

Used like Pawns or Treated like Kings? How Narratives around Racehorse Welfare in the 2023 Grand National May Affect Public Acceptance: An Informed Commentary



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The backstory

- The 2023 Grand National steeplechase race, dubbed “The People’s Race”, is the most famous horse race in the world with television viewership in excess of 7.5 million.
- An enormous field and even more enormous obstacles makes it a thrilling spectacle of horse and human athleticism, endurance, and courage.
- However, it has met with controversy from groups who have raised concerns about the considerable risks to the horses, including severe injuries and fatalities.
- This year (2023), an animal activist group gained access to the jump course and attempted to prevent the race from taking place.
- The disruption, the number of falls incurred by horses during the race, and the death of one horse led to extensive mainstream and social media coverage.
- The Anti-racing commentary focused on the risks faced by racehorses when jump racing, and their desire for the Grand National to be shut down permanently.
- The Pro-racing commentary only minimally addressed the risks to horses while racing and focused instead on the excellent quality of life that, according to racing’s proponents, horses have away from the racetrack.

Social Licence to Operate (SLO)

A social licence is a dynamic, intangible, unwritten contract between society and those who are involved in an industry or activity. It describes the degree of public acceptance of the industry/activity, and society's trust in its proponents to behave ethically, legally, and responsibly.



As described by Pearson et al. (2023)

Loss of social licence may begin with a negative portrayal of the industry, followed by loss of political support, then outside legislation, and potentially a total ban. Once lost, social licence can be difficult to regain.

The authors illuminate the power of public opinion to shape the future of an industry and offer a multipronged approach to improve racing industry's social licence that includes the sciences of equine welfare, psychology, and behavioural change. The following summarizes their approach:

Communicate with the Public about the Grand National



The psychological phenomenon called the “Availability Bias” states that our interpretation of the world is largely shaped by the information that is readily available. More prevalent, salient, and spectacular events are likely more easily recalled and are thus considered (often erroneously) to be an accurate reflection of reality.

Equine fatalities that occur during high profile races result in extensive coverage. A public with little previous racing knowledge will be moved and shaped by this coverage of catastrophic events as it is immediate, available, and memorable.



The racing world needs to address the ensuing public concern with directness and authenticity.

Prioritise welfare



A key argument presented by the racing industry following the Grand National was that their horses “live like kings”. The authors challenge this premise on the basis that a racehorse’s life diverges considerably from horses’ basic ethological needs for friends (socialization with other horses), foraging (almost continually) and freedom (for agency and movement).

Welfare assessment has tended toward a human-centred approach in assessing a good life for horses.



Only evidence-based research from independent equine welfare scientists will inform industry about whether these horses’ welfare needs are truly being met.

Understand, Engage, and Embrace Shared Values with Critics



After the 2023 Grand National race, the racing industry's attempt to undermine the credibility of the activist group simultaneously demonstrated a disregard for the large swathe of the public who are concerned about the welfare of horses in sport, and ultimately does little to engage in behaviour change which may protect equine well-being and the industry's SLO.

Values are intrinsically interwoven with identity and a threat to values is a threat to one's very being, often resulting in firm resistance to change.

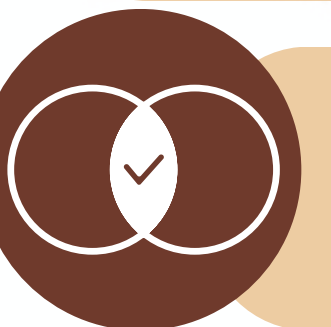


Instead of trying to dismiss or discredit critics, industry needs to engage in open, respectful discussion that addresses the knowledge and beliefs of both sides.

Publicly working with moderate critics to improve equine welfare, and involving them in setting and revising policy standards, may be an effective strategy that “reduces space” for those with extreme viewpoints.



The racing industry and anti-racing groups share an important and common value – that of reducing harm to race horses. To maintain their SLO, it is critical for industry to work toward this common goal with their adversaries.



Embrace Transparency



There is a tendency to close the proverbial doors when an industry's practices are threatened, but transparency is essential if an industry wants to maintain its social licence.

Brave and radical transparency paradigms have been effective in regaining public trust and improving SLO for other industries. Jump racing could also benefit from opening their industry to independent welfare scientists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)



Avoid Whataboutery



It is tempting but ineffective to try to redirect the public's ire by alerting them to situations within the horse world that are worse than the situation under discussion. Rather, it is more productive to engage with critics with humility and curiosity, and without judgement.

If critics believe that an industry is serious in its attempts to bring about change, many will work with them toward an acceptable compromise.





“Whilst well-meaning and aiming to promote racing, much of the racing industry’s commentary inadvertently risked damaging its reputation due to a poor understanding of social licence principles...Engaging with moderate critics, acknowledging difficulties, and being transparent about progress is often an effective means of bridging the gap between an industry and its opponents.”

Pearson, G., Douglas, J., Wolframm, I., & Furtado, T. (2023). Used like Pawns or Treated like Kings? How Narratives around Racehorse Welfare in the 2023 Grand National May Affect Public Acceptance: An Informed Commentary. *Animals*, 13(19), 3137.



Sustainable
future

Is racing galloping towards
a **sustainable future**?
Or into the **history books**?



Being
humble and
transparent

Consulting
with **welfare**
scientists

Promoting
inaccuracies as
selling points

Discrediting
NGOs

Engaging
with critical
NGOs

Highlighting
positive aspects
to **distract from**
criticism

Addressing
welfare
concerns as
top **priority**

Dismissing any
welfare
concerns as
trivial

