

**The Livestock Collective: A Case Study of Efforts to Enhance Transparency of the Live
Export Industry in Australia**

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Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Australia is a global leader in the live export of livestock. In 2021-22, more than one million head of livestock were exported by sea and air, and the annual value of these livestock is more than AUD\$1 billion (LiveCorp, 2022). Despite having low mortality rates among the livestock being transported, the practice has been scrutinized and faces consumer criticism. Following a media exposé in 2018, Sinclair et al. (2018) found 60% of respondents had negative views of the live export industry and 42% said the trade should be ended. The authors said more education about the issue is necessary.

Originally called The Sheep Collective, The Livestock Collective is a non-profit organization formed in December 2018 with the mission to use transparent communication “to address public concerns about the livestock export industry” (The Livestock Collective, 2023, para. 5). The initiative shares stories from individuals who work at all points in the live export supply chain – farm, trucking, feedlot, voyage, and market. The organization’s purpose statement says its efforts are to provide “visibility and communication to the wider community, thus ensuring an increased understanding of and connection to agriculture” (The Livestock Collective, 2023, para. 6).

Schnackenberg and Tomlinson’s (2016) model of organizational transparency served as the framework for this study. This model is comprised of three main constructs: information disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. According to the model, the amount and type of information an organization chooses to share (or not share) will impact the public’s perception of transparency.

The purpose of this study was to explore the Livestock Collective’s efforts to provide transparency about Australia’s live export of livestock. The primary research objective was to describe the organization’s communication efforts.

Methods

This study used a case study approach. Case study data can be collected from several sources (Yin, 2014). In the current study, I used newspaper coverage and interviews with two members of the organization. To collect the newspaper coverage, I used the ANZ Newstream to search for newspaper or wire feed content published between 2018-2022 with the following keywords mentioned anywhere in the headline or article: “Livestock Collective” or “Sheep Collective” or “Cattle Collective”. Using these parameters resulted in 56 articles. Duplicates and articles with negligible mentions of the keywords were removed, resulting in 28 articles. I conducted a semi-structured interview with two Livestock Collective staff members via Zoom. The interview lasted one hour, and we discussed the beginning stages of the organization, how it has evolved, use of communication platforms, and its future. Data analysis involved reading all the articles and interview transcript to identify the organization’s communication efforts.

Results

Shortly after its launch in December 2018, Goodwin (2019) specifically mentioned The Sheep Collective’s efforts to provide transparency about the industry and the emphasis on animal care. By mid-February, media representatives were able to tour a live export vessel bound for the Middle East as thousands of animals were loaded at a Western Australia port. This was the first

time the live sheep export industry had invited the media to tour such a ship (AAP General News Wire, 2019). The Sheep Collective's initial website launch had video testimonials from farmers, buyers and exporters (Laurie, 2019). The organization also created videos to demonstrate the supply chain, which agricultural producers could use on social media (Somerville, 2019). Over the next few months, organization leaders were invited to speak to several agricultural meetings about their transparency efforts.

In November 2019, The Cattle Collective initiative was launched to help those in the cattle industry "share accurate information and personal stories about the livestock export industry with the broader community" (*Queensland Country Life*, 2019, para. 2). By October 2020, these groups had joined forced to become The Livestock Collective. This organization began hosting professional development workshops to promote collaboration in the livestock sector with a focus on how to communicate about animal welfare concerns. A May 2021 article mentioned the Livestock Collective's Leaders workshop "empowers young leaders working in the livestock industry to share their stories and to improve their advocacy and leadership skills" (*Queensland Country Life*, 2021). In March 2022, the organization launched a virtual tour of a live export ship, which gives "everyday Aussies" a chance to see into the livestock export industry. Throughout 2022, representatives of the organization are cited in other articles as expert sources regarding topics impacting the livestock export industry.

Responses from the interview with organization representatives reinforced the organization's focus on enhancing transparency and authentic storytelling in the livestock industry. They noted the real success of this initiative has been the leadership program, which has trained over 300 individuals in a variety of agricultural industries to give them confidence and skills to communicate about agriculture.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The Livestock Collective quickly gained traction, which indicated the communication and training efforts they provided were addressing a need in the Australian agriculture industry. While the organization was initially created to provide transparency about one aspect of live export, it has expanded its mission to advocating for the entire livestock industry supply chain. The organization has used a variety of communication strategies to share information about the industry from in-person training sessions to social media content to virtual tours.

The insights from the case study can be used to inform other transparent communication efforts in agriculture, particularly those that are addressing a socially-sensitive topic such as animal welfare. It is also unique that this organization is focused on telling the live export story at all points in the supply chain. Other animal agriculture organizations can learn from the efforts of the Livestock Collective to create transparent communication efforts that address public concerns through the disclosure of information, providing clarity, and being accurate.

This organization has additional content that should be analyzed, particularly its presence on several social media platforms. Finally, future research should determine what impact these transparency efforts may have on consumers' attitudes regarding live export of livestock.

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