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# **‘You should be slaughtered!’ Experiences of criticism/hate speech, motives and strategies among German-speaking livestock farmers using social media**

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**Livestock farmers are advised to engage in direct dialogue with consumers. However, attempts to communicate in this way e.g. by farmers using social media have received little academic attention. The present article, based on an online questionnaire conducted in the summer of 2018, provides an explorative insight into the motives, strategies and experiences of criticism of German-speaking livestock farmers with a Facebook business page. The questionnaire reveals that farmers’ motives are not limited to immediate economic objectives. The farmers also aim to provide general information on agriculture and livestock farming. In doing this, they wish to regain the leading role in agricultural discourses and to improve society’s understanding of current agricultural practices with the overall objective of gaining wider societal acceptance of present-day livestock farming. However, the study also makes clear that Facebook is a platform on which farmers are confronted with criticism, and that this criticism can be violent and personally insulting, allowing the diagnosis that livestock farmers are exposed to hate speech.**

**Key words:** Descriptive ethics, social media, livestock farming, Facebook, hate speech, food production.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Livestock farming is an important element in the human food industry. However, today’s western societies have an ambivalent relationship with current animal husbandry (Boogaard et al., 2011). While people appreciate increased food safety and low food prices (Boogaard et al., 2008), they are increasingly concerned about social and ecological aspects (Luhmann and Theuvsen, 2016) and in particular about animal welfare issues (Bergstra et al., 2017; Clark et al., 2016; Krystallis et al., 2009). Germany can be mentioned as a typical example: while the majority of the population consumes animal-based

products as a central component of their daily nutrition (Cordts et al., 2013), an increasing number of people demands better conditions for farm animals (Busch et al., 2015; Kayser and Spiller, 2012; Special Eurobarometer, 2018). Confronted with images from common practices in current livestock farming, large parts of the German society judge them extremely negative (Boehm et al., 2010; Wildraut et al., 2015; Weible et al., 2016; Weinrich et al., 2014). Thereby, the conditions under which pigs and poultry are kept are seen as in dire need of improvement, while dairy farming is viewed more

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positively (Kayser et al., 2012; Christoph-Schulz et al., 2015).

The Scientific Advisory Board for Agricultural Policy of the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (WBA) saw a general sharply decreasing social acceptance of livestock farming in its well-received report on the future of German Livestock Husbandry (WBA, 2015). As a reaction to this loss of acceptance, the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture presented its "Nutztierhaltungsstrategie" (= livestock husbandry strategy) in 2017 (BMEL, 2017) and funded a project called "SocialLab – Nutztierhaltung im Spiegel der Gesellschaft" (= Animal Husbandry in the Mirror of Society), reflecting on the current relationship between society and livestock farming in Germany (for an overview of the project, see Christoph-Schulz (2018)).

All three, the report by the Scientific Advisory Board, the livestock husbandry strategy as well as results of the "SocialLab" project, indicate that German livestock farmers are required not only to work to more animal-friendly standards but also to find new ways of communication, bridging the gap between consumers and livestock farmers. According to the WBA, livestock farmers need to become more involved in social debates than they have been up to now; the current situation, which is characterized by increasing criticism, calls for more transparency and more dialogue-oriented communication (WBA, 2015: 330). In the context of the livestock husbandry strategy, the BMEL demands that not only agricultural associations but individual livestock farmers themselves should make greater efforts to communicate about their work (BMEL, 2017: 34). Similar arguments, underlining the importance of a dialogue between German livestock farmers and consumers, can be found in various recent publications (Christoph-Schulz, 2018; Vierboom et al., 2015; Wimmer, 2016; Langosch, 2016; Holzner et al., 2016).

This demand for more communication between farmers and society can be interpreted in the light of vital results of acceptance and (risk) communication research, especially when people know little about certain areas and expose themselves to potential risks (both apply to food), then trust (or mistrust) in the responsible actors plays a decisive role (Siegrist and Cvetkovich, 2000; Mayer et al., 1995). However, social acceptance and trust can only take place through communication processes between the stakeholders involved (Frewer et al., 1999; Meijboom et al., 2006; Rampl et al., 2012).

In regard to the aim of more dialogue-oriented communication, so-called social media (like Facebook, Instagram or Twitter) are of particular interest since they "allow users to (...) interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others" (Carr and Hayes, 2015: 50). With a view of Germany, the current user figures show that a significant proportion of

the population is using social media (ARD-ZDF, 2018). 31% of the German population (aged 14 and older) are using Facebook at least once a week; 15% are using Instagram at least once a week; 9% Snapchat; 4% Twitter. These are currently the four most widely used social media platforms in Germany. Statistics show for all of them that younger people use them more often than older people. For example, 63% of 14 to 29 year olds use Facebook at least once a week. In view of these figures, social media platforms are of particular interest also to the corporate world. Companies can not only place advertisements that will reach a large number of targeted users, but they can also create a free profile to communicate with customers and potential customers. Facebook therefore distinguishes between personal profiles (that private individuals create in order to connect with friends and acquaintances) and so-called business pages. A Facebook business page is a free public profile which can be set up for a local business, brand or product. Companies can use these pages to promote their business or products by posting status updates, links, event announcements, comments, or photos and videos (Facebook, 2019).

To sum up, German livestock farmers are currently being asked to communicate more directly and more often with consumers/citizens, and social networks such as Facebook seem ideally suited to play a crucial role in this endeavor. Therefore, German studies, books and institutions discussing effective communication measures for agriculture are currently advising, in particular, that (livestock) farmers should use social media such as Facebook to promote dialogue between themselves and society (Berghorn and Berghorn, 2013; BMEL, 2017: 35; Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung, 2018; Holzner et al., 2016; Langosch, 2016; Zeissett and Farby, 2018).

Although social networks and Facebook in particular, have often been scientifically analyzed when it comes to specific professions (e.g. the usage of social media among surgeons (Wagner et al., 2017) or among early-career veterinarians (Weijs et al., 2013)), farmers' usage of social media has hardly been investigated to date. The only few examples that can be found (White et al., 2014) interviewed four farmers about their usage of social media, Cui (2014) focused on farmers markets' and Bos and Owen (2016) on so-called Alternative Food Networks' usage of social networks make clear that there is a lack of vital scientific references about this topic. This is particularly true when it comes to German livestock farmers' usage of social media.

This research gap was the starting point of the present paper. The initial research questions were as follows: (1) What motivates German-speaking livestock farmers to run a Facebook business page? (2) What are their experiences with the use of social media, in particular, if livestock farmers on Facebook experience criticism, how is this criticism best characterized?

## METHODOLOGY

### Target group

The survey targeted German speaking livestock farmers who maintain a Facebook business page. Preliminary research identified so called Facebook groups in which farmers interact on Facebook. The selection of these groups was based on three criteria: (a) groups had to be thematically related to farming; (b) groups without user-generated content in the last 30 days were not considered; (c) groups with less than 300 members were not considered. To illustrate, the Facebook group, Social Media für Landwirte ("Social Media for Farmers") aims to share relevant content about social media in an agricultural context. As of January 2019, this group has 877 members. Groups like this are usually closed. One has to be a member to gain access to the page or to post within the group. Therefore, the moderators of such groups were contacted and asked to share the link to the study's online questionnaire with group members. A total of 14 groups were contacted<sup>1</sup>, all of which posted in German. It is highly probable that the vast majority of registered members of the groups are farmers, but it cannot be ruled out that non-farmers are also registered. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The participants were informed that the results would be published.

