Abstract - O’Brien

Social media and animal welfare

Digital platforms have become central to how people engage with animals, offering opportunities for awareness, fundraising, and connection. Yet alongside these positives, a disturbing trend has emerged: the spread of animal cruelty content. From staged “rescues” to deliberate abuse filmed for entertainment, such material is shared widely, often rewarded by algorithms and monetisation systems that drive engagement.

This session will introduce the scale and nature of this hidden problem, drawing on research from the Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition. Nicola O’Brien will outline how cruelty content thrives online, why it matters for animal welfare globally, and what makes it so difficult to tackle.

Although efforts to address this issue are still at an early stage, progress is being made. Engagement with major platforms, discussions with policymakers, and growing public awareness are laying the groundwork for change. By sharing current approaches, challenges, and opportunities, this talk aims to open up the conversation on how the animal protection sector can work with, and challenge, technology to eliminate animal cruelty online.

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