



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 659, Interview with karol orzechowski

Jasmin Singer: Welcome to Our Hen House, karol!

karol orzechowski: Thanks for having me!

Jasmin: Super excited to talk to you. You do so much interesting work and I have known you for so long. So I love when life kind of brings us back together to have these interesting chats and it's certainly been way too long. So just putting it out there. I don't want it to be this long before the next time we talk.

karol: Yeah. It's been a really, really long time and it's great to catch up with you. Totally.

Jasmin: Now, I think of Faunalytics as an organization that conducts research and publishes reports. So why did you decide to get into doing visual resources?

karol: Well, something that we do in addition to conducting our own research and publishing reports is that we maintain this huge library of other research that we haven't conducted. Research that exists out there in the world about animal issues. You know, there's so many journals out there, scientific journals. And in addition to that, there's so many groups out there that are doing their own research and publishing reports. So part of what we do in the library is to summarize that research into a form that's understandable for the average human person.

If you have ever spent any time taking a look at academic journals, you know that it can be very tough to understand what's going on at the best of times. And at the worst of times, it can be totally incomprehensible. Especially when you're dealing with data, numbers, formulas, percentages, things like that.

Jasmin: Yeah. I sort of zone out so go ahead because I'm totally with you. I need the visual learning.

karol: Totally. One of the things that we do is to simplify this research as much as we can, but the feedback that we get from our audience and our users of the site is that they always want things to be even more simplified if we can make it that way.

And one of the ways that we identified that would be good to do that would be to start a visual program. So doing more infographics, videos and things like that. And that's where the visual program from Faunalytics comes from.

Jasmin: Amazing. It's also great for people who have what I have, which is like adult onset ADHD. Or just kind of living in the society we live in now, where it's just really hard to focus on long form, especially academic reports. As well as probably being more accessible to differently abled people, which I guess is sort of one and the same.

So your latest fundamental was on animals and social justice. I want to talk about that. First let's back up. Am I right? There are three types of resources in your visual program: there's fundamentals, infographics and explainer videos. So before we get into the latest fundamental, what are the fundamentals?

karol: Sure. So the fundamentals are a series of long-form infographics that we did that cover a really broad animal topic area. So we have a fundamental on farmed animals. We have one on companion animals. We have one on wildlife. We have one on ocean life. We have one on zoonoses...and I feel like I might be missing one.

Jasmin: Research animals.

karol: Yes. Research animals. So we created these for two reasons, one to sort of give animal advocates the most up to date data on that particular topic in a really broad way. Obviously we're not getting into lots of nitty gritty stuff and really niche issues within those topics.

But if you go through those infographics, you'll get a really good idea of that topic area in a broad, general sense. And these are infographics that we update every year or two years with the latest data. We make sure that that everything in them is up to date so that advocates can go back to them over and over again and see what's in there.

The fundamental that we did most recently is on animals and social justice. You know, these are topics that have been important to the Faunalytics team for a long time. It became especially more so post pandemic, post George Floyd.

Looking at the landscape in the United States and thinking we need to be more vocal about this. We need to put ourselves out there more in terms of giving people a sense of what Faunalytics as an organization believes in and why we think these issues are important.

Jasmin: Okay. So the Animals and Social Justice fundamental, like what can people expect to find there?

karol: So we cover a whole bunch of stuff in that fundamental. We cover, for example, like looking at environmental racism.

So we look at hog farming in North Carolina. And North Carolina's been...it's an interesting example because it's one of the only places that's been studied really, really closely in terms of this topic. So when I say environmental racism, I mean factory farms being primarily located in Black communities or low income communities. And obviously all of the health effects that come with living near a factory farm, those rippling out into the community and primarily affecting Black folks and people with low income.

So we take a positive look as well. We look at change makers in animal advocacy around the world. We look at organizations that are trying to bring a more intersectional perspective into animal advocacy and what they're doing.

You know, we don't just want to dwell on negative topics. We always try and include in the fundamental something positive and ways that people can get involved.