The analysis focused on individual farmers, not agricultural organizations (such as "Deutscher Bauernverband"). This focus was deliberately chosen since the Ministry and other stakeholders explicitly want individual livestock farmers to make greater efforts to communicate with consumers (BMEL 2017: 34). Again, this demand can be interpreted in the light of recent communication research: When it comes to communication processes about moral values (like the ones playing a dominant role in social debates on livestock farming (Boogaard et al., 2011)), interpersonal communication is particularly relevant. Whether a recipient perceives the sender of a message as trustworthy or not depends, among other things, on whether they understand and can comprehend the sender's moral values (Meijboom et al., 2006: 433). This assessment may be easier with individual persons than with large organizations. Not least for this reason, a distinction can be made between "interpersonal" and "institutional" communication processes (Poortinga and Pidgeon, 2003; Rampl et al., 2012). The study focused on the former.

### Online questionnaire

The decision to carry out an online survey was taken for pragmatic reasons: potential participants live all over the German-speaking area and have a tight schedule, making it difficult to invite them to semi-structured interviews or to visit them. An online survey gave them the opportunity to be flexible in terms of time and place to answer the questions. The questionnaire presented seven open questions with unlimited input fields. It also presented twenty-six statements requiring respondents to indicate the strength of their agreement or disagreement on a 6-point Likert scale: (1) I totally agree, (2) I agree, (3) I agree somewhat, (4) I disagree somewhat, (5) I disagree, (6) I totally disagree.

The questionnaire consisted of five parts designed to collect data on the following:

<sup>1</sup>The groups were the following: „Landwirte unter sich“, „Social Media für Landwirte“, „Die Land u. Forstwirtschaft in Norddeutschland“, „Rinder und Rindermenschen“, „Landwirt – EinBerufDerZukunft“, „Direkt vom Bauern“, „Landwirtschafts-Freunde“, „Ich bin Bauer nicht Landwirt...“, „Landwirtschaft“, „Landwirtschaft und so“, „Brandenburger Bauern & deren Freunde“, „Pro Landwirtschaft - Profis statt Ideologie“, „Landwirtschaft“, „Landwirtschaft im Dialog“.

(1) The farm: Which animals are farmed? What branch of production is involved? Size of herd? Organic or conventional? Location? (One open question).

(2) The Facebook business page: Who manages it? When was it set up? How many followers/friends does it have? (3 closed questions).

(3) The motives: Why do farmers maintain a Facebook business page? (2 open and 4 closed questions).

(4) The farmer's general experience of Facebook: Are other users posting on their pages? Do they read such comments? (4 closed questions).

(5) Criticism: Do farmers experience criticism on Facebook? If so, how would they describe this criticism in more detail? (4 open and 15 closed questions).

The results presented subsequently relate mainly to parts (3) and (5) of the questionnaire. The questions presented in the study, and in particular those in part (5), were developed after a three-hour workshop held by the author on 15 February 2018 as part of a farmers' training seminar. The workshop was held under the auspices of the Frankfurt Agricultural Association. At the workshop, farmers shared their experiences of Facebook, making clear that they regularly have to deal with harsh criticism. The theoretical starting point for part (5) was the diagnosis that social networks such as Twitter or Facebook currently function as platforms for socially relevant debates and controversies (Marres and Moats, 2015).

### Implementation and evaluation

The questionnaire was available online between 1 June and 30 September 2018. A link to the questionnaire at [www.umfrageonline.com](http://www.umfrageonline.com), where the aims of the study were described and anonymity of all respondents was assured, was sent to potential participants via Facebook. At the time of the study, the topic under investigation was largely unexplored, so special attention was paid to the open questions and their qualitative evaluation. In the tradition of hermeneutics, such qualitative analyses do not involve quantitative assertions. Instead they aim at a heuristic exploration of the substantial content of an argument or position. Answers to the open questions in the study were evaluated according to the method of qualitative content analysis, following Mayring (2015). According to Mayring, the primary tasks of qualitative content analysis are hypothesis finding, theory building and the ordering of data material according to certain empirically and theoretically meaningful aspects with the objective of enabling a structured description of the collected material (Mayring, 2015: 22ff.). Developing Mayring (2015), Kuckartz sets out the following specific steps (Kuckartz, 2012). (a) An initial round of work on the texts in which important passages are marked is followed by (b) the preparation of a first draft setting out a system of main categories. The first test run checks the general adequacy of this system. (c) The material is coded to reflect the categories. (d) All text passages coded with the same category are compiled together. (e) Working directly on the raw material, subcategories (if appropriate) are obtained inductively, and further tests are conducted to check and refine the system of main categories and subcategories. Finally, (f) the material as a whole is coded using the differentiated system. At this point, (g) discussion of the results can begin. In regard to the open questions, the current survey followed these steps.

## RESULTS

A total of 83 participants took part in the study. The

number of answers to each individual question was lower than this, however, as it is made clear in connection with each of the questions subsequently. Significant interpretations of the text material, including the inductive extraction of further research questions, are already included in the following presentation of the survey results.

The survey was conducted in German. When farmers are quoted in the following text, these statements were translated from German into English by the author and professional translators. In selected cases (where the German statement was difficult to translate literally) the original quotation will also be provided. In this case, longer sentences are translated in footnotes, shorter ones in the continuous text. Citation numbers such as (5/21) refer to the systematics of the content analysis: The first number stand for the number of the question of the questionnaire, the second refers to the number of participants.

### Motives

A key question in the online survey examined the motives of livestock farmers who maintain Facebook business pages for their farms. The open question was: "Why do you run a Facebook business page? Please describe your motivation in your own words." 54 participants responded to this request. Their answers led inductively to a differentiation of the initial question into three sub-questions relating to the intended target group, the intended type of communication, and the intended goals of communication.

### Intended target group

A decisive element of any communication is the receiver or receiver group that a sender wants to reach with their message (Burkart, 2002: 64ff). Who are the recipients with whom the participating farmers want to communicate via their social media presence? Their answers regarding the intended target group can be differentiated and placed in the following categories: (a) customers, (b) society, (c) local people/acquaintances, and (d) colleagues. For each of these categories, the following are the exemplary statements made by the participants.

**Customers:** Survey answers indicated that livestock farmers use their Facebook business page to communicate with customers and potential customers. Farmers use Facebook because they want to "have a closer contact with the customer" (5/21), "provide faster information" (5/21) for them and "find new customers" (5/34). In this context, some farmers stated that they sell products through direct marketing and that they use their Facebook business page for advertisement. They want, for example, to make (potential) customers aware of the

"milk filling station" ("Milchtankstelle") (5/8) or the "shop" (5/14) on the farm. A farmer who keeps hens answered: Via Facebook, he/she wants to "give our customers an idea of the conditions in which our eggs are produced. The customers should see that the hens that lay their [the costumers'] eggs live in good conditions and that they [the customers] decide against conventional factory farming [by buying the eggs from our farm]."<sup>2</sup> (5/17)

**Society:** Livestock farmers use their Facebook business page in order to communicate with a target group that can be summarized as "society". The participants stated, for example, that they want to "reach a broad population" (5/1) and to "show people our work" (5/46). Hence, they understand this target group as those parts of the society "that have nothing to do with agriculture" (5/1). In other words, the people they are trying to reach are "non-farmers" (5/9). According to the participants, these "non-farmers" can also be critical of livestock husbandry, more than that: in view of the results that are still being presented subsequently, it can be asked whether farmers generally assume that society is critical of them. Basically, it can be said that farmers are using their Facebook business page also to open a "dialogue (...) with critical fellow citizens" (5/35).

After the open question, farmers' motives were also investigated through closed questions. Two questions asked there largely fit into the identified category "society": The statement "I maintain a Facebook business page in order to inform interested parties about agriculture" gave an average value of 1.50 (SD ± 0.98; n: 59) (Table 1).

