressed the opinion that government regulation at national or European level makes sense,

but that the sector itself should also have substantial autonomy. Opinions on how proactive on the one side or reserved on the other side governments should be, differ among the interviewees. Communication plays a role, albeit a modest one, in the complex relationship between government and company (see the next connection in Fig. 1). A dialogue, which is effectuated through meetings (Table 1), is necessary to start innovative programs in cooperation with the government. An RM who is willing to join the debate, and is supported to do so by corporate management, is influential. It is the frontrunners who hold the microphone.

RM5: “The House of Representatives wanted to discuss the stunning of slaughter animals. The Association [of the industry] wanted to delegate people there to explain things on behalf of the industry. Being a frontrunner for animal welfare we [as a company] said: we slaughter more than 50% of Dutch pigs, so I’m going to explain it myself.”

There are strong connections between RMs and companies in the production chain (Fig. 1, bottom) which are helpful. In addition to a rather impersonal channel such as a newsletter, and a quasi-personal channel such as an extranet (a website with controlled access for partners), live meetings and farm visits are stimulative, because they can establish mutual trust and understanding (Table 1). For example, RMs visit farmers to see how things work from their perspective.

RM4: “I myself, through my work and walking around on farms, with boots on, talking to farmers, have started to appreciate farming and animal-based production systems, and the people behind them. I think they are extremely undervalued in society. (...) So, through my work and through the years I have started to value all this, and as well the importance of animal welfare. Honestly, I think, I wasn’t aware of all that before, because I wasn’t raised on a farm. We didn’t really have companion animals. So, it was a rather remote issue to me.”

In addition to the five directions described above (shown in Fig. 1) in which the RM directly communicates – in most cases bilaterally – with stakeholders, we will now describe communicative connections between stakeholders in which the RM plays a moderating role.

The RM Moderating Connections between Stakeholders

Apart from communicating with the stakeholders as described above the RM connects stakeholders (the outer ring of arrows). We found 6 connections inside and outside the company, in which the RM is involved as a kind of moderator, stimulating stakeholders to communicate about animal welfare issues. Again, we will describe them clockwise, starting at the left of Fig. 1. RMs connect employees to parties in the production chain by organising farm visits. They take the view that visiting farms increases employees’ understanding of animal welfare issues.

RM4: “You could [as an employee] sign up to visit one of our pig farmers. (...) Because our experience is: if you take people with you, then it comes alive.”

We have already seen that RMs connect with adjacent departments to work closely with them. Through this channel, the RM initiates and facilitates connections between those departments and other stakeholders. One of these connections is that between those departments and other employees. To begin with, employee newsletters, for which the RM can offer information on

animal welfare issues, are put together at the Communications department. The same holds true for part of the content on the intranet and on the company's website. The latter is created for the public, but is used by employees too. We found no examples of employees responding on animal welfare issues, which is represented by the one-sided arrow between adjacent departments and employees in the model.

There are many external communicative connections of adjacent departments that enhance corporate responsibility for animals. The RM plays a facilitating role by working together with these departments or providing information. We will now proceed with the arrow on top, right from the middle, between adjacent departments and the consumer and the public. As already mentioned, the website is open to the public. It can present animal welfare issues and steps taken by the company. One of the corporate websites mentions 'farm-to-fork transparency'. Another one explains the differences between Good Nest Chicken, free-range chicken, and organic chicken. Besides their explanatory role, websites contain press releases about the company's intentions and achievements. This type of news can also be published on social media.

SM2: "All [brand, nationality] dairy products satisfy the requirements of outdoor grazing."

Other relevant channels between adjacent departments and the public by which the RM can stimulate animal welfare topics mentioned in the data are packaging (where product information is disclosed), product traceability systems, and integration of animal welfare as a topic in overall CSR or sustainability communication. In addition, the connection between adjacent departments and the public (including consumers) through these channels helps to establish transparency and trust by providing information. The channels are used to make the complex issue of animal welfare come alive and to receive and answer critical consumer questions, making this connection a two-way street. One of the annual reports explains how this connection to the public works, and one of the RMs illustrates how the reaction of the public plays a role.

