



When Euthanasia Goes Viral: Death and Multispecies Work in the Shadow of the Platform Economy

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Abstract: This article examines how the emotional, immaterial work of animals becomes part of human creative and entrepreneurial labor on digital platforms – spaces where the line between sharing daily life and exploiting it to generate content increasingly blurs. It discusses how cuteness, as a performative aesthetic designed to highlight the animal's sweetness and perceived vulnerability, hides its active role in boosting views, user engagement, and social interactions. Between the genuine desire to share and the pursuit of trending content, even the animal's death is also caught up in these dynamics. To illustrate how digital culture relies on multispecies forms of labor in digital spaces, this article presents the case of an Italian female veterinarian recording the euthanasia of her own dog, which goes viral on Instagram and sparks negative comments and disapproval, revealing a complex web of contradictions. The precariousness of the veterinary profession is also analysed, emphasizing how sharing medical knowledge is intertwined with strategies of self-branding and gendered labor; meanwhile, the animal's emotional, immaterial work is overshadowed, and its death commodified as a tool for engagement. Ultimately, the article suggests that an animal's death does not interrupt the creation of value but instead becomes a key component in a system that spectacularizes multispecies intimacy.

Keywords: Euthanasia; Instagram; Animal death; Multispecies work; Veterinarians

“I have bad news to tell you”

On December 2, 2023, I found myself heartbroken while watching an Instagram Reel¹ in which an Italian veterinarian with almost 200,000 followers

¹ Instagram Reels can last from 15 to 90 seconds, and the platform provides several editing tools to cut and merge clips make them more dynamic, well-structured creative and engaging. Reels appear on individual users' profiles but can also be featured on the Explore page, increasing their visibility.



documents the final moments of her dog's life. The video montage, slightly increased in speed to fit the video time format, accompanied by a voiceover explaining what happened, shows a series of scenes filmed to capture the event. In the opening frames, the veterinarian is at home on her sofa. Distraught, she says, "I have bad news to tell you, in fact, terrible news".

The voiceover explains how she decided to initially film the dog in the backyard, with video frames integrated into the storytelling. From the kitchen, she notices the animal lying outside. Based on its breathing alone, she immediately senses the seriousness of the situation: "irregular breathing, weakness, and white mucous membranes. In a few seconds, I already knew what it was". Aiming to document the symptoms of a deadly tumor affecting several dog breeds, she shows herself palpating the swollen abdomen to confirm abdominal bleeding. The next scene shows her in the clinic, wearing a lab coat. She proceeds with the pre-operative anesthesia herself. Anesthetist and owner, she first kisses the dog and shortly afterward intubates him.

I took him to the clinic quickly, did an abdominal ultrasound, and immediately attached a blood bag because he was very ill and had significant abdominal bleeding. The ultrasound revealed that the spleen was definitely cancerous. We also noticed something on the liver, but we hoped it wasn't cancerous. I took him into surgery with a small hope of being able to stop the internal bleeding. When we actually opened the abdomen, we realized that the bleeding wasn't from the spleen but from the liver, and the liver was in worse shape than the spleen.

Confronted with the severe bleeding caused by the rapid growth of hemangiosarcoma, an extremely aggressive tumor, she realized that the dog's death was inevitable. "I decided to close him up and take him on one last trip to the mountains, where he is happy. He saw my parents again, all of us. We gave him lots of cuddles before euthanizing him at 3:15 p.m. So today, D. rests in peace and is no longer with us. I'm sorry" (IG Reel, December 2023).² The video caption emphasizes the deep pain and frustration of not being able to save the animal. The veterinarian shares the challenges of her job in these moments:

I'm angry, sad, and I don't know who to blame.

I couldn't even keep him alive for one more day. There was no way. There was nothing I could do.

² The original text is in Italian. All translations and transcriptions are my own and have been slightly adapted to balance accuracy and readability.



The hard part about being a vet is that no one tactfully tells you what's happening. No one guides you step by step. You have to figure it out on your own. In just a few moments. It's like a slap in the face. You realize everything immediately. You already understand in a second that it's a disaster.

At least he didn't suffer. Until the night before, he ate and went out for his usual walk. Now he's running happily in heaven with [our two other dogs].

We will miss him so much.

I thank all my colleagues who were so kind and supported me during those terrible moments.

#farewell #funeral #rip.³

With 2.6 million views, the Reel went viral and currently has 8,902 comments. Amid numerous messages of condolence and solidarity, the decision to record the process and euthanize the dog generated a series of comments expressing strong disapproval. This criticism arises from her seemingly detached explanation of the events and the act of filming the animal in its final moments of life; the choice, according to some commentators, to euthanize the dog when it could have died “naturally”, suggesting euthanasia was the easiest way to “get rid of the nuisance”. The veterinarian chooses to grieve privately and returns publicly after a week's absence to engage with her followers and address some of the negative comments, thereby reaffirming the correctness of her actions. There are many reasons behind the publication of this Reel. The veterinarian aims to share her personal experience and inform her audience that the dog whom they had grown fond of by following her page had passed away. Yet, as attention becomes a limited commodity in a world that is overloaded with information (Goldhaber 1997), sharing become a performative act. Content creators and influencers strive to convey authenticity and disclose personal vulnerability to attract views and gain followers (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023). The best ways to obtain, manage, and maintain attention is often through emotional content and controversy. As I will explain later, in the case of social media veterinarians, knowledge itself becomes a narrative resource designed to attract and entertain audiences who then become important assets to be re-directed toward e-commerce sites or attract brand partnerships and collaborations.