Jasmin: Amazing. We've got to look through that for some interview ideas or just send us any, but we're going to comb through it later.

karol: That is cool. I would be surprised if you hadn't interviewed a lot of the folks already, because this has been part of what Our Hen House has done for a long time as well.

Jasmin: Yeah, thank you. Though, you know, every now and then I'm like, "who's that person!?" and it's very cool because there are people popping up left and right, I feel like, now.

When we first started Our Hen House in January of 2010, we talked to our first funder, the person who gave us our seed money, and he was like, "I mean, it sounds like a pretty good idea, but won't you run out of people to interview?" And here we are! 12 and a half years later!

So, it's funny. I feel like we could do this every day and not run out of people to interview. So do you cite sources for all your factual assertions?

karol: Absolutely. We wouldn't be making any factual assertions if we didn't cite any sources. And that's actually been one of the interesting things about doing some of these resources is finding out what data exists out there and what doesn't.

For example, with talking about environmental racism, one of the reasons that that was so studied in North Carolina was that there was a particular academic who had uncovered some stuff related to that issue and was very dedicated to bringing it to light. I believe his name was Dr. Steven Wing and he dedicated his academic career to sort of working on that issue in that state. For that, the North Carolina hog industry sued him over and over again, made his life miserable in a lot of ways, tried to get him to give data over related to the people that he studied, I'm sure to make their lives miserable.

And sometimes we find that the topics that we're covering, not just in that fundamental, but in fundamentals say about research animals or about companion animals or farmed animals...It can be really difficult to find data on what we're looking for. Because as you know, outside of the vegan world, for a lot of people animals don't count and, by extension, they don't get counted.

Jasmin: Yeah. I can imagine the data must have been hard to come by. Can you talk a little bit more about that? Like how do you go about finding it?

karol: Sure. So there's always the balance of not just finding data, but finding reliable data. And sometimes we err more towards the side of leaning on reliable data versus the data that might be more "interesting."

So for example, when we think about, say - Right now, something that I'm working on is a series of infographics about global slaughter numbers. So this is something that we've been doing for a few years. We look at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization data over time and we're able to say, "this many land animals were killed around the world in 2020." And then we can break it down by country, we can break it down by continent, all that sort of thing. That data gives us a really high level overview of how many animals we're consuming in the world and whether that number is going up or down. Like, how the situation is changing in different countries.

With that said, I know a lot of people have pretty strong critiques about the UN FAO data. It's not perfect. There are all kinds of reporting problems. There's

issues with all data. No data is really airtight and perfect and can't be critiqued. And so with that being said, there's not really a great other alternative.

Apart from doing a lot of sort of high level math and making estimations, which probably rely on the UN data as the starting point, anyway. So in certain situations we'll sort of err on the side of, "Well, these numbers aren't perfect, but they're the best that we have and they can give us a really clear picture with some caveats."

Jasmin: Okay. So random question. Who's doing this research and what kind of background do they have? Like who makes up your team? I can't quite put my finger on what you would have in that job description.

karol: So we have a few research scientists on staff now, and our research director, Jo Anderson has a PhD in social science and is a research scientist, as a statistician. We have folks on our team, Andrea Polanco, who also just got her PhD. Zach Wulderk and Coni Arévalo, who is a research assistant as well. And so we have this tight team of researchers who really...they conduct all of our original research.

And then we have, when I'm looking at, for example, the data that's going to make up the global slaughter statistics, that's coming from the UN FAO. And so they have their own collection methods and their own researchers who do that sort of thing.

Jasmin: Very cool. I love that. So who are these resources designed for and how do you hope they will be used?

This is kind of like the big animal activist question, right? Like how do we get it out there?

karol: Sure. So the interesting thing about the fundamentals is that they're sort of meant to be like a 101 on a particular topic. Right. And. Because they're like this kind of 101 thing we wanted it to be useful for...we always want everything we do to be useful for animal advocates first. Our mission is to empower animal advocates with reliable data, but we also recognize that some of our resources can really work well for the general public. So, one of the things that we're really fortunate to have is a Google ad grant.