AR8: "[Company] thinks it's important that communication about our products is honest, open and clear. [Company] wants to help its clients to be sure that they can make well-informed choices. [Company] says what it does, and does what it says. Integrity and trust are important values of our cooperation with suppliers. This applies as well to consumer communication. If claims or specific product features are printed on [company] products, this will be checked beforehand, to guarantee that products really match these claims. If possible, [company] works with licensed inspection bodies and labels. In some cases, this is not sufficient. In that case [the company] sets up an appropriate inspection body in cooperation with parties involved. In the horsemeat chain, for example, [company] has started to do its own inspections. In addition, [company] is working on a certification system to improve animal welfare."

RM5: "A lot has to do with transparency, openness. The consumer pays a lot more attention, right? And we have other media, social media. What you see is that many changes start after something goes wrong, and the [public] reaction to it. That kind of things have a lot of effect."

Especially if products are being sold with a trusted animal welfare label, it helps if the label is communicated extensively and at the same time honestly.

RM8: “What we haven’t meddled with – I think that’s been our strongest weapon – is that we have been communicating based on facts (...). So, we have just been very honest about how much space the chicken has. (...) We are not going to depict chickens sitting in a wicker basket somewhere in the meadow, or something like that. (...) No, welfare really requires factual communication. (...) If you don’t do it well, you’re going to be lynched. And that’s a good thing, I think.”

Marketing and communication departments use communication channels for storytelling, for example to confirm an authentic or indigenous product image in texts or videos on the website. A video of a farmer who says how much he loves his animals and enjoys the change to a more animal-friendly system increases trust and partly replaces live farm visits. In the next example, the wish to tell a positive story and be authentic at the same time stimulates change.

RM3: “If you would like to state that in Ireland the cows are always in the meadow... In winter they’re not in the meadow, right? So, you cannot write that down. Marketing would love to tell that story. Well, in that case we’ll have to make it happen.”

Even food-processing companies, on whom reputation issues may seem to have less direct impact because there is no direct consumer contact, are aware of indirect effects on their reputation. RMs acknowledge that if animal welfare is important to the companies next to them in the production chain, it is automatically important to themselves.

RM3: “The retailers we are dealing with are all, let’s say, number one companies in their home countries, who put CSR in a high position already. So automatically we put it in a high position too. [...] Actually, we don’t really like to be in the news. It’s all about our retailer.”

RM7: “We like to be seen as a progressive company. And that’s what we are. And animal welfare is an important (...) CSR issue for our [business] environment. So, as we want to be progressive, this is an important issue.”

NGOs in the field of animal welfare have an interest in companies taking a responsible stance towards animals, for example as part of the company’s CSR. For these NGOs, communicating with the public is an obvious activity (see the next arrow, between NGOs and the consumer and the public). They use several channels to express themselves on animal welfare in relation to the food industry in general, or to specific products, companies, or brands. RMs use these existing channels for positive change by being in close contact with these NGOs and working together with them. They facilitate communication between NGOs and the public, for example about products, labels and NGO awards. According to our data, the channels used are NGO websites, company websites, social media, joint press releases, and packaging (NGOs allow companies who meet their requirements to use their label).

If a company obtains an animal welfare award for their achievements, the RM can help the NGO communicate about it with the public. An RM describes how even a ‘shaming’ NGO campaign can be used for progress by tuning in on it.

RM4: “When you see that animal welfare is what resonates [with the public], you start working with [label]. That’s what you communicate with the consumer. (...) We’re also always in contact with [an NGO] internationally, and received a few awards from them. (...) And locally, we also work with (...) various NGOs. (...) What happened with [an NGO] and chickens, this ‘pop chicken’ campaign: You find out that the interaction may be of interest, or offer opportunities. We have long been concerned with animal welfare

as an integral element, but in some materials we are such small players, that we can hardly be the *trigger*. But then there's the difference: since it's already on the agenda internally, you can seize the opportunity of the 'pop chicken' campaign to announce your own switch, and start free riding on the attention, instead of digging your heels in and being defensive."