Animal presence in digital spaces play an equally important role. Animal imagery has served as both an affective and economic force in a society where the professional and recreational spheres have collapsed into one another, and eve-

³ I have retained the original formatting of the caption and removed the last hashtag containing the dog's name.



rything is work (Page 2016). As Page argues, the cuteness of small, baby-like animals offers comfort and makes them a source of entertainment for workers exhausted by the precariousness of neoliberal capitalism, providing them with a reason to keep going (2016). This emotional comfort sustains productivity (for those who watch), yet it is also driven by the commodification of personal and intimate experiences of those who work on platforms. Human creative labor becomes inseparable from the affective and bodily work of the animal's partner, so what happens when those same animals, protagonists of these videos are immortalized by their human companions during the final stages of their lives, and intimate aspects of life are shared and commodified to foster empathy? On this note, Porcher's proposal to draw the attention of the social sciences to the work animals do and how they can change the very nature of work pushed me to follow her along her most provocative question: "What place does [animal] death have in work?" (2014, p. 8). Can the (dying) animal be considered as a digital worker himself?

The current debate on animal work has already highlighted the need to distinguish between socially accepted forms of animal work – such as those involving so-called "working animals" (Coulter 2018) – and forms of emotional labor that occur in less formal settings. As Coulter notes, animals used for institutional roles (among others, guide dogs, police dogs, therapy dogs, or police and therapy horses) are seen as equivalent to human workers because of their clearly defined physical tasks, specific training, and partnerships with humans. In these formal environments, animal work mostly consists in regulating both their own emotional states and those of the humans they interact with (Warda 2022; Dashper 2019). Even in these settings, however, identifying such work requires knowledge of the animal's behaviour and advanced interpretive skills that encompass the ability to recognize agency and initiative. In the context of digital platforms, animal labor becomes more difficult to recognize, as watching a human-curated digital profile makes it hard to assess the animal's active contribution. Despite this challenge, animal labor understood through corporeal presence and ethological registers reveals that bodies are not inert and animals are not simply raw material but active participants in processes of meaning and value-making.

Following recent efforts to theorize animals as protagonists in economic and digital processes by drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of "*encounter value*" and "lively commodities" (2008) as extended by Barua (2016) my aim is to show how animals' affective and bodily work co-produces surplus within capitalist economies. Barua emphasizes that encounter value shifts analysis beyond human-centered understandings of labor but also "that it conceptualizes political economies as constituted by liveliness from the outset" (Barua 2016, p. 13). As Barua notes, liveliness and encounter value emerge through multimodal, mul-

tispecies forms of labor that might be rendered into commodities and circulated for purposes of valorization. “Encounter value,” he writes, “can be thought of as that *process* of value generation where bodies, ethologies, and liveliness of an animal *make a difference to*, and *is constitutive* of, those very relations that render or mobilize it as a commodity” (ivi, p. 4, original italics).

More so, labor is not inherent to the animal but derives from people who stage these encounters. Indeed, “nonhuman labour is porous, for it is not the attribute of individuals closed in on themselves but an activity enmeshed in heterogeneous entanglements” (ivi, p. 10). Therefore, “as much as humans set up conditions for animals to work, the latter too have bearings on human economic activity and its organisation” (*ibid.*). Turnbull *et al.* (2023) further adapted this concept into “*digital encounter value*” to describe online human-animal interactions not proximate in time or space, thereby transforming how value is produced (ivi, p. 12). These digital encounters generate affective and economic value through multispecies entanglements and technological agencies through media-based content and spectacle.

Building on these authors, this paper explores what happens when euthanasia becomes the focus of a digitally mediated and valued encounter – an otherwise unseen event by those without companion animals – whose circulation reveals both ethical tensions and various forms of care, especially if conducted by a female veterinarian influencer, someone who works for, with, and possibly through the animal. By expanding the idea of encounter value to include moments of loss and ethical exposure in the digital age, I analyze how transspecies relations are spectacularized and mediated through digital infrastructure that transforms experience into reproducible, exchangeable formats, such as videos that can be watched repeatedly, accumulating views and extracting value from the encounter with death as the spectacle of a (once)-lively animal. The spectacle of death thus marks the moment where liveliness is commodified, with the human and animal material and immaterial labor sustaining these relations becoming obscured. In fact, the analysis will also show how the invisible affective work animals perform in digital spaces intertwines with the unique precarity of the veterinary profession (Irvine, Vermilya 2010) and platform labor conditions (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023).

This work is part of my doctoral research on practices and rituals involving companion animals’ death, conducted at a pet cemetery and crematorium in Sardinia (Italy) and on Instagram (IG). Almost simultaneously with the start of my PhD (2022), I observed how digital spaces were becoming central venues for expressing grief over companion animals, revealing several tensions. From that point, I expanded my primarily ‘analog’ fieldwork to include digital spaces to understand how they mediate the phenomenon I was studying.



