

Animal work, memory, and interspecies care: police horses in multispecies urban imaginaries

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Abstract

Mounted police units around the world have entered social media, with the aim of bringing the police closer to the public. In this paper, I analyze the Facebook page of the mounted police in the city of Helsinki, the capital of Finland. I ask how equine agency, animal work, interspecies care, and the relational networks of memory are interpreted, communicated, and performed on social media, contributing to the co-production of urban imaginaries. I approach the material as performances of animality and human–animal relations, concentrating on shared interpretations and representations of the horses and their agency. To be able to analyze human–animal encounters and interaction in urban space as they are experienced, imagined, remembered, and collectively shared, I suggest a novel concept of multispecies urban imaginary. Developing the concept widens the focus of understanding the multispecies nature of urban environments and includes animals in the experiences and perceptions of city space – where they belong.

Keywords

animal geographies, Helsinki, mounted police, relationality, urban imaginaries

In the early December slush, surrounded by temporary barriers, most protesters refrained from violence. A small group were equipped with hockey sticks and were ready to use them. This was when the police horses with their mounts made their move. They proceeded between the fence and the protesters, who made some of the horses nervous in the narrow space. As a result, two horses were hit with a stick by the protesters. The incident, taking place during the official Independence Day celebrations in 2013, was recorded on video. It made front page news, was widely shared in social media and aroused public indignation.

In Finland, trust in police forces is fairly high, but public confidence in the mounted police and their horses is even greater than in the police force in general.¹ Apparently, the presence of horses transforms the power relations between the police and the publics. By mounting a horse, the police seem to get closer to the citizen. This is the result of a development in the use of police horses in the past few decades: although horses are still visibly present in demonstrations, their use in crowd

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control has decreased, while their main task is PR work. Sitting on a horse, a police officer is more approachable than sitting inside a patrol car.

Another recent development concerns the virtual presence of police horses. In the 2010s, mounted police units around the world entered social media. In Finland their Facebook and Instagram pages are widely followed, the animals are admired, and their actions commented on. Similar sites can be found with police dog units, border patrol, and the customs. These social media sites make visible the ways in which several ongoing societal and cultural transformations come together, including changing relations between humans and animals, increasing concern for animal welfare, and the rise of social media.

In this paper, I analyze the Facebook page of the mounted police in the city of Helsinki, the capital of Finland. I ask how equine agency, animal work, interspecies care, and the relational networks of memory are interpreted, communicated, and performed on social media, contributing to the co-production of urban imaginaries. My main focus is not on the police force as such, but on how horses become embedded in relational networks crossing the boundaries between the virtual and the real. This process is based on how internet users, by sharing their conceptions, experiences, and memories online, relate to the lives of the horses and the ways in which they inhabit the city. The data analyzed consist of postings by the mounted police and comments on them by the followers of the site. I approach the material as performances of animality and human–animal relations,² concentrating on interpretations of the horses and their agency, and suggest a novel concept of multispecies urban imaginary. In doing this, I draw from an array of theoretical discussions, mostly within cultural geographies, animal geographies, and the interdisciplinary field of human–animal studies.

The study of the use of horses by the police is sparse. Recent research on the mounted police consists of, for example, historical analyses of the role of the mounted police and its future.³ These studies do not, however, address the horse as an animal working with humans. With police dogs, the situation is slightly different. Sanders, for example, has explored police dog handlers' feelings about the dual role of dogs as companions and as law-enforcement tools.⁴

In the following section I first discuss the theoretical literature, after which I introduce the Helsinki Mounted Police and the data and methods I have used. In the remainder of the paper, I present the results of the analysis.

Relationality and multispecies urban imaginaries

Human–animal relationships are affected by the spaces in which they are produced and experienced.⁵ These spaces can be understood as relational, epitomizing the ways in which humans and animals co-constitute each other situationally.⁶ This can be observed in cities, where numerous species thrive alongside humans, suggesting that urban space can never be conceived of as solely human.⁷ Throughout history, animals have abounded in urban environments, including livestock and service animals, but animals have also been excluded from cities 'via regulation, zoning, and extermination'.⁸ The status of the different animals living in cities is negotiated in multiple encounters between humans and animals as well as in spatial practices involving animals. These negotiations are informed by understandings of the impact of different groups of animals in city life, including perceived social benefits, danger, aesthetics, and order, as well as cultural conceptions of animals and their relations with humans.

Urban space is, however, not only the physical environment where animals are situated. Spaces can be understood as being 'created by and through relationships'⁹ and consisting of experiences, memories and emotions related to that space, thereby extending physical space into imaginary space. Kelley defines urban imaginary as 'the collection of unique perceptions, experiences, interpretations, and images of cities (and the smaller spaces within them) that we all carry in our

minds'.¹⁰ These imaginary spaces are continuously intertwined with actual streets, parks, buildings, and squares as well as the people moving about and living in the city. As Kelley goes on to argue, 'in as much the composition of urban space hinges on the content of the imaginary, the imaginary is composed by individual perceptions and experiences of urban space'.¹¹ Cinar and Bender further suggest that cities are created by the collective imagination that operates through a plethora of collective urban experience that entails 'travels, interactions, and communicative practices of people within a city'.¹² Inevitably, these experiences and practices involve the different animals that cohabit the city with humans.