The statement "I maintain a Facebook business page to enter into a dialogue with people who are critical of agriculture" by contrast returned an average value of 2.02 (SD ± 1.27; n: 59) (Table 2).

**Local people/acquaintances:** Another target group is those who live locally or are in the farmer's circle of acquaintances. Exemplary answers here stated that the farmers want to inform those in "the nearer surroundings" (5/47) or a "closer circle of acquaintances about my daily work" (5/2). The "neighboring population" (5/25) should be given an opportunity to "find out something about the farm" (5/25). This target group was not surveyed quantitatively.

**Colleagues:** Another target group is colleagues. The farmers indicated that they are on Facebook in order to "network with colleagues (...), exchange ideas and support each other" (5/33). So, the Facebook business page is also used for "communication with other farmers." (5/45) In this context, one participant used the following

<sup>2</sup> Original statement: „Um unseren Kunden ein Bild davon zu geben, in welchem Umfeld unsere Eier produziert werden. Die Kunden sollen sehen, dass die Hühner, welche ihre Eier legen, in guten Verhältnissen leben, und sich somit gegen die herkömmliche Massentierhaltung entscheiden.“

**Table 1.** I maintain a Facebook business page in order to inform interested parties about agriculture.

(1) I totally agree	(2) I agree	(3) I rather agree	(4) I rather disagree	(5) I disagree	(6) I totally disagree
70.69%	17.24%	6.90%	3.45%	--	1.72%

**Table 2.** I maintain a Facebook business page to enter into a dialogue with people who are critical of agriculture.

(1) I totally agree	(2) I agree	(3) I rather agree	(4) I rather disagree	(5) I disagree	(6) I totally disagree
45.61%	28.07%	14.04%	7.02%	1.75%	3.51%

**Table 3.** I run a Facebook business page to exchange with colleagues.

(1) I totally agree	(2) I agree	(3) I rather agree	(4) I rather disagree	(5) I disagree	(6) I totally disagree
15.52%	22.41%	25.86%	22.41%	5.17%	8.62%

**Table 4.** I run a Facebook business page to advertise my farm.

(1) I totally agree	(2) I agree	(3) I rather agree	(4) I rather disagree	(5) I disagree	(6) I totally disagree
44.83%	24.14%	8.62%	15.52%	5.17%	1.72%

wording: "I try to have a discussion (...) with colleagues [about issues] outside the box."<sup>3</sup> (5/9) The last words could also be translated as "beyond the conventional horizons".

Turning to the closed questions, the statement "I run a Facebook business page to exchange with colleagues" gave an average value of 3.05 (SD  $\pm$  1.44; n: 59) (Table 3).

### **Intended type of communication**

A second evaluation analyzed responses according to the type of communication the farmers saw themselves as participating in. The responses here were divided inductively into the following categories: to (a) advertise, (b) inform, or (c) seek dialogue. For each of these categories, the following exemplary remarks were made by the participants.

**Advertising:** A word that kept coming up in the responses on the motives was "advertisement" ("Werbung"). Farmers are keen to advertise their farms or products from their farms. They use Facebook "to increase and spread our advertising power"<sup>4</sup> (5/11) and "to increase our popularity" (5/12). One participant said: "Facebook is a good possibility for free advertisement."

(5/29) Turning to the closed questions, the participants agreed with the statement "I run a Facebook business page to advertise my farm" with an average value of 2.17 (SD  $\pm$  1.38; n: 59) (Table 4).

**Informing:** Some answers appeared to have a somewhat different purpose. A purpose best described as "informing". The difference to "advertising" is that "informing" does not aim at an immediate business relationship. The survey answers rather indicated that livestock farmers want to provide general information about agriculture and livestock farming. One participant addressed this explicitly: He/She is using a Facebook business page "in order to inform about agriculture and our farm. Since we do not have direct marketing at our farm, it [the Facebook business page] is not a tool for customer acquisition/retention." (5/19) In this context, the German term "Aufklärung" (5/4) was used repeatedly. It refers to something like information or education but also connotes *enlightenment*. One farmer answered: "We must enlighten, show our colors and present ourselves! We work in public and therefore it is important to take the public with us!"<sup>5</sup> (16/4) In the German language, the term "Aufklärung" is often used in a context in which more knowledge is regarded as highly necessary. The answers of the participants are no exception: The livestock farmers assume that there is a lack of knowledge about

<sup>3</sup> Original statement: „Ich versuche mit (...) Kollegen jenseits des Tellerrands zu diskutieren“.

<sup>4</sup> Original statement: „Wir führen diese Seite, um unsere Werbeschlagkraft zu erhöhen & zu streuen.“

<sup>5</sup> Original statement: „Wir müssen aufklären, Farbe bekennen und uns präsentieren! Wir arbeiten in der Öffentlichkeit und deshalb ist es wichtig, diese auch mitzunehmen!“

their actual work, that is why the aim of “informing” is accompanied by wordings like “[I have the desire] to show what everyday life in agriculture looks like” (5/22) or “[I want to provide a] representation of reality, bluntly and without any filter.”<sup>6</sup> (5/32)

**Seeking dialogue:** A third intended type of communication can be labeled “seeking dialogue”. The farmers want “to enter into dialogue” (5/9), they are trying to “understand the reactions of consumers” (5/42) and also seeking “dialogue (...) with critical fellow citizens” (5/35). Unlike the previously mentioned types of communication, the purpose of such dialogue is not to deliver knowledge in one-way communication from a sender to a recipient, but to allow exchange and feedback. One farmer stated: “It would be smarter not to present your farm on Facebook if the only goal is to convince people of your own livestock farming” (16/21). However, on a platform like Facebook “there should be (...) an openness to dialogue and to rethink one’s own business”<sup>7</sup> (16/21).

### **Intended goals**

The three types of communication discussed earlier can be compared with the farmers’ intended goals. Content analysis distinguishes between four of them: The answers on the livestock farmers’ motives for using a Facebook business page indicated that they aim at (a) increasing their income, (b) raising awareness (about food), (c) regaining expert status in the public discourse on agriculture and (d) building social acceptance of livestock farming by improving the knowledge of the public.

**Increasing income:** As explained earlier, the farmers want to advertise their farms, or products from their farms, via their Facebook business pages. The aim of this type of communication is to increase the popularity of the farm, to sell more products and, perhaps most fundamentally, to increase income.

**Raising awareness:** Participants stated they want to encourage consumers and fellow citizens to think about where their food comes from. One term that was prominent in the answers is “Bewusstsein” (which denotes *awareness*). One farmer stated: “Whoever wants to eat meat, must deal with the fact that animals are bred, kept and slaughtered for it. And also with the pressure many farmers are confronted with. Maybe in this way we can create a better awareness about the animals and the

meat. If less meat is eaten again and we pay more attention to what we eat and gladly pay more money for better animal husbandry, all sides have won!”<sup>8</sup> (16/44). Another one replied: “But these people should know where their food comes from. We fight for it, that people think more about what is behind the glass of milk or the steak”<sup>9</sup> (16/1). One farmer argued that she/he is convinced that the consumer “does not have to watch how an animal is bred, fattened and slaughtered, but [the consumers] should know that what they put in their mouths has lived and where it comes from”<sup>10</sup> (16/9). Raising awareness means that it is “important to show people where and how their food is produced” (16/27), and that those “who consume animal products must know where the animal come from, where it was produced and how and why it was produced.” (16/33) This awareness was explicitly valued above economic considerations in some answers. For example, one farmer stated: “Everyone should know what happens to animals and then decide whether he or she eats meat. If less meat is consumed as a result, then so be it”. (16/31)

### **Regaining expert status in the public discourse on**

**agriculture:** The farmers complained that they have lost their status as experts in today’s discourse on agriculture. According to the replies of the participants, other stakeholders and groups, media platforms and some NGOs and political parties, currently dominate debates on agriculture and livestock farming. This dominance was represented as unacceptable by the participants. One of the objectives of their communication on Facebook could therefore be summarized as regaining their status as experts on agriculture: “Many people are extremely influenced by the media and they believe a lot immediately without having been on a farm themselves” (14/1) and “For several years now, media and politics have created a mood against farmers, which has now become entrenched in society as a result.”<sup>11</sup> (14/2).