The digital component of my research was carried out on Instagram through my personal profile and developed in a diversified, loosely structured manner. From a methodological perspective, following Caliendo (2018), my aim has not been to adapt ethnographic methods to virtual environments but to understand the features that shape social interaction and expression within platforms (hashtags, retweets, Instagram stories, algorithms), which are always latent and relational. This shifts the focus from what technology does to users toward the mutual ways users shape platform practices, emphasizing that these affordances only materialize through specific cultural practices and social interactions, rather than being intrinsic features of the technology (Costa 2018). This, in turn, alters the strategies and options available to the researcher. Therefore, I did not pre-select profiles or collect specific data through established protocols; instead, I observed and welcomed the creative insights shared by both famous and ordinary users who usually don't focus on animal death but live with companion animals, sharing their daily lives and experiences with loss. Consequently, the data in this article comprises multimodal user-generated content, including text, audio, videos, and images collected between November 2022 and January 2025. Although this research is part of a broader investigation that includes various practices related to the theme of animal death, the current focus is mainly on a single profile; and the analysis of Reels, Instagram stories, and live broadcasts created under various circumstances before and after the veterinarian's dog's death, which she chose to share, post, and archive; and more specifically, the Reel documenting her dog's euthanasia, the follow-up IG Live, related stories, and a purposive sample of comments. All materials analyzed were posted publicly and remain accessible to the public. However, names and direct identifiers have been removed.

Cute economy, affective labor and death

The presence of animals in digital spaces is pervasive. From corporate logos in the 1960s to stickers and mobile phone accessories in the 1990s, and today's pet influencers, animals maintain a ubiquitous presence in the digital realm (Berland 2019; Lupton 2023). To trace how animals have been integrated into the contemporary platform economy, I initially analyze the online presence of animals and the emotional labor they perform within the "cute economy" by examining the Internet with its participatory and experimental nature, characterized by anonymity, collective creativity, and its amateurl media production (Meese 2014); then, and most importantly, I focus on the

Social Web. No longer a peripheral environment frequented by specialists or nerds, but an extension of everyday life open to a wide variety of people and its emphasis on the construction of personal identity and content monetization that has altered economic, political, and social balances (Thibaut, Marino 2018).⁴

The link between these spheres is represented by various multimedia content (texts, images, sounds, and animations), which are communicative acts where animals serve as key figures in web aesthetics and visual culture. In this context, animals act as mediators of values, aesthetic and social codes, and also co-produce human labor and economic outputs. First, during the era of webcams and personal blogs (1995-2004), the largest webcam on the Internet was “KittyCam”, dedicated to watching Kitty, a cat owned by an advertising agency in California. The camera took a single still image every two minutes, and Kitty only appeared when she wandered in front of the fixed camera. In 1998, KittyCam received over a million visits. Then, during the meme era (2005-2011), animals acted as linguistic and semiotic symbols, as famous images with humorous captions; now, during the era of celebrity pets (2011 to present), pet influencers are major players in the digital market (White 2020, pp. 76-106). To understand the value generated by digital encounters with animals, note that with YouTube’s rise in 2005, Maru, the first Japanese cat known for playing with boxes, set a Guinness World Record in 2016 for the most viewed videos of a single animal on YouTube: over 325 million views by 2020 (ivi, p. 93).

Behind these cheerful performances lies an ambivalent dynamic: while animals appear as symbols of joy and care, they become part of various networks at the intersection of the cute economy (Maddox 2021) and a hidden infrastructure of affective work (Barua, 2018). Cuteness functions as a performative aesthetic that aims to emphasize the animal’s sweetness and vulnerability. Features like large eyes, a round face, and a small nose and mouth evoke infantile traits that reinforce human nurturing behavior toward animals, thereby eliciting compassion and empathetic responses. However, the same aesthetic that promises tenderness and empathy conceals a deeper reliance on the immaterial labor of animals: supporting and caring for humans in their daily lives within a complex power dynamic embedded in neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, Allison Page has suggested that watching cute animal videos is a “cruel relief” to escape from loneliness and demanding work environments (2016). While examining the

⁴ The distinction between these two configurations is useful for navigating the complexity of the issues addressed, but it should not be understood as a clear-cut separation (Thibault, Marino 2018).

rhetoric used to frame cute animal media, she argued that such videos serve as a tool for procrastination against the imperative of productivity and offer a means of coping with the conflation of work and leisure (2016).

The shift from the participatory web to platform-based environments exacerbates many of these issues, especially the tension caused by sharing personal and intimate experiences on platforms designed to maximize audience engagement, where joy, empathy, and the entrepreneurial dynamics of social media intertwine. With the emergence of Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, animals have evolved into prominent influencers, maintaining personalized profiles, rather than a decontextualized meme, with followers and sponsorships that establish them as influential figures within the digital marketplace (e.g., Jiffpom or Nala Cat).

Pet influencers easily become true celebrities because of their distinctive morphological or expressive traits. This is one reason why more pet owners are creating YouTube and Instagram accounts for their pets, hoping to gain fame and fortune through followers, likes, and shares (White 2020). Animals enhance views, user engagement, and social interactions; moreover, the joy they elicit also constitutes a form of invisible labor (Maddox 2021). Cute images evoke feelings of innocence or helpfulness, which contribute to creating “an indexicality of wanting to care for the animal in question” (ivi, p. 3335). Nonetheless, the desire to care remains ambivalent: it can have positive outcomes for animals, as social media effectively raises awareness of issues such as increasing adoptions in shelters while this same sweetness can lead to the exploitation of companion species entangled in this peculiar economy. As Maddox argues, “This complicates the cute economy by allowing it to simultaneously exist as a metaphorical cultural exchange and attempted actual financial transactions, thereby problematizing the cute aesthetics’ ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’” (*ibid.*).