So we get a certain virtual budget from Google every month to spend on Google ads. So when you search for pig farming, you might get a little Faunalytics ad that brings you to the Farmed Animal Fundamentals. Which, depending on what

you're searching for and what kind of user you are, that might be a really interesting experience for you and might teach you a lot of things that are maybe not what you were expecting to find when you started on your Googling journey.

And so we're lucky in that the fundamentals, for example, get a lot of traffic from that program. And we think reach a lot of people who might not see them otherwise.

Jasmin: Yes. Amazing. I love that so much. So you mentioned infographics, the second type of resource is the infographics. So what is that used for? Basically the same thing as you just mentioned, or is there like another layer there?

karol: Our fundamentals are kind of these long resources that might contain a whole bunch of infographics, but we also create smaller ones for smaller purposes. So for example, we recently published a study summary about adoption statistics through the pandemic.

And data that the pet, I believe it's called Pet Point Data that is a network of data collection for animal shelters across the US. And they had published a bunch of findings about how many animals were adopted during the pandemic, whether they're still in their homes and whatnot. That was a great study summary. It had a whole bunch of numbers in it that we felt like could be better represented in a small infographic. And that was something that we created for that.

So the infographics are really more kind of like ad hoc stuff that we do kind of on a one off basis to cover a much more sort of like niche topic really quickly.

Jasmin: Yeah, I'm looking at the cultured meat one right now. And you have one on the Greyhound industry. Really cool stuff.

So the final category are explainer videos. What are they and what role do they play in the visual program?

karol: So the explainer videos we just started doing about a year and a half ago. And since then we've done I think 10, or we might be up to a dozen now. It ultimately went back to user feedback. Every year...we're actually getting set today to publish our annual community survey.

We love data so much that we also ask our users to fill out surveys. So we can get an idea of what they want and how they're using our resources. And

something that Faunalytics heard over and over again over the years was like, “please keep simplifying things! Give me the top bullet points, just give it to me as quickly as you can,” which is challenging for us because we want to be accurate. Sometimes data doesn't lend itself to being simplified. And so we decided that one of the ways that we could simplify things a bit more and sort of cut down on people's time commitment is to create these short videos that help to highlight one of the studies in our library.

So the explainer videos are all under three minutes long, something you can watch in between other things that you're doing and get a really quick overview of a study that was done on a particular topic. We've covered a whole bunch of stuff in the explainer series so far, we've covered the impact of different conservation action. We've covered the idea of whether plant-based food labels are confusing to the general public. We've looked at really specific advocacy techniques, like offering veg food options as a default on menus, how using graphic images in animal advocacy affects people and things like that.

Jasmin: Wow. That's super cool. I love that. And so, In general, what is the process for selecting those topics and deciding like what type of resources appropriate? Cause you just kind of covered the gamut.

karol: Mm-hmm, something that you discover when you start to do these things is that not all data lends itself... You know, like I just mentioned not all data really lends itself either to being visualized in like charts or in an infographic or to being summarized in a three minute snippet. Sometimes the research experiment is really complicated and so it's hard to sort of explain. Or sometimes the results are very nuanced and would probably be difficult to parse in that time.

So for us, the infographics and explainer videos are always best done on studies and with data that's really clear, that really has a clear takeaway. And again, because our audience is advocates, we want it to have a clear takeaway for advocates. So like, what can an advocate do with this information? If a study doesn't have that kind of clear takeaway, then we probably won't make a video out of it.

Jasmin: So one thing that concerns me when I write articles is how quickly things change. But the thing is, like with an article, it can live online even if it is outdated, because it's sort of the nature of writing. But when you're doing what you're doing, it sort of can't right? Like how do you keep up with the quickly moving facts changing?

karol: Yeah. Well, that was one of the reasons why we figured that with our fundamental series, these would be resources that we updated regularly. Because they're meant to be a sort of broad overview on a topic and we really want people to use them that way. We thought, “well, we're gonna make sure that these are up to date. That the studies that we're highlighting in them are things that are going on over a long period of time. And that we can like track how things are changing.”

But with our infographics and explainers, we don't have that luxury. It's really important for people to... I don't know how often this happened, but it's happened a lot, where you see someone post something on social media and you think, “this article is five years old,” or something like that.