The respondents claimed that there are “false insinuations by NGOs” (14/3) and “biased reports in the media combined with the good networking of animal protection groups and environmental protection groups, plus an extremely good network of animal rights

<sup>6</sup> Original statement: „Darstellung der Realität ungeblümt und ohne Filter“.

<sup>7</sup> Original statement: „Es wäre klüger, seinen Betrieb nicht auf Facebook zu präsentieren, wenn das einzige Ziel ist, die Menschen von der eigenen Tierhaltung zu überzeugen. Eine Dialogbereitschaft und die Option, den eigenen Betrieb zu überdenken, sollte vorhanden sein.“

<sup>8</sup>Original statement: “Wer Fleisch essen möchte, muss damit klarkommen, dass Tiere dafür gezüchtet, gehalten und geschlachtet werden. Und unter welchem Druck viele Landwirte stehen. Vielleicht schafft man so ein besseres Bewusstsein für die Tiere und das Fleisch. Wenn wieder weniger Fleisch gegessen wird und man mehr darauf achtet, was man isst, und man gerne mehr Geld für bessere Tierhaltung bezahlt, haben alle Seiten gewonnen!” (16/44)

<sup>9</sup>Original statement: “Diese Menschen SOLLTEN aber wissen, wo ihr essen herkommt. Wir kämpfen dafür, dass die Menschen mehr darüber nachdenken, was hinter dem Glas Milch oder dem Steak steckt.“

<sup>10</sup>Original statement: „Ich bin der Meinung, der Verbraucher muss nicht zusehen, wie ein Tier gezüchtet, gemästet und geschlachtet wird. Er sollte aber wissen, dass das, was er sich in den Mund steckt, mal gelebt hat, und wo es herkommt.“

<sup>11</sup>Original statement: „Medien und Politik [machen] nun schon mehrere Jahre Stimmung gegen Landwirte, was sich dadurch mittlerweile in der Gesellschaft verfestigt hat.“

activists”<sup>12</sup> (14/5). Against this background, livestock farmers want “to destroy prejudices” (5/51) and “to refute lies/calumnies” (5/36). To achieve these goals, the farmers feel that they need to communicate about agriculture themselves: “... otherwise the public will hear about it [what livestock farmers do] from often one-sided media that deliberately supply information with a specific tendency”<sup>13</sup> (16/4). Facebook offers the chance to “decide for oneself which pictures of us are to be found in the net” (5/7). It “has not worked in the past to hand the way opinions are formed over”<sup>14</sup> (16/17) to others. Participants stated that farmers “must not leave the field to the animal rights activists and vegans on Facebook” (16/49). One said that “there are many animal rights activists [on Facebook], often with several profiles, trying to create a specific mood via Facebook.”<sup>15</sup> (14/2) Given this general situation, which is characterized by growing criticism, active communication by the farmers themselves is “the best defense” (16/12). One participant captured this conviction succinctly: “The motto must be: ‘Tell your story before someone else tells it for you’. NGOs and the Greens [the political party] are currently dominating the discussions on agriculture. Each farm should tell its own story even if it ‘only’ reaches its closest neighbors.”<sup>16</sup> (16/41)

**Building social acceptance via improving public’s knowledge:** The farmers complained that there is limited understanding of their work. One farmer replied: “There is much mistrust and ignorance or controlled/wrong knowledge”<sup>17</sup> (9/3) when it comes to livestock farming. This ignorance concerns as participants repeatedly emphasized, current agriculture, sometimes described as “modern”: “Those who know nothing must believe everything. There is great ignorance about modern agriculture. Almost all consumers adopt the media opinion. When I explain things, I usually start from scratch: There is a lack of basic knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> (9/34) This ignorance is perceived as a problem by the farmers because they assume that wider knowledge of their work

would create higher levels of social acceptance: “Only those who know where the food comes from will appreciate it and also our work to produce it!” (16/8). An important term in the answers of the participants in this context was “relation” (in German: “Bezug”): Participants argued again and again that “people outside agriculture have lost relation with the production of their food.”<sup>19</sup> (16/35). Where this relation still exists, according to the participants, there is more acceptance of livestock farming. For example, one farmer stated: “Children who are socialized with animal husbandry from an early age onwards, learning that you have to care about animals in order to have something to eat, have less problems with it [that is, livestock farming, including slaughter]”<sup>20</sup> (16/7). This farmer also offers guided tours for adults and children; against this background he/she continued: “We experience this especially with kindergarten groups. We go with them to the pigsty when piglets are born. Afterwards there is bread with sausage [as a snack], hardly any of the children does not eat it.”<sup>21</sup> (16/7) Some participants considered the prospects of improving public knowledge to be good because: “The interest [in agriculture and livestock husbandry] is increasing” (16/3). It was claimed that “more and more people (...) want to know where the products come from. They want to know what is happening in the stables” (16/20). One farmer explicitly addressed the topic “social media” in this context. He/She argued: “Most people are basically interested in it [livestock farming], but the spatial, societal and social distance to agriculture and a totally different reality of life compared to most farmers (...) lead to alienation. Social networks offer a small platform here.”<sup>22</sup> (16/18)

## Critique

A central research question shaping the online questionnaire was about the criticism livestock farmers are confronted with on Facebook. Closed questions were used to investigate the frequency of criticism. The results showed that at least some participants experienced (even harsh) criticism: The statement “It happens that our agricultural work is (sometimes heavily) criticized in the comments or by messages” gave an average value of 3.44 (SD ± 1.48; n: 55) (Table 5).

<sup>12</sup>Original statement: “Tendenziöse Berichterstattung in den Medien kombiniert mit guter Vernetzung von Tierschutz- und Umweltschutzgruppen plus ein äußerst gutes Netzwerk aus Tierrechtlern.“

<sup>13</sup>Original statement: “Warum wir was, wann und wie tun, ansonsten erfährt die Öffentlichkeit es aus oft einseitigen Medien, die bewusst Informationen in spezielle Richtung bringen.“

<sup>14</sup>Original statement: “...Meinungsbildung aus der Hand geben hat schon in Vergangenheit nicht funktioniert.“ (16/17)

<sup>15</sup>Original statement: “... sind dort viele Tierrechtler unterwegs, oft mit mehreren Profilen, die versuchen, per Facebook gezielt Stimmung zu machen.“ (14/2)

<sup>16</sup>Original statement: „NGOs und Grüne bestimmen zurzeit die Diskussionen um die Landwirtschaft. Es sollte jeder Betrieb seine eigene Story erzählen – auch wenn er ‚nur‘ seine engsten Nachbarn erreicht.“

<sup>17</sup>Original statement: „Es herrscht viel Misstrauen und Unwissen oder gesteuertes/falsches Wissen“.