The hyper-visibility gained through cuteness is deeply connected to the more or less ethical and consensual exposure of the animal’s body, which – in the absence of language – plays a crucial role in all the activities performed. The animal’s contribution comes from its presence, vitality, expressiveness, postures, and interactions with other animals or humans. Physical features such as breed, size, distinctive traits, emblematic gestures, and recognizable reactions help create a coherent and stable identity, turning the animal into a “character” with legible intentionality and narrative continuity. Whereas looking at the camera to simulate eye contact, approaching the lens, and affiliative gestures like wagging the tail or resting the muzzle on the owner’s legs can build a parasocial relationship with the user in a virtual encounter that mimics a mutual bond. Even behaviors like resting, slow breathing,

purring, scratching surfaces, or eating bones can serve as emotional regulation devices, providing comfort to the user⁵ who fails to notice signs of stress, discomfort, or fear.

The animal's work on digital platforms is even more subtle to identify because it's impossible to assess what happens before or after the recorded moment, nor the extent to which animals might face repeated demands, whether they are executing "funny" or trained actions, or are compelled or rewarded to stay or be positioned for filming. There are also many aspects that escape us, such as behavioral repertoires that are more or less acceptable or desirable, which influence how we perceive an animal's cuteness and charm. In this way, cuteness acts as an ambivalent device: while it makes the animal visible and sustains continuous engagement, it obscures the working dimension of its actions, reducing them to mere spontaneous expressions or harmless entertainment. This issue becomes even more evident in times of illness or the end of life which evoke feelings of helplessness, and extreme vulnerability. Here, the animal body becomes a vehicle for further work: it mobilizes practices of care, ethical reflections, and emotional participation, reorganizing the decisions and moral stance of humans. The death of the animal also affects the content that surrounds the creative human labor involved; it can generate shares, comments, and newspaper articles (Solon 2018). The popularity that many profiles are able to achieve encourages owners to keep their followers updated on the circumstances of the pet's death, to publish photographs, and to dedicate messages, with the risk of falling back into the logic of commodifying grief, as is the case of human death.⁶

Mourning is shaped by platform logics than incentives emotional responses, negative or positive, but at the crossroads of spontaneity and strategy, memory and entertainment, online spaces have helped create new rituals

⁵ Within so-called ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) formats, a genre of audio-visual media designed to elicit pleasurable sensory responses (e.g., relaxation) through amplified sounds, chewing, cracking, and other bodily noises produced by the animal which is in front of a camera eating specific meals are not incidental but become content.

⁶ In the case of studies on human death, among many examples, Abidin's (2022) research among Singaporean influencers shows how hashtags related to tragic global events are exploited to gain visibility. This behavior highlights the shift from authentic sharing of grief (*public grieving*) to its commodification for the sake of notoriety (*publicity grieving*). This is done both to attract visibility in order to increase one's notoriety on social media and to promote or sell products. Often, personal failures and pain are not only documented but also heavily re-narrated and hyper-visualized to elicit mutual empathy from their followers. On the phenomenon of grief influencers, who base their expertise on personal experience of grief to sell products, guides, and courses, see Harju, Peintikainen (2025).



and imaginaries around animal death and afterlives. Internet culture has intercepted the need for social spaces where people with similar experiences can connect, reducing the sense of disapproval present in other public settings (Desmond 2011). Virtual cemeteries, forums, and online memorials have grown and diversified, continuing to provide ways to keep animal memories alive (Tumidei 2025). They have helped facilitate grief expression, sometimes replacing or supplementing institutions like pet cemeteries (Brandes 2017), and have made the death of companion animals mournable (Demello 2016; Redmalm 2019). In pet-loss forums, images play a deeper emotional role, serving as symbols of affection, memory, and mourning. Here, the depiction of the animal gains emotional and commemorative significance, creating a shared space of intimacy. Following what occurs in the case of human death, the widespread sharing of various content types – such as elegies, poems, stories, video montages, background music, filters, captions, and off-screen narrations – helps propagate and expand vernacular practices like the idea of a shared otherworldly horizon embodied by the Rainbow Bridge. The Rainbow Bridge, now widely understood as an imaginary space where certain animals wait to be reunited with humans before moving on to a shared afterlife, is extremely common in the English-speaking world. Partly due to the unique iconography – frequently evoking animal cuteness – created through video montages, images, and drawings by artists, it takes on various forms and can also serve as a trademark for those offering counseling and support services.

The cute aesthetic category, designed to evoke responses that engage audiences and generate affective economies, fits well into the realm of animal death. That cute aesthetic which initially attracts people's attention, continues to be monetized when the animal dies because such death can also become content capable of concealing the emotional work of that same animal. This dynamic commodifies human personal experiences while simultaneously reinforcing an aura of authenticity that helps sustain emotional relationships with followers (Bainet-Weiser 2021; Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023). Seemingly opposed, cuteness and death ambivalently rely on a shared logic of vulnerability and affect to elicit emotional responses but both exploit and obscure the affective, bodily, and emotional work through which the animal's life, and its loss, generate value. The commensurability of cuteness and death can be seen as a shift in how digital culture leverages human-animal relationships. The emotional, immaterial work of animals becomes part of human creative and material labor, revealing how digital culture relies on "interspecies intimacy" (Chua 2018) that circulate for value in digital spaces.

Social media veterinarians

Platforms driven by visibility and monetization dynamics contribute to the exploitation of animals as entertainment objects within digital spaces where creativity and freedom exist in a conflicting relationship. This also intersects with the precarity of the veterinary profession, especially for female veterinarians, a highly vulnerable group of workers who, according to Tomasi *et al.*, “were 3.4 and 5.0 times as likely to die by suicide as the general population” in both clinical and non-clinical roles (p. 109). Veterinary medicine has become increasingly feminized over recent decades; however, women veterinarians in private practice earn about 75% of what men do, partly because they are less likely to own their clinics and tend to charge lower fees (Irvine, Vermilya 2010, p. 58). Female veterinarians mainly work with companion animals and more often engage with clients facing emotional and costly decisions. As a result, women often handle most of the gendered – and unpaid – work of communicating with clients (ivi, p. 63). This means the profession benefits from the “invisible work” that many women veterinarians may see as a “natural” part of their identity.