If RMs make their companies join an animal welfare label program, it becomes possible for an NGO to share this information through its website and a press release. In addition, an animal welfare label can be introduced on product packaging. The RM in the following example sees the label as a communicative tool.

RM6: "Five years ago, the [label] came into existence (...), a great tool to make things known to the consumer."

In case of collaboration with an NGO, shared press releases about joint actions or achievements are issued and exposed on websites.

WS9: "[Company] has announced a major pledge to improve the welfare of the farm animals in its supply chain, following the signature of a partnership agreement with [NGO]."

As animal welfare is strongly demand driven, companies try to make their activities and achievements publicly known through these releases, which increase consumer trust by including a partner NGO as a co-sender.

Although it is not a direct influence of the of RM, we want to mention the influence of both naming and shaming of the company by NGOs. Indirectly, RMs can turn a shaming campaign into an opportunity. One retailer's website uses the negatively framed term 'pop chicken' to make its own products stand out positively in comparison.

WS8: "From October 2014, the [label] has been on the shelves. The living conditions of this chicken are considerably better than those of the current basic chicken, or 'pop chicken'. [Label] is a slower-growing breed. The chickens live longer, gain less weight, and have more space. In addition, they get more daylight, which offers them a natural day-night rhythm. Those are all conditions a pop chicken doesn't have, and which are good for the chicken. It is [the company's] ambition to replace all pop chicken on the chicken shelf with [label] by 2015."

Yet, if the shaming coin flips to the other side, it can have a negative effect on the collaboration between the company and the NGO. People in the company can feel offended or betrayed. RMs and their colleagues get demoralised if things get nasty, for example when excesses of animal abuse are presented as common for the industry, or when unfounded criticism is given. But even then, shaming can indirectly provoke change, as we see in the next example.

RM2: "[This NGO] raises a very loud voice, with harsh commercials. And on the one hand they have enticed us to (...) ultimately improve the chicken shelf, because internally we started seeing: Right, we can't go on like this, there is a need for sustainability, for improvement. That happened on the basis of a very aggressive campaign. I'm not sure whether they caused us to finally take steps, but they did contribute to that process."

Food scandals outside the reach of the company pose challenges and at the same time accelerate the overall process of taking responsibility, as they reveal practices through the

media of which the public and the consumer were not, or hardly, aware. And again, RMs turn this challenge into an opportunity.

RM5: “The scandals are the triggers. These are the wake-up calls. This should change, that must change. And how you’re ultimately going to set things up, that’s a consumer issue, a matter of demand.”

AR8: “During the past few years, several abuse issues in the South American horsemeat chain have been revealed. A team from CSR and Quality did some research in the chain of the horsemeat sold by [company]. Luckily they found none of the practices shown in the documentary. Nevertheless, arrangements for improvement with our suppliers have been made, to further improve the wellbeing of the horses, also during transport.”

We have talked for some time about the connection between NGOs and the public and the consumers, and will now move on to the next arrow: connecting the production chain with the public and the consumer. What holds for employees, holds for the latter groups as well: the topic comes alive as soon as one meets farmers and their animals in real life. Therefore, RMs initiate participation of chain partners in activities such as open-door days. This extends transparency, establishes trust, and takes away negative prejudices. On one of the websites it is formulated thus:

WS7: “The image that chickens have a bad life, living in small cages, is persistent. (...) Therefore, more poultry farmers should open their farms to the public (...) for example on Open Farm Days. It’s important that people see with their own eyes that chickens have a good life, because only in that case will they really remember it.”

The bottom arrow in Fig. 1 expresses connections between parties within the production chain, facilitated by RMs. Views on animal welfare and corporate responsibility can vary considerably between chain partners. According to the data, trust and mutual engagement are crucial for achieving progress. Both are established by live meetings between parties within the chain. Therefore, the use of live communication channels, such as visits and other meetings (e.g., focus groups, program meetings and strategic sessions), is a driver. Sometimes communication is embedded in partnerships, to make sure that the chain partners meet, connect and collaborate. Once again, the RMs are moderators.