<sup>18</sup>Original statement: “Wer nichts weiß, muss alles glauben. Es herrscht große Unkenntnis über die moderne Landwirtschaft. Mediale Meinung machen sich fast alle Verbraucher zu eigen. Wenn ich Dinge erkläre, fange ich meistens bei ‚Adam und Eva‘ an: Es fehlt an grundlegendem Basiswissen.“

<sup>19</sup>Original statement: “...denn die Menschen außerhalb der Landwirtschaft haben den Bezug zur Produktion ihrer Nahrung verloren.“

<sup>20</sup>Original statement: “Kinder, die von klein auf mit Tierhaltung sozialisiert sind und lernen, dass man sich um Tiere kümmern muss, um etwas zum Essen zu haben, haben weniger ein Problem damit.“

<sup>21</sup>Original statement: “Das erleben wir besonders mit Kindergartengruppen. Wir gehen mit ihnen in den Sauenstall, wenn gerade Ferkel geboren werden. Anschließend gibt es ein Wurstbrot, kaum eines der Kinder isst es nicht.“

<sup>22</sup>Original statement: “Die meisten Leute haben grundsätzlich Interesse daran, aber die räumliche, gesellschaftliche und soziale Distanz zur Landwirtschaft, eine total unterschiedliche Lebensrealität im Vergleich zu den meisten Landwirten (...), führt zur Entfremdung. Soziale Netzwerke bieten hier eine kleine Plattform. (16/18)



**Table 5.** It happens that our agricultural work is (sometimes heavily) criticized in the comments or by messages.

(1) I totally agree	(2) I agree	(3) I rather agree	(4) I rather disagree	(5) I disagree	(6) I totally disagree
9.09%	25.45%	12.73%	25.45%	20.00%	7.27%

The open question concerning criticism was: “If your work is criticized by other users on Facebook, what is criticized, and why?” In all, 48 participants responded. The answers led inductively to a differentiation of the question into three sub-questions: What is criticized? In what way is criticism expressed? How do the farmers deal with criticism?

### What is criticized?

Answers given by the participants to the first question (that is, the question about what other Facebook users criticize online) were differentiated according to topic into the following categories: (a) livestock production per se, (b) specific practices in livestock production, (c) organic vs. conventional production, and (d) other issues.

**Livestock production per se:** The participants stated that typical criticisms posted on their Facebook business pages by other users often if not mostly reject animal farming in principle; so, this kind of criticism is not referring to a specific farmer or farm or to a particular husbandry practice, rather: “Often the criticisms are statements by persons who reject animal husbandry in principle.” (9/14) The criticism is “mainly about the keeping of animals as such.” (9/22) One farmer stated: “In most cases the keeping of animals with the intention of making profit (...) is criticized.” (9/42) Another one responded: “The primary criticism is why one comes up with the idea of raising cattle for slaughter at all...”<sup>23</sup> (9/11). Behind this kind of criticism, according to the farmers, lay fundamental moral convictions: These critics, who reject animal husbandry in principle, have the “opinion, that you shall not eat animals” (9/2) and that we all should live in “a meat-free world”. (9/6) Participants repeatedly called these critics “animal rights activists” (in German: “Tierrechtler”) in their responses, sometimes also “vegans”. Participating livestock farmers assumed that harsh criticism on their Facebook pages come from “animal rights activists/vegans; they cannot deal with us ‘exploiting’ and killing animals.”<sup>24</sup> (9/26) This is why “Criticism [posted on Facebook] mostly erupts in animal rights debates”.<sup>25</sup> (9/7)

**Specific practices:** Specific practices are also criticized,

<sup>23</sup> Original statement: „Vorrangig wird kritisiert, warum man überhaupt auf die Idee kommt, Vieh zur Schlachtung aufzuziehen...” (9/11)

<sup>24</sup> Original statement: “... Tierrechtler/Veganer, die können nicht damit klarkommen, dass wir Tiere ‚ausnutzen‘ und töten (9/26)

<sup>25</sup>Original statement: “Kritik ufert meistens in Tierrechtsdebatten aus.“

according to the farmers; however, no participant stated that this concrete criticism was frequent, especially in comparison with the fundamental rejection of livestock farming as discussed before. For example, the farmers had received complaints that “the animals are kept in a stable” (9/17), that the animals were kept “without straw” (9/2), that there was “too little space in the stable” (9/24), that the animals had “no pasture” (9/24) or also that it comes to a “separation of cow and calf” (9/37). To quote one exemplary response by a farmer who keeps pigs: “Points of criticism in our area are tail-docking, neutering (although we do not castrate at all but fatten boars), protective baskets for piglets, slatted floors and general intensive keeping without a run area.”<sup>26</sup> (9/5)

**Organic vs. conventional:** A further kind of criticism on Facebook revolves around the familiar distinction between organic and conventional agriculture. Conventional farmers stated that they were repeatedly criticized simply for running a conventional farm rather than an organic (in German: *Bio*) one. One said that he has been criticized “once by organic-fetishists, [arguing] that conventional is not good and organic is better.”<sup>27</sup> (9/9). A similar answer was given by another farmer: “Another major point is the work as a conventional farm, also here the criticism is quite vehement and attacking.”<sup>28</sup> (9/11) One organic farmer stated that she/he too was criticized but that in her/his case the criticism “comes more from conventional farmers who do not like organic”. (9/16)

**Other:** In addition to the topics mentioned earlier, the participants mentioned other objects of criticism. “Crop protection with the field sprayer” (9/37) was referred to here, as were “usage of manure for fertilization” (9/37) and the deployment of “large machines” (9/41). The supposed interdependence of agriculture and multinational corporations was rehearsed: “Bayer and Monsanto control everything” (9/41). The farmers also mentioned criticism focusing on the “postponement of working time due to weather conditions, for example late into the evening and into the night” (9/37) and the pricing policy of the farm: “We receive notable criticism (...) if, for

<sup>26</sup> Original statement: „Kritikpunkte sind in unserem Bereich das Schwänzekupieren, das Kastrieren (obwohl wir gar nicht kastrieren, sondern Eber mästen), die Ferkelschutzkörbe, die Spaltenböden und die intensive Haltung ohne Auslauf im Allgemeinen.“

<sup>27</sup>Original statement: “Einmal von Biofetischisten, dass konventionell nicht gut sei und Bio besser.“

<sup>28</sup> Original statement: “Ein weiterer großer Punkt ist die Arbeit als konventioneller Betrieb – auch hier sind die Kritiken recht heftig und angreifend.“

example, we do not give away food for the dog for free, if we do not spontaneously double our delivery radius for free, or if someone suddenly would like to have their order cheaper” (9/11).

### ***In what way is criticism expressed?***

The participants’ responses indicated that criticism is expressed in different ways. At least two ways could be identified in the analysis of the livestock farmers’ answers. According to them, criticism they receive on Facebook is either (a) constructive or (b) radical, occasionally insulting. For both categories, exemplary remarks made by the participants are given subsequently.