For veterinarians, increasing job instability – especially among women – makes the transformation of knowledge into an economic resource an opportunity. Students and established professionals use platforms to promote their services, increase public awareness of daily work in clinics, and conduct educational activities. Online work can be done alongside veterinary visits or consultations, or, in some cases, platform-based entrepreneurial activities become the main source of income. Unlike traditional influencers who mainly promote products or lifestyles, veterinarians are more likely to fit into a broader trend related to “knowledge influencers” and entrepreneurial ventures on social media (Maddox 2022). Knowledge influencers combine their professional authority with the dynamics of digital visibility and craft their identity and communication around their expertise (Maddox 2022). They view themselves as content to be consumed, reflecting the wider commodification of skills as people are encouraged to turn every aspect of their lives, including their professional expertise, into a branding opportunity. This trend clearly raises ethical questions, especially when the dissemination of knowledge is linked with sponsorship strategies and the goal of maximizing views and audience interaction.

Academic credentials and scientific authority are emphasized as persuasive tools. However, as Maddox (2022) explains, unlike “calibrated amateurism”, where influencers pretend to be inexperienced to appear more relatable, experts use digital platforms to share knowledge while keeping credibility, representing a form of “calibrated expertise”. Indeed, a key aspect is creating a sense



of authenticity, because, unlike celebrities in entertainment, knowledge influencers are seen as more similar to ordinary people in terms of status and experience. This means that experts have to compete with less qualified but more skilled influencers in engaging the public, risking oversimplifying information to fit the dynamics of the web. According to Maddox (2022), knowledge influencers must find a balance between credibility and accessibility, adjusting their communication style to fit the platform's dynamics. For instance, responding directly to comments and using engaging narrative formats make the informational content more effective and immediate.

The veterinarian in question is clearly aware of these issues and makes no secret of her fruitful collaboration with a social media strategist. Her profile, which began in 2017 as a blog, has gained popularity and now functions as a platform for sponsorships of online medical services, her own pet food line, and on-demand courses. In her professional role, she debunks myths, offers advice, and responds to questions from followers. Besides sharing her personal life, she doesn't just share information; she does so strategically, utilizing the visual and interactive features of each platform. Her knowledge of trending formats, along with her ability to cross-post content across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram, helps her tap into trending topics, comment on current events, and repost viral content to maximize her audience's engagement. On Instagram, her stories – filmed in her car, at clinics where she still works as a freelancer, in her office, at home, at her parents' house, or on vacation – bring her followers closer by sharing more personal aspects of her life, which are carefully curated. Her communication style and environment have adapted to her needs and evolved over time. In earlier videos, her tone was softer and more discreet, and her attitude was friendlier. Today, with greater familiarity with digital tools, she adopts a more direct and often deliberately provocative approach.

Another interesting aspect is the diverse makeup of her followers, which comprises young veterinary students, colleagues, and pet owners. Through her strategic utilization of the platform, the veterinarian fosters a high degree of engagement with her audience. For instance, in her stories, she frequently posts polls or 'question boxes' directed at her followers, which are subsequently reposted anonymously as overlays within her stories. The responses to these questions, especially those from students and colleagues, underscore common challenges in veterinary medicine, including equitable hourly wages, the difficulties associated with outpatient work, burnout, and numerous ethical dilemmas related to more complex procedures such as euthanasia. In this context, her extensive digital archive of featured stories includes a collection entitled "euthanasia." The initial segments of these stories begin with several questions



“from veterinarian to veterinarian” and underscore internal dialogues, ethical conflicts, and uncertainties surrounding the profession.

The veterinarian’s presentation offers a clinical perspective with the aim of educating a broad audience. In the flow of stories, she shows a video explanation: the camera stays fixed on a patient’s⁷ electrocardiogram (ECG) monitor, and the doctor explains the procedure verbally in a voiceover. First, deep sedation, then the administration of the drug that will lead to painless cardiac arrest. To focus the attention on the change in the patient’s vital signs following the procedure, she uses inserts, so-called “stickers”, in this case flashing colored circles that indicate “look here”. Downplaying the emotional effort involved almost as a professional duty, the veterinarian warmly invites users to ask questions or share curiosities about euthanasia, emphasizing how comfortable she feels discussing the topic. Using IG stories she responds directly, sitting on the sofa in her home, reposting comments and questions she received that appear overlaid on the screen. In this setting, she explains her approach and addresses questions from colleagues and students. Regarding her approach to euthanasia, the veterinarian states:

Well, as a veterinarian, I am quite used to euthanasia, so I don’t experience it as badly as many owners might. In fact, euthanasia gives me a great sense of peace and liberation. So, it actually has a calming effect, in the sense that when I finally put an end to the animal’s suffering, I experience it as ‘Finally, it’s no longer suffering’. So, for me, euthanasia is not something shocking. Of course, it’s much harder to make this decision for your own animals than for other people’s animals (IG stories, November 2022).

Questions from students or colleagues highlight the frustration caused by the contradictions inherent in a financially unstable profession with a very high burnout rate. This career is pursued due to a strong desire to care for animals and a naturalized vocation to save them. Among many other issues, her approach to ethical dilemmas is notable because her points are anything but objective and are the most difficult to evaluate.