RM7: “We take retailers to the farms. We take farmers to the retailers. (...) We invited our farmers into a session to exchange ideas on issues like health, welfare, or any issues they are dealing with. And we invite external speakers to shed a new light on these kinds of issues. Well, it works. And why do we do that? Not so much because we want to change the farmers ourselves, but because the awareness at poultry farms of [the situation of] market parties is very important for getting support for transitions, for improvement, for change. Conversely, market parties also need to understand very well what the problems of daily farm practice are. Only in this way one can jointly search for improvement.”

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

We will now interpret our findings in the light of our research question: *Which factors of communication help food companies to take responsibility for animals, and how do they interact?*

The positive communicative drivers we were looking for take the form of communicative connections and communication channels. They are summarised in our model (Fig. 1), in combination with our overview of the communication channels we found (Table 1). We found them by analysing data from nine semi-structured interviews, the company's websites, their annual (CSR) reports and their social media posts, looking for references to any positive influence of these connections on a responsible corporate stance towards animals. The interviews were the most informative, as they offered not only communicative expressions, but also elaborations and explanations. Nevertheless, documents and posts also provided useful additional information.

The Role of the RM

Our model (Fig. 1) and the accompanying table (Table 1) show a network of interactions of which elements are used by several RMs and stakeholders. The RM as a central figure has many options for connecting to parties and additionally connecting parties around the RM's own position in which the RM is not involved per se. Concepts that play a role are trust, collaboration, and meeting each other in person, for example in company visits and meetings.³ Additionally, more remote channels (and one-way channels) are used out of habit or for practical reasons, since involving all stakeholders extensively in visits and meetings is simply not feasible.

The RM acts as both a connector and a moderator of connections between others. Both types of connections involve the same set of stakeholders and therefore can in some cases intertwine. For example: if the RM organises an employee visit to a farm, it is quite natural to join the group of employees on their visit and affirm the personal relationship with the farmer. Nevertheless, the RM can also keep individual contact with the farmer. The RM who encourages the marketing department to provide information to consumers about animal welfare on the corporate website is likely to get involved in creating content. We did not find examples of RMs getting in contact personally with consumers or the public. This may have to do with the large numbers, but a written text or a video message could be an option. We have no data that show why RMs do not communicate with the public or the consumer directly.

Channels

Table 1 shows that many different channels are used for communicating with the public (and meanwhile the consumer), such as websites, newsletters, press releases and social media, although differences exist between companies. Some of these differences can be explained from the position companies have in the production chain. For example, it is more important for a retailer to inform the public thoroughly than for a processor. Although quantity is not an issue in our study, we want to remark that not many references to animal welfare were found on the social media channels of the companies. For CSR issues in general, Etter (2013) concludes that, fearing the potential negative publicity, companies are hesitant to proactively communicate CSR topics on Twitter, although several of the companies have solved the

³ One of the interviewees remarked after seeing our results that in their case (a cooperative company), the communication with the supplying part of the production chain is of a slightly different nature, as their suppliers are co-owners of the company and therefore have a voice in corporate decision making. Nevertheless, communicative factors in this specific relationship appeared equally important and were integrated in the overall results and conclusions.

paradox of engagement and risk management by starting a specific CSR Twitter account, taking time and effort to manage issues put forward by the public.

Looking more closely at Table 1, we see that each stakeholder has its own appropriate communication channels. Personal contact works out well with partners in the production chain and with NGOs. It would probably work with consumers and the public too but is not feasible, except during events like Open Farm Days. For large stakeholder groups, however, multimedia approaches such as websites, social media and press exposure via press releases are more viable. Sometimes authentic storytelling, as well as tuning in to trends and NGO campaigns with genuine commitment, can work as a substitute for personal contact in approaching large audiences.