Or, for example, with like the global slaughter statistics that we're going to release, this is part of the reason why we rely on the UN data. We know it's going to be updated on a regular basis and that way we can track how things are changing, even if the data isn't perfect. It's more likely to be there than someone who say does a one-off analysis and then never does one again.

But you know, like you're saying, there is a certain amount of data literacy that needs to exist among advocates and needs to exist among the general public. I mean, this is something that we found in the pandemic is that most people don't understand how science works and how science unfolds over time.

And especially when science is happening, sort of in real time. Like when we're watching the process of knowledge creation in real time, it can be very messy and contradictory and results can contradict each other. And that doesn't mean it's not working, that actually means it is working. And so with keeping resources up to date, I mean, we publish 200 study summaries in our library every year.

Those studies, any study really, just represents a snapshot in time of a particular group of people being studied about, let's say, their attitudes towards chickens or something like that. That study is a snapshot in time. And as time goes on, we need to keep taking more snapshots. You can almost think of it as like animation, right?

Like you create animation by taking many, many pictures over the course of time and when you put all those pictures together, you start to see a moving image. I just made that up, but it sounds very poetic.

Jasmin: I like it. No, I think it's great. As you were saying that I was like, “what a perfect analogy.” Yeah, totally true.

I keep thinking about when I was writing *Always Too Much* and I got to the chapter where I was talking about dairy. At first, I was writing about it and I just was like, “okay, just write it and then I'll go back later and kind of pick it apart.” And so I included something about rape racks. And then, I realized that it's animal rights activists and vegans who mostly came up with the fact that farmers call them rape racks. It didn't have a baseline, like every study linked to another animal rights resource. So I went to Mark Hawthorne who had done a significant amount of research for one of his books. I think it was *Striking At The...* No, it wasn't *Striking At The Roots*, it was a different one...

And he had done research into it and found that horses have been attached to machines that were called rape racks, but not cows. So, it still made the point, but I kind of was like, “Hmm, the opposition is going to be extremely focused on what we're saying and how we're saying it, like ready to discredit us.”

Does that, like in general, make you nervous?

karol: No, it doesn't actually. And it's funny you mentioned the opposition and some of our most popular stuff has been the stuff that sort of directly mentions the opposition. Our two most popular explainer videos are - one's about USDA subsidies and the other one is about...we covered a report that was by the Beef Checkoff program, which is like an industry program. And they had published a report about what animal advocates are doing and how they're strategizing. And so the video that we did was called *Countering Big Beef's Playbook*, which was looking at what they're doing to counter what we're doing and how we can counter that back.

And we got so many negative comments. It really brought out all the industry trolls to come and attack it. Which is really funny because it's their own report. We didn't really say anything that wasn't...we were just...it's out there, you know!? And we just decided to bring it to animal advocates and say, “Hey, animal advocates, this is what the beef industry says that we're up to and how they're gonna counter it. So here are ways that you can counter strategize.”

And part of the thing with Faunalytics is that reliability and credibility are the two most important things to us. It's really important to us that we have all of our i's dotted and t's crossed and that the data that we're putting out there is...I mean, everything can be critiqued and you can criticize things in terms of methodology or sample size or things like that. You can always pick things

apart, but before we put things out into the world, we really do take great pains to make sure that everything is as tight as it can be because we anticipate being criticized.

And advocates are criticized all the time. So if advocates are using the things that we're putting out there, we want them to know that it's reliable and that they can trust that it's not just a weird stat that they found on like, some...who knows what, you know? There are so many blogs out there, so many news sources, so many of them don't link to their sources or where they got the data from.

It actually is one of my pet peeves. How many I've noticed recently that a lot of news organizations will say...They'll make a news story out of a new study. They'll say, "A study found that most people really dislike fireworks." I don't know, I'm just making something up out of a hat...and you go to the article and you read it and there's no link to the study. Even though the study exists somewhere, there's no mention of the names of the authors, there's no mention of anything like that. And so it's no wonder that people don't have literacy when it comes to this stuff because they never get a chance to interact with it. It's just turned into a press release and published to a news site and then people just sort of read a headline, a stat in a headline, and never try to understand what the actual study was.