**Constructive criticism:** Participants stated they have received constructive criticism on Facebook. For example, one farmer said that there had been “so far quite constructive dialogues in the comments”. (11/23) This kind of constructive criticism seems to relate to particular practices or to pose specific questions because, according to the farmers, they react to this criticism by giving “explanations” (9/4) and “answers”. (9/7) More than that, they stated that these answers had been “well received in the broadest sense” (9/1). The more constructive critics had shown “understanding after explanations” (9/4) or had stated that they had “imagined things differently” (9/43). It was felt that criticism of this kind “can almost always be contained by polite information (...)”<sup>29</sup> (9/17). One farmer described such constructive debates with the following words: There are “critics who do not like our way of keeping animals, but they are interested in a constructive dialogue, it is exhausting to discuss with these people, but it is also a lot of fun. It is sometimes difficult to put oneself in these people’s thoughts and to understand where the shoe pinches, but it is simply nice to be able to get rid of a misunderstanding or two that is often the basis of criticism.”<sup>30</sup> (9/5)

**Radical and occasionally insulting criticism:** Livestock farmers stated that critical comments posted on Facebook can be “radical” (9/11). This means: Farmers are confronted with critics who reject animal husbandry as such. As mentioned earlier, farmers tended to call these vehement opponents “animal rights activists” or

sometimes also “vegans”. In numerous responses, however, these criticisms are not only described as “radical” (in the sense of: a position that completely contradicts one’s own position), but also as personally insulting. Therefore, by radical, vehement opponents, farmers meant mostly critics “who reject our animal husbandry, insult us, attack us, send us private messages under false names, and are ultimately not interested in any dialogue”. (9/5) In one open question, livestock farmers were asked about the worst insults they had been confronted with so far on Facebook. In all, 43 participants answered this question. Their responses included the allegations that farmers are “murderers” (11/2), “animal abusers, exploiters, criminals” (“Tierquäler, Ausbeuter, Krimineller”) (11/3), a “fool” (“Dummkopf”) (11/8), “well poisoners” (“Brunnenvergifter”), (11/22), “rapists, mass murderers” (11/31) (“Vergewaltiger, Massenmörder”), or “subsidy social spongers, stupid yokel” (11/32) (“Subventionensozialschmarotzer, dummer Bauertrampel”). One participant answered: “[Having] no empathy and [being an] animal abuser are rather harmless allegations.”<sup>31</sup> (11/30) Another farmer stated that a user accused him/her and the whole family that “we would force the cows to get pregnant and rape them. The calves are stolen from their mothers and we steal the milk.”<sup>32</sup> (9/13). “Holocaust comparisons” (11/38) are made repeatedly, in which farmers are likened to “concentration camp supervisors” (11/2) or other “comparisons with the Hitler regime” (11/5) are made. One female farmer stated: “I was accused of having no empathy and being a bad mother, because I have cows and take the ‘babies’ away from them” (11/44). One participant said that on his/her Facebook page farmers had been described as “the biggest scum running around, one should put them against the wall”<sup>33</sup> (11/37). Farmers had been told that “people like me should be deprived of their children” (11/5), that “If one would look at me, one would see that I was ready for slaughter myself!”<sup>34</sup> (11/7), and that “You should be locked in the cages yourself.” (11/2). Some critical posts used offensive swear words. One participant reported the comment: “You [the farmers] are the most miserable dirty wankers around... only terrorists are the same rank... you fucking sub-humans!!! Mistreating living beings and pretending this was normal. Eat your shit, you dung heap!!!!”<sup>35</sup> (11/4). Another participant stated: “One has

<sup>29</sup>Original statement: „Kritik kann bei höflicher Aufklärung jedoch fast immer eingedämmt werden.“

<sup>30</sup>Original statement: „Kritiker, die unsere Art der Tierhaltung nicht gut finden, jedoch Interesse an einem konstruktiven Dialog haben – mit diesen Menschen ist es zwar anstrengend zu diskutieren, es macht jedoch riesigen Spaß. Es ist manchmal etwas schwierig, sich in diese Menschen hineinzusetzen und zu verstehen, wo der Schuh gerade drückt, jedoch ist es einfach schön, wenn man das ein oder andere Missverständnis, das häufig die Grundlage der Kritik ist, aus dem Weg räumen kann.“ (9/5)

<sup>31</sup> Original statement: “Empathielosigkeit und Tierquäler sind eher die harmlosen Vorwürfe.“

<sup>32</sup> Original statement: „Wir würden die Kühe zwangsschwängern und vergewaltigen. Die Kälber werden ihren Müttern gestohlen und wir stehlen die Milch.“

<sup>33</sup>Original statement: „Sie sind der größte Abschaum, der rumläuft, man sollte sie an die Wand stellen.“

<sup>34</sup>Original statement: „Wenn man mich ansehen würde, sähe man, dass ich schlachtreif wäre!“

<sup>35</sup> Original statement: “Ihr seid die erbärmlichsten Dreckwichser, die es gibt...nur Terroristen stehen im gleichen Rang...ihr Scheiß-Untermenschen!!! Lebewesen misshandeln und noch so tun, als ob es normal ist, friss deine Scheiße, du Misthaufen!!!”

shared a picture in a vegan [Facebook] group from our profile and commented that only Napalm would help here. Cunt, filthy bastard, they should hang you, you want to poison us all...<sup>36</sup> (11/6). The farmers also referred to insults or “threats against the children” (11/33) of them. One reported being told: “My children shall also be roasted – with a photo of my children” (11/14). Another had been told that his/her “children should die of cancer” (11/37). One generally said: the “worst comments are those that attack our children – they wish our children, the ‘shit-brats’, a terrible and incurable disease and then a long and painful death”<sup>37</sup> (11/4). Another recounted comment like: “You should be slaughtered, your skin should be peeled off, the house should be burned down, the children should be slaughtered, etc.”<sup>38</sup> (9/38).

### **How do farmers deal with radical insulting criticism?**

In responding to the online questionnaire, the farmers also described how they are dealing with (radical, personally insulting) criticism on Facebook. Although not many participants addressed this topic in their replies, five strategies could be identified in the study and were labelled as follows: (a) a preventive technical strategy, (b) a preventive content-related strategy, (c) a reactive technical strategy, (d) a reactive content-related strategy, and (e) a psychological strategy. These will be elaborated in turn.

**Preventive technical strategy:** One way of handling the radical, insulting criticism is to take technical measures so that such criticism never even appears on the farmer’s Facebook business page. Thus, one respondent described this strategy with the words: “Therefore, we have blocked several offensive words in the settings.” (9/7)

**Preventive content-related strategy:** Another strategy involves judicious choices about what kind of content to post on Facebook and how to do that. One farmer said: “Honestly, I don’t put issues that are too serious into focus”<sup>39</sup> (9/1), explaining that such issues might give rise to criticism. Another one stated: “... I have never been verbally attacked because I try to explain everything I do

in a funny way.”<sup>40</sup> (9/8) In this context, it was also argued: “When farmers run their pages as ‘know-it-alls’, they attract the activists”<sup>41</sup> (14/16).

**Reactive technical strategy:** Another strategy is similar to the preventive technical strategy, but is instead reactive. A farmer said in this context: “These critics are quite radical, partly unworldly, and I consistently block them and remove their postings because a normal dialogue which I was initially looking for is impossible.” (9/11) Here, the settings on Facebook should help to avoid radical criticism by blocking users who have posted harsh or even insulting criticism. In this case, however, in contrast to the preventive technical strategy, the farmer must first read the criticism and identify it as such. It can also happen that other friends/followers of the Facebook page read the criticism.

**Reactive content-related strategy:** Another strategy is again reactive, but in this case content-related. For example, a farmer stated that she/he had reacted to critics “with an invitation to our farm” (9/11) in order to shift the debate from Facebook to “real life”. Behind this strategy lay a diagnosis that was often mentioned by the participants: the familiar idea that anonymity (here, on the internet) leads to more aggressive debate: One respondent said: “Some use the distance to reduce their frustration” (14/6). Another claimed that “Social networks are an optimal outlet to get rid of personal frustration. This is where the mob can swear and scribble. Thereby, farmers are pilloried...”<sup>42</sup> (14/7). Another element in the reactive-content strategy was indicated by the respondent who stated that “over time a large community of non-farmers has formed to support me in these attacks” (9/22).