When can a vet refuse to perform euthanasia?

This is also a good question, because we veterinarians can only perform euthanasia if we believe that the animal is suffering and has no chance of improvement or recovery. Basically, we assess the quality of life. That is always the point of reference. Does it have a good quality of life or not? If it does not have a good quality of life and cannot

⁷ The term used by veterinarians to refer to the animal in their care.



improve, then there are grounds for euthanasia. Of course, it is very important... I want you all to know that no one can force a veterinarian to perform euthanasia if there are no grounds for it. It is not as if euthanasia is performed on demand: the owner arrives with a dog with a broken leg, asks you to perform euthanasia, and you do it. No, eh! The veterinarian must only perform euthanasia if they deem it appropriate, so it is true that the owner has the final say, but they cannot in any way force a veterinarian to perform euthanasia if there is no real need for it, clear? (IG stories, November 14, 2022).

Indeed, euthanasia remains a contentious issue among veterinarians. Significant disagreements persist as increased animal life expectancy and expanded treatment options complicate the recognition of pain, the assessment of the animal's emotional distress, the determination of the quality of life, the understanding of what constitutes suffering, and the appropriate timing for euthanasia (Hurn, Badman-king 2019). During my research, I met people who decided to cease practicing due to euthanasia. For veterinarians, euthanizing their own animals is nearly taboo, often leading them to seek assistance from colleagues. These issues arise from various reasons that are frequently challenging to evaluate. Generally, the veterinarians I engaged with during my fieldwork explained that the primary factors contributing to these differences include university training, lack of preparation for owners' emotional reactions, religious beliefs, fears of retaliation in the event of mistakes, and the overarching goal of saving animals. Since veterinarians are committed to treating their patients, euthanasia can be perceived as a failure to cure the animal, particularly among younger generations. For all these reasons, images or videos depicting an animal being euthanized are rare, not only because they are seen as an intimate and sensitive act but also because they are often associated with pain and suffering.⁸

⁸ Nonetheless, one of the most widely viewed videos I came across while casually browsing Instagram shows exactly those painful elements that are usually avoided in discussions about euthanasia. The video has now received 202,000 mostly supportive comments and over 85 million views. The original footage, recorded by a woman with a YouTube channel and split into part one and part two, was reposted by an Instagram account that shared only segments of those longer videos to fit the platform's video format. In the clip, a large Rottweiler is positioned on a veterinarians' table. In the opening shots, the dog owner – talks with the veterinarians, sobbing and saying, "I feel I just need a moment". Seconds later, she is leaning over the dog, holding its head as the animal loses consciousness and likely takes its final breath. Visibly distressed, the woman begins to scream and cry, exclaiming, "Oh God, Oh God". The scene is profoundly upsetting, given the intense emotional stakes involved. It is hard to determine exactly what caused the video to go viral (the second of the two original ones on YouTube, as well, with 3.4 million views). On Instagram, it is more common to post carousels of images showing key moments from the animal's life or photos taken just before euthanasia at the clinic, often with touching captions. Sometimes, owners post a Reel or other formats weeks later to explain



The aftermath: working for, with, and through animals

On December 10, 2023, a week after publishing the Reel of her dog's death, the veterinarian decides to go live on Instagram. Unlike the previous video, she appears wearing makeup and smiling. The first few minutes are spent promoting a newly published Reel.

This week, I thought about what to say to you when I returned, and I decided to start with a Reel, with a message of help for those who are facing this moment like me. So, a few thoughts on what mourning a dog or cat means, how to deal with it and process it, and how to dodge the questions that are asked, such as 'Ah, but you'll get another one', etc. (IG live, 10 December 2023).

Aware that the high number of views has brought in new followers, she continues by welcoming them. She feels the need to downplay the situation by stating that sadness is temporary and that the profile is usually different.

Many new people have also arrived at a time of pain, arriving at a time when they will say, 'My goodness, I arrive on this new profile and there is an air of crisis, there is an air of sadness...' Well, it's a moment, it will pass. Now, little by little, we are all starting again together and you will certainly see ups and downs, but we have to move forward, so in some way we will. Maybe I'll struggle to make some particularly cheerful videos at first, [nervous smile] but I'll try.⁹

Then she moves on to let the public know that she has felt people's closeness and how much their messages of affection have been appreciated. "I didn't think you could feel so much affection through a screen – because after all, we don't know each other in person – but I really spent at least the first three days collecting messages of condolence everywhere". She is pleased that this is a sign of affection for her dog "because he was a very good dog anyway" (IG Live, December 10, 2023). Then, she openly addresses the criticism she has

what happened or to remember the animal. More generally, however, death tends to be displayed differently among platforms. Certainly, different policies and affordances play a role pointing to culturally appropriate ways of showing and consuming (animal) death on social media, as well as social expectations around expressing grief and depicting suffering (both of those who remain and those no longer here) but answering these questions would require a comparative analysis I cannot address in this paper. What I find notable is that the veterinarian has received more disapproving comments than the dog owner described above, highlighting, as I will explain later, the gendered professional expectations in tension with platform creators' work.

⁹ Shortly afterwards, she adds that she has already scheduled an appointment with a video maker to make two YouTube videos. One of them is dedicated to explaining what happened to the dog.



received. As shares increase, the video reaches a large, unfamiliar audience. Its viral nature causes unsuspecting viewers to feel uneasy about her explanation of the event, as she films all stages of what happened and then posts the video on social media. To share her side of the story, the veterinarian spends considerable time replying to negative comments that challenge her decisions and medical authority. Her initial response is directed at those who oppose euthanasia.