Jasmin: Totally. My wife works in human research protection. So she just makes sure that studies that people volunteer to be in are ethical. And it's really fascinating because I never thought about that before.

And then it's like this whole giant world and I was like, "of course it is!" Like every time I've been handed like a packet, if I was putting myself into study, you know, I never thought, "Someone is overseeing this packet." So anyway, you're such a charming nerd.

karol: Well, thanks. You know, the Faunalytics staff is full of charming nerds.

Jasmin: Yeah. I bet. That's the job description - seeking charming nerds.

karol: Pretty much. *laughs*

Jasmin: Okay, here's the question for you. Because you just mentioned your team, and you're obviously all charming nerds, but you all have different perspectives on different things, I'm sure, because you're different people.

So do you ever have topics that you don't agree on the right approach? Like I'm thinking of welfare/rights kind of controversies, but I guess there could be many other ones as well. How do you handle ultimately the bottom line of what you're looking for?

karol: So it's kind of one of the nice things about being involved with an organization that is data centric and data focused is that, I mean, we certainly all have our own opinions and we all come from different backgrounds.

Some of us come from a longer history of advocacy, some of us are newer to the movement. And so, I mean, as you know, there is sort of like a life cycle of being an animal advocate, you know? You kind of start off - Most people kind of start off really angry and very rights focused.

Some may sort of maybe ,quote unquote mellow out over time and become more welfare focused or whatever. But within the organization we defer to the data. It's like, “what does the data say works?” And so it's nice to be able to, in situations where there are disagreements, which truth be told there aren't that many, we're able to say like, “okay, well, what does the data say about this topic?”

And it's interesting as an organization that is data centric, people will sometimes be very demanding that Faunalytics take a position on something. Like, “what is your position on enriched cages?” or something like that. And our position is always, “Well, let's look at what the data says.” And on the topic of enriched cages, for example, the data says the welfare of chickens in enriched cages is not all that much better than regular cages. And so to us, that is indicative of what the position should be. As an organization, we're not really necessarily interested in having a hard position on issues because the data may change over time.

So for example, like something that Faunalytics as an organization talks a lot about is reducing meat consumption versus eliminating it. We're big proponents of reducing meat consumption meal by meal. If that's where people are at, it's important to meet people where they're at because there is no one size fits all approach. Not everyone is going to go vegan overnight. And so what are the ways that we can encourage people to reduce their animal product consumption, even on a meal by meal basis.

These are things that are like really uncomfortable for a lot of animal advocates to talk about because I think advocates get hung up on the idea that if they're not advocating for complete elimination, that they're somehow advocating for

animal abuse, but we don't look at it that way. We're trying to advance the movement inch by inch. Sometimes it goes yard by yard, and sometimes it goes mile by mile...am I doing my American conversions correctly?

Jasmin: Yeah, really good job.

karol: So sometimes we can make bigger steps and like bigger leaps. And other times we're just trying to get mom and dad to eat a few fewer animal product based meals a week.

Jasmin: Yeah. I think that it's important for people listening to this to remember that a lot of this is strategy.

It doesn't mean you're compromising on your bottom line. It doesn't mean you are sacrificing your view of animal liberation, it's just, yeah...

karol: Totally. Yeah. Like I can be as vegan as I wanna be and all animal advocates can be as vegan as they want to be. But when it comes to reaching out to others who are not there, strategy is important and data can help inform strategy.

We recently had a question with someone wrote in and said that they were working with a food company that was going to be reaching out to influencers to try and find what would be effective messaging for getting people who are, I can't remember the exact age range, but let's say like 25 to 35 to go veg or go vegan.

I love it when people reach out to us and ask these questions, because they're looking for like the one thing. What's the one thing that's most important to this age group. I love telling them that there is no one thing and there's not one message that's going to reach everyone. It's almost like a biblical or like kind of religious way of thinking where people think like, "I just need to figure out the one speech I need to make or like the one...is it environmentalism? Is it health? Is it ethics, which one is the most important?" And the answer's always, "well, they're all important." Some people who are swayed by a health argument who are really into health are just not gonna care about animal ethics.