**Psychological strategy:** The last strategy can be called “psychological”, since it sought to deal, not so much with the substance of the criticism and insults on Facebook, but rather with the negative impact of any critical comments on the farmer’s state of mind. Farmers stated that they try not to “get too upset about it every time” (11/11) because “this critique is not worth it” (11/11). One said: “I don’t get upset about these people. Especially I don’t draw this negative energy to myself by archiving such stuff”<sup>43</sup> (11/16). (The last sentence hints at a question of the questionnaire, asking if the farmers

<sup>36</sup>Original statement: “Man hat ein Bild in einer veganen Gruppe von unserer Seite geteilt und dazu geschrieben, es würde hier nur noch Napalm helfen. Fotze, Dreckspack, man sollte Euch aufhängen, Ihr wollt uns alle vergiften...” (11/6)

<sup>37</sup>Original statement: „Die schlimmsten Kommentare sind welche, die unsere Kinder angreifen – sie wünschen unseren Kindern, den ‚Kackbratzen‘, eine furchtbare und unheilbare Krankheit und dann einen langen und qualvollen Tod.“

<sup>38</sup>Original statement: “Mörder, Euch sollte man schlachten, euch sollte man die Haut abziehen, das Haus anstecken, die Kinder schlachten etc. etc.“

<sup>39</sup>Original statement: „Ich bin da ganz ehrlich, dass ich zu schwere Themen etwas aus dem Fokus lasse“ (9/1)

<sup>40</sup>Original statement: “... bin aber noch nie grob verbal angegangen worden, da ich alles, was ich mache, eher auf die witzige Tour versuche zu erklären (9/8)

<sup>41</sup>Original statement: “Wenn Landwirte ihre Seiten als Besserwisser betreiben, dann ziehen sie die Aktivisten förmlich an.“

<sup>42</sup>Original statement: “Die sozialen Netzwerke sind ein optimales Ventil, um persönlichen Frust abzulassen. Hier kann der Mob pöbeln und krakeln. Landwirte stehen am Pranger...”

<sup>43</sup>Original statement: „Ich rege mich nicht über diese Leute auf. Schon gar nicht ziehe ich diese negative Energie an mich, indem ich solches Zeug sogar noch archiviere.“

**Table 6.** The criticism was sometimes so harsh that I considered closing my Facebook page

(1) I totally agree	(2) I agree	(3) I rather agree	(4) I rather disagree	(5) I disagree	(6) I totally disagree
7.84%	7.84%	13.73%	17.65%	13.73%	39.22%

archive insulting criticism.) Another stated: “I don’t let insults get to me personally. (...) Sometimes you have to be able to go on and forget these things for your own protection”<sup>44</sup> (11/24). The insults were bearable because “You become thick-skinned over time”<sup>45</sup> (11/39).

The closed section of the questionnaire asked a question that can be related to the “psychological strategy”, since the *ultima ratio* could be to close the Facebook business page in response to the harsh and insulting criticism. The results show that at least some of the participants have already considered this option. More precisely, the statement “The criticism was sometimes so harsh that I considered closing my Facebook page” gave an average value of 4.39 (SD ± 1.66; n = 54) (Table 6).

## DISCUSSION

The survey provides an explorative insight into the motives, strategies and experiences with criticism of livestock farmers using a Facebook business page. It thus creates an initial database that allows hypotheses to be framed, points towards further (representative) studies and generates new research questions.

First of all, the study showed that there are German-speaking livestock farmers who use a Facebook business page in order to present their work online. The survey identified different motives that can be differentiated on the basis of intended target groups (customers, “society”, surrounding area and colleagues), type of communication (advertisement, information and seeking dialogue) and overarching aims (increasing income, raising awareness about food, regaining expert status in the public discourse on agriculture, and building social acceptance of livestock farming by improving the knowledge of the public).

Generally, livestock farmers’ Facebook business pages can be understood as tools of corporate communication. Corporate communication means all communication by a company in order to create an advantageous point of view among vital stakeholders. (Riel and Fombrun, 2007: 13ff.) Thus, corporate communication has to aim at different target groups (Dixon, 2017; Guth and Marsh, 2012; Riel and Fombrun, 2007).

Using social media to communicate with these target

audiences, different roles of livestock farmers emerge: using Facebook as an advertisement tool to communicate with customers and reach out to potential customers, the farmers understand themselves as entrepreneurs who try to increase their income. Future research could compare the extent to which this form of advertisement is more effective than, for example, classical marketing. However, the results of this study suggest that livestock farmers’ motives are not limited to such immediate economic objectives. Other target audiences and corresponding roles are also important: Using Facebook as a platform to stay in contact with the closer surroundings of the farm, the farmers understand themselves as a part of a local community, as a neighbor who (so the interpretation) aims at a good neighborliness. Furthermore, livestock farmers have a Facebook business page in order to communicate with other farmers. Thus, they see themselves as members of a specific profession who are interested in an exchange of ideas with colleagues. Future research could, on the one hand, focus on the concrete contents of this exchange: Is the focus on technical questions? Or is it rather (as the answers in this study suggest) about “the big picture”, about the context in which agriculture takes place? On the other hand, it might be interesting to explore why farmers seek this exchange with colleagues online. Is this related to the development that there are fewer and fewer active farmers, so that they feel isolated in regard to exchange about the profession? Or is this also related to the increasing criticism, which could mean that Facebook could be more and more used as a kind of self-help group?

Last but not least, the farmers also want to provide basic information on agriculture and livestock husbandry to a group that can be called “society”. More than that, the results suggest that communication with this group is one of the most important motives of livestock farmers using a Facebook business page. The farmers sketch this target group as a group that (a) has little knowledge about livestock husbandry, (b) has lost touch with agriculture and food (production) and (c) is heavily influenced by other stakeholders who (from the farmers’ perspective) unfortunately dominate the debate on livestock farming, namely media, NGOs and some political parties.

The survey results suggest that farmers using social media wish to take action against this situation. One could say that farmers are trying to “frame” the debate (Boehm et al., 2010; Druckman, 2004). They feel that those involved in agriculture (they themselves) must be heard as one of the most important voices in any social

<sup>44</sup> Original statement: „Ich lasse Beschimpfungen nicht an mich persönlich heran. (...) Aus Eigenschutz muss man manchmal Angriffe einfach abhaken können.“

<sup>45</sup> Original statement: „Man legt sich ein dickeres Fell zu mit der Zeit.“

debate about agriculture. Livestock farmers seem to assume that especially the urbanized parts of society are increasingly becoming alienated from food production. These consumers should know more about livestock farming and agriculture, and more generally about their food, and they should also have a stronger connection with these issues. The survey responses indicate that this is the only way, according to the farmers, to ensure broad societal acceptance of livestock farming in the future. This aim can be seen in the light of so-called crisis communication as one important part of corporate communication (Bundy et al., 2017). Hereby, crisis can be understood as the “perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007). Crisis communication is the response to this. More precisely, it can be defined as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs 2010). Against the background that a central motive for livestock farmers’ usage of social media is that they perceive the public as increasingly critical, it can be asked to what extent their communication via Facebook can be interpreted as a kind of permanent crisis communication. If communication between farmers and consumers/citizens fails, as many farmers stated in their answers, then the social acceptance of livestock farming will be lost completely sooner or later.

In the context of communication with “society”, livestock farmers understand themselves as a kind of educator: They are the experts; contrary to large parts of the public, they have not lost touch with food production, that is why they are able to and *have to* teach society about this important issue. More precisely, they do not only understand themselves as distributors of new knowledge (about “modern” livestock farming), but also as someone who has to recall old knowledge that has been forgotten (about food and agriculture in general).

In summary, livestock farmers who use social media understand themselves as entrepreneurs, neighbors, colleagues and, last but not least, educators. Now it can be argued that the roles neighbor, colleague and educator (and associated goals) only serve one aim: to increase the farmers’ income. Following this argumentation, it could be said that a farmer wants to teach the public about food production because more public knowledge about livestock farming will lead to more social acceptance, and acceptance will lead to higher or at least secure income. Similarly, goals such as good neighborly relations or exchange with colleagues can be related to economic aims. However, the answers suggest that farmers do not only have economic aspects in mind. Rather, they seem to suffer from the way their profession is currently perceived in society and to long for more social prestige, regardless of whether it is accompanied by more income or not.