[Among the comments] there was obviously a group of people who were against euthanasia, and I wanted to clarify this... I performed euthanasia on D. because he was already dying. The situation was that once the surgery was done, which was a desperate surgery, I already knew from the ultrasound that the situation was not great, but we were hopeful. I was still convinced that by removing his spleen, he would live for a few more months. When we saw his liver, we realized that was not possible. So, my fellow surgeon said to me, 'There's nothing we can do. Either we euthanize him now, or we close him up, but you have to euthanize him by this evening. I mean, let's be clear, he won't make it until tomorrow'. So... it was [him] who gave me... gave me, how can I put it, a shock, right? The shocking news. Even though I already understood that the situation was bad, I performed the euthanasia at that moment when – not because, as someone wrote... there was a total idiot who said to me, 'It's easier to give him the injection, euthanasia, than to treat him'. So, to someone who comments like that, I mean, what do you say? (IG live, December 10, 2023)

The veterinarian continues resentfully:

I'm a veterinarian, my job is to treat animals. Do you think it's easier for me to give him the injection than to treat him? I mean, let me understand, I don't know. And then I would have done anything to keep my dog alive for another week or two. My other dog – who died for the same reason – survived for a month. So, he had the surgery anyway – his liver wasn't affected – and as a result, he lived a wonderful month. I spoiled him, pampered him, fed him all kinds of delicacies, and we went on beautiful walks. After a month, [the tumor] recurred, obviously in the abdomen, as we know these tumors do, and at that point, I euthanized him. But unfortunately, D. was already dying, so we put him down, I stuffed him with drugs, so rest assured that he didn't suffer, he was heavily drugged with methadone, fentanyl, and every anti-inflammatory imaginable. He was just conscious, happy to see us. When we got to the mountains, I said to him, 'Hey, we're in the mountains!' He even pulled himself up, but he couldn't stand, so we carried him to the fireplace, laid him down there, and he spent a few hours with us, watching us scratch his ears, happy to see us. Then he collapsed again. He was pale white again because I had given him a transfusion, so I had given him some blood, but he had already lost it all. White again, collapsed again. That's it.



At that point, you euthanize him. If I hadn't euthanized him, he would have died an hour later, two hours later... in a bad way, because dying of internal bleeding is really bad (IG Live, December 10, 2023).

Some commentators seem to forget the mourner and its vulnerability. In response to the violation of an implicit social norm, the veterinarian thanks those who defended her, by replying to the most offensive comments. As someone in pain, the veterinarian says she can only talk rationally about the event while recording the live broadcast, a week later, but reading those comments initially triggered deep anger. In fact, she says: "I even responded rudely to someone, I said two or three nasty things to one person, because how can you do that? I mean, anything goes, but at that moment, you can't do that to me". The reference is again to the people who accuse her of excessive coldness and detachment in her decision to recount the event.

Some people even said to me, 'it's too easy to euthanize'. Well, yes, you're an idiot. Do you think it was easy for me to euthanize my dog? Do you think I wasn't crying at that moment? In fact, I was grateful that he collapsed again, because otherwise, if he had been standing there with his ears up, looking at me, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to do it. So, in a way, I was grateful that he gave me the signal that it was time to do it (IG Live, December 10, 2023).

The professional role of the veterinarian and the personal experience of practicing euthanasia generate numerous tensions as she faces social pressure in a digital environment. Although from her perspective the video is useful and faithful to the intent of the veterinary education profile, the vulnerability of the animal, its body, and its bodily work is captured between life and death. A combination of subtle signals from the dog's dying body, such as pain from hemorrhage and systemic organ compromise, faster breathing, a dull gaze, exhaustion, and the body's adaptation to compensate, becomes content. Unlike the stories mentioned above, where euthanasia is only seen through a monitor and turned into a moment of collective reflection, the raw, urgent narrative in which the animal goes from being a living companion to a dying patient raises questions about the video – whether it is right to watch it, share it, and whether filming was appropriate. The potential objectification of the dog serves as a critical tool: the animal's affective and bodily work moves, incites, and arouses perplexity.

The veterinarian's medical expertise seems to justify her decision in the eyes of her audience. However, this claim to authority conflicts with the highly dramatized narrative structure of her story – marked by key moments like the an-



nouncement, diagnosis, turning points, decision, and farewell – which makes it morally questionable. Still, from a medical-scientific perspective, she believes that filming aligns with her professional role, which is not without contradictions. She aims to project the image of a rational and decisive doctor, yet this medical detachment conflicts with the image of a compassionate veterinarian wholeheartedly dedicated to the profession. As shown by Irvine and Vermilya (2010), gendered expectations play a significant role. Female veterinarians primarily working with companion animals are expected to be “responsible not only for the medical care of the animal patient, but also for the emotional well-being of the human client” (Irvine, p. 65), especially in cases of euthanasia and grief over the loss of an animal. However, the female veterinarians interviewed by Irvine and Vermilya strategically distance themselves from stereotypically feminine characteristics and emphasize their interest in science as “a discursive strategy” to present themselves as professionals because some of them “found that clients could sometimes see caring and communication as unprofessional” (Irvine, Vermilya 2010). In their interviews, Irvine and Vermilya (2010) found that female veterinarians believe that “emotional” and “professional” do not go well together, thus they strive to appear calm and in control. Changing their emotions is seen as a necessary part of projecting a professional image. In sum, the women veterinarians diminish the emotional qualities and interpersonal skills that, within the same field, are recognized as valuable aspects (Irvine, Vermilya 2010). Distancing from the feminine represents a form of “gender work” through which women create space for themselves within veterinary medicine. The gender work of women veterinarians involves constructing a professional identity within a masculine system of meanings that sustains inequality by upholding the masculine ethic of veterinary medicine, despite the fact that the profession is mostly female. Concurrently, while on platforms, self-branding strategies aim to present oneself as authentic to encourage parasocial identification and enhance reputation through network management practices (Caliandro 2018), also “the compulsion to share intimate, even uncomfortable moments” becomes “a strategy for community-building and accruing followers” (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023, p. 14). Visibility again introduces vulnerability in the form of harmful comments and negative responses that require additional emotional work, entangled with the unique precarity of platform labor conditions, since neither creators nor influencers are considered legal employees of platform companies, leaving them without the protections granted to other vulnerable workers (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023).