Animal Welfare as a Topic of CSR Communication

As we noted already, not much is known about specific communication on animal welfare as a CSR topic. Du et al. (2010) found a mix of general CSR communication channels (reports, Public Relations, websites) and outcomes (trust, awareness, advocacy), both of which overlap with the findings in our study. A study by Kim (2019) reflects several aspects of CSR communication we found as well, like the importance of trustworthiness and transparency, and the link with reputation. Schlegelmilch and Pollach (2005) confirm trust as an important purpose of corporate communication about ethical issues, and also confirm most of the channels that we found. One difference is the relatively personal and reciprocal character of the communication that we found in our research. This difference can be explained by their stronger focus on corporate communication instead of manager communication. Another explanation may be the complexity of the animal welfare issue (Vanhonacker and Verbeke 2014) and the dilemmas it raises, for example between animal welfare and environmental issues, or between differing positions about what is best for animals (Janssens and Van Wesel 2018). At the same time, we cannot be sure that these characteristics (personal, reciprocal) are unique to animal welfare issues. For communication with employees about CSR in general, for example, it is in line with Chen and Hung-Baesecke (2014), who conclude that managers enhance employee participation in CSR activities by participating themselves in them and actively advocating them. Specifying the differences between animal welfare and other CSR topics further requires additional research.

The success of working with adjacent departments points towards embedding animal welfare communication in broader, existing channels of (CSR) communication within a company. This is in line with what Vanhonacker and Verbeke (2014) conclude: that incorporating animal welfare in CSR communication can be fruitful for the company and its animal-friendly stance. In addition, Cornelissen (2004) states that CSR communication needs to be an integrated and inherent part of business activity. Ross et al. (2015) suggest that many companies in the agri-food industry still do not use sustainability (including animal welfare) strategically, but instead defensively. In this way they overlook opportunities to use sustainability as a mechanism to build competitive advantage.

We have indicated that employee communication and consumer communication are supportive of a responsible attitude of the company towards animals. The latter is confirmed especially for agribusiness by Luhmann and Theuvsen (2016). Taking the limited consumer knowledge of food production into account, they state that it is important for a company to share its view on the process, in order to increase transparency, knowledge, trust and reputation. The importance of communication and gaining trust is also confirmed by

Schlegelmilch and Pollach (2005), and especially for the food sector by Gössling (2011) and Vanhonacker and Verbeke (2014). In addition, Luhman and Theuvsen (2016) find that stakeholder pressure is a strong motivator for CSR in agribusiness, as do Vidales et al. (2012). Our study confirms this relationship for animal welfare as a CSR topic.

Limitations of this Study and Recommendations for Further Research

We realise that our study is of an exploratory nature, and that the small number of participants is a limitation. We stopped interviewing when saturation in the diversity of topics occurred, which means that some of the drivers we found were only experienced by one or two of the interviewees. Thus, we cannot make statements about the strength or frequency of the drivers found. Therefore, we recommend that future research further explores our findings, including the nature and impact of specific connections and, as was mentioned earlier, specific characteristics of animal welfare as a CSR issue. Another limitation of this study is that it does not offer all possible drivers for animal welfare. Despite the saturation effect, we cannot completely rule out the possibility that additional interviewees could have surprised us with new channels, or that there are several potential channels or connections that have been overlooked by the industry and have not yet entered its practice. Research into the potential influence of relatively new communication channels and communicative connections is therefore recommended. Furthermore, it is possible that the RM plays a less central role and only looks more central because of the relatively high weight of the interviews with the RMs in our analysis. Nevertheless, we think we have revealed a model that draws a useful picture of communicative drivers around the RM, inside and outside the company.

In our exploratory study, we cannot make statements about strong causal relations between communicative drivers and a responsible corporate stance. What we have shown is in which ways RMs with a relatively responsible attitude take a central role in a web of communicative relations that are potential drivers of corporate responsibility for animals, at least from their own point of view.