They just aren't going to, and so finding the messaging that will work to reach a particular target audience is like so crucial. And it's so crucial for us to understand that one size doesn't fit all. It never has and it never.

Jasmin: I was recently doing some research for an upcoming brainstorm that I have for VegNews for the first issue of 2023.

And I was looking into trends, like projected trends for 2023 in every area, like fashion, food, lifestyle. And in every single one I looked at there were vegan things. And there were not non-vegan things. I mean, there were things that were irrelevant to veganism, but it wasn't like cultivated meat and then like beef. It was so inspiring for me. You know, it's really hard to get me out of my rut sometimes, but I was like, "wow, people are shifting" and yeah, maybe it's not like they're going fully vegan, but this is going to make a big dent.

karol: Mm-hmm I mean, it is a really inspiring time right now for animal advocates. I think like, not only is the movement really growing a lot, as you said before. You're someone who's very connected to the movement, you're very involved, you know lots of people, and you're finding new people all the time that are doing really interesting work and going into new areas and...you know, what you mentioned before about fashion...A few years ago, I think around, I can't remember when, 2018, maybe even 2017...I was introduced to this idea of material innovation. And so there are these companies that are working on material innovations, replacing animal based textile products like leather with alternatives that use all kinds of stuff like mushroom leather, and things...

Jasmin: Coffee, pineapple, apple...I love it!

karol: It's so wild. And you know, these are things that are so important to the advancement of the cause. But there are also things that from an advocacy perspective have also been kind of controversial over time. Like the idea of vegan capitalism and this idea that some animal advocates and some vegans really want the animal advocacy movement to stay radical and to be completely non-corporate and all of that stuff. And to be honest, I feel that way a lot as well, but these things are so important to advancing things on a broader scale than just like a potluck that you're going to have with friends who are all cool, progressive people, you know?

And I think that that's something that you're highlighting. It's like we can still be cool, progressive people who are like alt and into these things but the advancements that are happening right now are great for the general public. And it's the general public that we need to reach. Vegans or vegetarians are anywhere between like 2-10% of the population, the other 90% of the population is who we're trying to reach out to and get them to shift their habits.

Jasmin: 1000 billion percent. You shouldn't hire me cuz I don't do math, but if I did, I would say that that was 1000 billion percent. I completely agree with you.

And it's nice to interview someone and end on a hopeful note. So definitely stay on for the bonus content because I do have a few more questions, but can you please tell our listeners how they can access all of this incredible content and how they can support your efforts?

karol: Absolutely. So our website, which is that's where it all happens is at Faunalytics.org.

So, in case you're not gonna look in the podcast description and click on the link, it's F A U N A L Y T I C S.org, faunalytics.org. You can support our work by going to faunalytics.org/donate.

We also just started a monthly donation program that we call “the data base” and that was not my creation but I think it's a brilliant name. Browse through our website, check out, the resources that are there. We have things divided by topics. So you can look just at studies about research animals, or just at studies about farmed animals or just studies on effective strategy and things like that.

And we're going to be, in the next few months, redesigning the site, improving the way that the resources are laid out, improving our search function and we're always trying to make improvements to like how people actually access stuff.

Jasmin: And do you encourage people to share the graphics and whatnot on their social media?

karol: Of course. And another way that you can stay in touch with us is by signing up for our email alerts. So once a week we send out a digest of stuff that we published in the last weeks. When you sign up for those alerts, you can tell us what you want to hear about. So if you just want to hear about companion animals, you will just get emails when we have new companion animal stuff.

But if you just want to hear about wildlife, you can get emails when we have new stuff in that area.

Jasmin: I'm such a big fan. I'm so inspired by all of this, karol, thank you so much for joining us on Our Hen House today. And, if you're in the flock, be sure to tune in on Tuesday for the flock bonus content.

karol, thank you and we will talk to you very soon!

karol: Talk soon!