The numerous intertwined plots in this successful narrative create friction among the same constructions. First, there is the variety of roles and types of work embodied by a single individual, whose priorities conflict with the



expectations of a vast audience: on one side, the detached female veterinarian who challenges gendered expectations; the communicator aiming to showcase the symptoms of a severe and rapidly progressing disease to help others; the entrepreneur who monetizes her expertise filming the dying body of her dog, which involves editing the video, assembling different scenes to fit the timing of the reel format, and then sharing it on her page; and the owner who can rationalize the prognosis, accept its consequences, and face the moral dilemma of euthanasia without hesitation. The same applies to the animal, whose death is consumed, contested, or mourned through the platform. In this case, the dog is simultaneously a life partner capable of working alongside its human; a victim of an incurable disease nearing the end of life; an object of medical-scientific observation, endlessly scrutinized to understand symptoms like abdominal hemorrhage; and, once again, a patient whose death cannot be prevented and whose spectacularized death becomes a lively commodity (Barua 2016).

Returning to Porcher's question, the way animal life and death are captured and transformed into a valuable digital encounter can be seen as a form of labor that continues to draw attention, evoke emotions, and generate monetizable engagement. However, the line between care, cooperation, and exploitation of the animal remains blurry when examining digitally curated profiles. Speaking of "work" is not meant to resolve this ambiguity but to foreground a way to critically recognize how the animal's emotional effort, its role in fostering parasocial bonds, and its liveliness are both embodied and hidden within specific physical features or repertoires such as "cuteness" or "being a good dog". These features operate within complex infrastructures, expectations, and power dynamics that make them productive in eliciting care, attachment, or disapproval.

Conclusion

Sharing images of animals might seem like a light-hearted and trivial act, but it is deeply connected to larger social, economic, and political issues (Maddox 2021). Pictures of cute and helpless animals become a valuable form of currency in the social media visual economy for an audience looking for lighthearted content. However, the use of such technology can, perhaps or less consciously, contribute to animal exploitation and reinforce the capitalist system that promotes the consumption of this content. With the rise of platforms, the boundary between sharing personal experiences and using content for monetary gain has become blurred; what started as the circulation of cuteness for connection and joy can be expanded to sharing death as a way to evoke emotions and



generate views. In this context, the affective work of animals, often filmed or photographed in various situations, becomes invisible and unmeasurable as it is difficult to assess how exposure to cameras, visibility, or other factors negatively affect their bodies and well-being.

Within this context, the example aims to illustrate how “encounter value shifts the emphasis on *trans-actions* between human and non-human labor enmeshed in the commodity and forming part of a porous exchange” (Barua 2017, p. 11, original italics) and how the recognition of animals as subjects endowed with individuality and companions in meaningful relationships are entangled within “specifics of value-generation processes [...] configured by particular animal bodies and ethologies” (Barua 2016, p. 5) that transform them into consumer objects while affirming their importance as significant partners.

The value of this staged encounter lies both in the desire to care for the vulnerable animal and in the spectacle created by its death, amplified by platforms designed to promote affective content that sparks controversy. The virality and critical comments regarding the decision to film and euthanize the dog underscore how deeply intertwined the tensions are among personal, social, and platform vulnerabilities (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023), which are embedded in human-animal relationships encapsulated and fractured within digital encounters (Turnbull *et al.* 2023) that such spectacle and images depend on. This process is closely connected to human labor, especially the work of veterinarians, which often entails end-of-life decisions and the emotional turmoil for clients they are tasked to care for (Irvine, Vermilya 2010). In this context, the affective work and vulnerabilities of both humans and animals become blurred, sometimes invisible or indistinguishable from the creative and gendered labor that support platform-dependent vulnerabilities (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023).

To conclude, the veterinarian euthanizing her own dog reveals a complex entanglement: both cuteness and death contribute to the attention economy and caring responses, thanks to the digital infrastructure that prizes engagement through the interdependence of humans and animals work, both material and immaterial. The animal’s invisible labor of dying intersects with the knowledge-influencer’s creative labor and the veterinarian’s unseen care work. The encounter becomes doubly productive, as digital value arises through liveliness and loss of the animal bodily work that supports contemporary economies of visibility and emotion. In fact, the spectacle of death becomes the very site where liveliness is commodified: the circulation of the video reanimates death as a source of vitality and value. Digital infrastructures transform the act of dying into a durable, repeatable form, generating value after death through the continuous reverberation of the message beyond time and space, blurring



the boundaries between public and private spheres. The animal's death, then, does not mark the end of (human-animal) labor or value but instead becomes a process through which liveliness is reconfigured as a commodity, extracted and circulated in digital economies.

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