The exploratory nature of the study and our aim to find factors that help a company take a responsible stance towards animals, has led us to focus on companies that do express themselves on animal welfare and therefore appeared to have linked responsibility for animal welfare to one of their managers. This is a limitation as well. Our data offer no options for comparison with companies who have not done so.

Given the existing literature on the influence of investors on CSR (Glac 2014; Kong 2012; Vidales et al. 2012) it was interesting to observe that they were hardly mentioned in any of our data sources. Sometimes they were implicitly included in terms like stakeholder debate and materiality assessment. We did not explicitly ask RMs to elaborate on investor communication, and RMs did not mention them spontaneously. Therefore, investors are not included in our model. An explanation of their relative absence in the data may be that they are beyond the scope of the RM and thus are more remote.

We observed that to some companies (or at least to their RMs) their position towards animal welfare is strongly determined by consumer influence. An interesting topic for a normative follow-up study would be the relevance of intention. Can companies be accused of greenwashing if their intentions are mainly or purely economically motivated, or are the outcomes in terms of animal welfare what counts? Our qualitative data cannot answer this question.

What we did not address either is the conflict of interests that can occur in communication about an issue like animal welfare. Our data revealed that ‘shaming’ of companies can be

drivers for animal welfare, but can at the same time harm companies and their employees. There are more interests involved than those of animals. This as well is a recommended topic for normative exploration in follow-up research.

Applicability of the Results

Although our study focused especially on animal welfare in the food industry, we think the odds are high that the drivers we found can be translated to other CSR topics and industries as well, as was argued above in the light of CSR communication literature. Nevertheless, the strength of each driver will depend on several aspects of each topic, such as how common it is and where the company stands on the topic. Therefore, on the one hand, we do not want to be speculative about the transferability of our findings, but on the other hand, we have no difficulty imagining that trust and dialogue play an important role in child-labour issues in the production chain as well, for example, and that site visits could accelerate processes by creating understanding. We also think that openness, accessibility, and sensitivity are positive characteristics of any responsibility manager working on a CSR issue. At the same time, we think that the issue of animal welfare in the Western food industry is so urgent and so relatively new that it reveals communicative drivers more easily than other topics in other industries would have done.

For the issue of animal welfare, we conclude that there is much that companies and their RMs can do to strengthen a responsible stance of the company by communicating. For example, they can share information in their reports, organise farm visits, talk about their goals and achievements (and how they relate to the gap) on social media, and work towards an animal-friendly reputation by showing the trusted face of the farmer in authentic stories. This confirms the findings of Janssens and Kaptein (2016), who state that any company can express its responsibility for animals, at least by showing it more clearly on its website.

Our list of communication channels offers plenty of tools for RMs to enhance a responsible corporate stance towards animals. We recommend that from this list, they extract ways to take the corporate stance further by using the communicative drivers (both connections and channels) described in this model. We also want to emphasise that we are showing the cumulative connections and channels that are used by the RMs of the frontrunner companies in our study, and that none of them uses the complete set. This means that RMs of any company can derive new ideas from our model and overview.

First, if no manager is responsible for animal welfare yet, make it the explicit responsibility of the CSR manager, the quality manager, or any other manager with the appropriate responsibilities. Secondly, we recommend exploring the 5 opportunities for connecting with stakeholders, and the 6 opportunities for facilitating connections between stakeholders. One can strengthen existing connections and initiate new ones where this is possible and appropriate, and use existing (CSR or other) communication channels for communication about animal welfare. The next step is to add personal contacts to these channels for establishing trust and explore substitutes like storytelling. Finally, one could add creative new ideas and to the existing use of communication channels: take inspiration from the gaming example and explore where dialogue can enrich current one-way communication by making use of the input from communication partners (e.g. on social media), et cetera.

Although most of the communicative drivers and channels we found may not come as a total surprise, we think we have offered an overview of the total field of communications around the RM and a broad spectrum of communicative tools that a company, and especially the RM, can use to strengthen and communicate the responsibility it takes for animals.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest There was no conflict of interest of the authors in writing this article.

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