Focusing on the type of communication, at least one aspect can be critically discussed; the study identified an understanding of dialogue amongst livestock farmers that can be called *narrow*. As shown, participating farmers also responded that they seek dialogue with interested or even critical citizens. A precise look at the answers, however, raises the question of what farmers understand by “dialogue”. In regard to “informing”, the matter is clear: In this case, a sender, possessing a specific knowledge, provides information to a recipient who lacks it (Burkart, 2002: 427). The starting point of this type of communication is a kind of knowledge divide: An expert on one side delivers knowledge in a one-way communication to a layman on the other side. A “dialogue” can be distinguished from this type of communication since it can be characterized by being an open-ended process without a predefined hierarchy (Bergman, 1991). However, wherever the participants use the term “dialogue”, it must be clarified to what extent they only mean an information process with possible feedback. Looking at how farmers describe a constructive dialogue, they usually sketch it as follows: “A consumer has a critical question about livestock farming, the farmer answers this question. The resulting dialogue makes the citizen understand. Criticism is answered.” Of course, this can also be described as a dialogue; however, it shows a narrow understanding of dialogue since there is still a clear, predefined expert-layman hierarchy. An understanding of dialogue as open-ended process between equal participants could be found only in very few answers.

In summary, the study suggests that livestock farmers often have a narrow understanding of dialogue. Thus, they want to “answer” criticism. This approach can be described as a problem because there is criticism that cannot be “answered” but has to be discussed in an open process. In particular, the question of what kind of livestock husbandry we consider as morally justifiable as a society is an ethical question. This is where the expert-layman dialogue model and its approach of “answering criticism” reaches its limits.

A central research question of the study was about the criticism livestock farmers are confronted with on Facebook. The results show that livestock farmers do experience criticism in this social network. In regard to what is criticized by other users, livestock production per se is the main topic according to the farmers. Other issues (such as specific practices or organic vs. conventional production) played a tangential role in their responses.

The farmers themselves distinguish between “constructive” and “radical” criticism. While “constructive” criticism, according to the farmers, can be discussed objectively (mainly by the farmer answering a specific question; see the notes on the narrow understanding of dialogue as earlier discussed), “radical” criticism rejects animal husbandry as such. It is noticeable that in the

farmers' responses, this "radical" criticism is often equated with personal insults. On a meta-level, it would be appropriate to make a clear distinction at this point: "Radical" criticism completely contradicts one's own position; however, it can be objective and well-founded, while "personal insults" neglect any reasoning and culture of discussion.

Methodically, the study cannot answer whether radical and personally insulting criticisms come from users who understand themselves as "animal rights activists" and/or "vegans". However, that is how the farmers tend to call these vehement opponents. These terms have to be understood against the background of the current debate about the moral status of animals (in the German-speaking countries, but also in others). The pathocentric approach of animal protection (about this approach (Grimm and Wild, 2016: 39ff.) and the concept of animal welfare (Hewson, 2003) are criticized as outdated by the so-called animal rights position. In the tradition of Regan (1983), who argued that non-human animals have moral rights because they have to be understood as "subjects-of-a-life", current German animal ethicists like Schmitz (2016) and also NGOs oppose livestock farming per se: animals should not be kept for food production. Studies on eating habits indicate that there are at least a small number of people in Germany who forego animal-based products because they are convinced that keeping animals for food production is morally wrong (Cordts et al., 2013; Christoph-Schulz, 2018).

At this point, it is important to avoid the misleading interpretation that animal rights activists tend to stir up hatred against livestock farmers or that "hate speech" livestock farmers experience on Facebook comes from animal rights activists. But what the study does show: Livestock farmers do experience personally insulting criticism on Facebook. Such comments posted by other users on livestock farmers' Facebook business pages can be summarized under "(online) hate speech". This phenomenon is rapidly recognized as a serious problem by the authorities of many countries (Gagliardone et al., 2015) and can be understood as any speech that takes place online and attacks a person or a group on the basis of specific attributes. More precisely: "Hate speech refers to an expression that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, and/or incites to violence, hatred, or discrimination" (Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012: 900). Allowing easy, fast and anonymous communication without personal encounter, social media facilitate hate speech in comparison with face-to-face communication in the so-called "real" life (Gagliardone et al., 2015: 14; Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012; Silva et al., 2016). While research in this field (Silva et al., 2016; Gagliardone et al., 2015; Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012) assume that attributes like race, behavior (e.g. "sensitive people"), physical characteristics (e.g. "obese people"), sexual orientation, class (e.g. "rich people"), ethnicity, gender, disability or religion are the main categories when it

comes to online hate speech, the results of this study allow the statement that livestock farmers are exposed to hate speech because of their *profession*.

This finding raises follow-up questions that future research will have to investigate. For example, it is necessary to clarify the motives of users who personally insult farmers on Facebook. Do these critics understand themselves indeed as animal rights activists who are frustrated about livestock farming being still a common practice? Or must they be considered "trolls", users who want to disrupt online communities because they take pleasure in upsetting others? (Duggan, 2014; Kirman et al., 2012). Other options (such as bots) are also conceivable.

In regard to a productive dialogue, the question arises if other social media platforms are more promising than Facebook or even more fundamental: Is it advisable for farmers to seek contact with society rather offline?

Questions about the long-term effects of hate speech should also be asked: The survey identified five strategies how farmers deal with personally insulting criticism. However, the psychological effects of experiencing online hate speech and trolling are considered similar to the psychological effects of offline harassment (Craker and March, 2016). Therefore, it can be assumed that comments like the ones the livestock farmers quoted are a massive mental burden on them. If it becomes common that livestock farmers using social media are confronted with hate speech because of their job, will this affect their communicative efforts in the long term, for example by stopping any online corporate communication again? This study suggests that at least some farmers have thought about it already. Generally, Facebook can be seen as a social network that gives livestock farmers not only positive opportunities like advertisement for their business, it can also give them the feeling of being morally pilloried. The question arises if farmers increasingly exchange experiences with hate speech, trying to help each other. And further: If criticism (both the "radical" and the "insulting" one) is simply part of a current livestock farmer's job, are farmers prepared for it in their training courses?

Finally, the starting point has to be considered again. It was shown that vital stakeholders demand that individual livestock farmers should make greater efforts to communicate about their work. However, if building such a bridge between citizen/consumer and livestock farmer is socially desirable (or more than that, it may be even necessary) how can this communication be shaped (more) constructively?

At present, livestock farmers do not only seek contact with customers but also with citizens who are critical of livestock farming. As long as these citizens do not fundamentally reject livestock farming as morally wrong, the farmer and the citizen can engage in a dialogue about how standards in livestock farming can be improved or why some improvements are hardly possible. If, however,

the farmer meets someone who completely rejects livestock farming, such a dialogue is rather difficult. If farmers are increasingly encountering such critics in social media, how should they deal with them and with the whole situation? Generally, is it politically desirable that livestock farmers and vehement opponents of livestock farming get in touch at all? Since the farmers produce for a large majority, it could also be argued that this majority should be the main target audience of vehement critics, not livestock farmers.

Thus, demanding more communication efforts from farmers cannot be the last step. Rather, it is necessary to document and analyze what happens when farmer and citizen meet (online), to discuss which platforms (whether online or offline) offer the greatest opportunities when it comes to a fruitful dialogue, and to measure the long-term effects of this exchange, for example on livestock farmers' mental health or changes in the competence profile of the profession.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

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