In addition to actual encounters with animals in city environments, multispecies urban spaces are co-produced and given shared meanings through human imaginings, memories, emotions, and experiences of interacting with animals. These can be represented in, for example, online stories and discussions on the actions of police horses and encounters with them. Encounters and interactions between humans and animals can themselves be approached from the viewpoint of relationality, placing emphasis on shared experiences and mutual becomings.¹³ Relating to animals and encountering them are often experienced emotionally and lead to the accumulation of memories. Memory is relational and, in the case of embodied interaction with animals, the memories themselves may be embodied and emotional.¹⁴ Remembering events experienced in the past evoke emotional responses to them, for instance when someone from the past – animal or human – is encountered again in the present. Sharing these memories contributes to the co-production of *multispecies urban imaginaries*, collections of experiences and interpretations of interactions between humans and animals in urban space.

A relational approach assumes that relationships are co-produced by animals and humans, and it takes into account animal agency and the way it shapes human action and relations between humans and animals through embodied interaction, albeit always within limits set by humans.¹⁵ The agency of animals can be understood to include their experiences, feelings, and actions, with which they convey to others (humans and animals) their feelings, emotions, and perceptions in ways that are characteristic to them as individuals.¹⁶ The consideration of the agency of police horses, for example, turns focus to the ways in which they inhabit the city, thereby becoming distinct actors in the urban landscape.¹⁷ In this paper, I analyze the agency of the police horses as it is perceived, interpreted, and discussed in the social media materials.

Relationality applies to different embodied practices of interacting with animals, including work and care, both of which are central in the lives of police horses. Porcher argues that animal work can be considered to be 'the primary medium of our ties and the place where animals are most evident and have the closest proximity to us'.¹⁸ The concept 'animal work' has been addressed in research as work done by, with or for animals.¹⁹ My focus here is on the work done by police horses and with them, but also for them, in terms of the caring for the horses. Animal work as a relational activity involves humans and animals co-constructing each other, in a relationship that 'is built on education, rules, communication, cooperation, and affection'.²⁰ Porcher suggests that animals demonstrate responsibility for their work: they may use power to modify work rules into ones that are more favorable to the successful realization of the work, thereby making it more interesting for them. Animals are thus not solely objects of human action but, by their own actions, 'destabilize, transgress or even resist our human orderings'.²¹

Similarly to work, care can be considered one of the most significant forms of interaction between humans and animals. Care is relational in the sense that it is co-produced by providers and recipients and involves reciprocal dependence, responsibility, and commitment.²² The double meaning of the word 'care' is significant: *caring for* refers to 'caring actions on behalf of another', whereas *caring about* includes 'emotional concern about the wellbeing of another',²³ including the 'relational and affective elements of being caring'.²⁴ Understanding care as *interspecies* requires that the mutuality

of care is recognized, as in, for example, animal assisted therapies. Following the relationality of interspecies care, its dialogical nature is explicitly pointed out in feminist care theory, emphasizing the need for ‘listening to animals, paying emotional attention, taking seriously – *caring about* – what they are telling us’.²⁵ In practice, this refers to ‘reading’ animals, their body language, and expressions, something that can be learned in shared experiences with them.²⁶ Communication is, however, never perfect – yet, as Donovan suggests, by means of analogy based on homology it is possible to imagine ‘how the animal is feeling based on how one would feel in a similar situation’.²⁷

There is an increasingly shared understanding that animals should be treated as individuals, that their subjective experiences should be appreciated, and that their care should be based on compassion and an aim at promoting their wellbeing.²⁸ Practices of care are at the heart of co-habiting and interacting with animals, often co-produced with the animals themselves in different spatial contexts.²⁹ These spaces and practices of care have varying functions and meanings depending on the time of day or year, thus creating patterns that are both temporal and spatial, but they are also shaped by how an animal is contextually understood. In interactions between humans and animals, the actions of the animal are interpreted by humans according to different conceptions of ‘animality’, that is, of animals as beings distinct from humans, and their situated understandings.³⁰ Thus, the needs of one animal differ from those of another, resulting in different care regimes, for instance, for a working police horse and a retired leisure horse.

The police horse in Finland

Places influence the ways of seeing animals and subsequent interactions with them.³¹ Police horses are constantly seen, heard, smelled, and touched in different parts of the city and therefore, the places of encountering them become part of the experience of interacting with them in urban space. In this section, I introduce the history and current situation of the police horse in Finland and the city of Helsinki.

As animals working for humans, horses are responsible for a major part of powering human needs in modern cities, especially in the 19th century.³² During this time, streets were occupied by riders, wagons, horse-drawn trams, omnibuses and fire engines as well as, toward the end of the century, mounted police. The Helsinki Mounted Police was the first one established in Finland, dating from 1882.³³ As modernity progressed, however, animals were actively excluded from city spaces, and the horse was replaced by motor vehicles and electricity.³⁴ In Finland, the major transformation from horse power to motorized movement took place soon after the Second World War, leading to a rapid decline in the number of work horses by the 1960s.

Since the decades of intensive urbanization in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s, further transformations have taken place that affect the relationships between horses and humans in cities, especially the increase in the use of horses for sport and leisure from the 1960s onwards. This has resulted in a new presence of horses especially in peri-urban areas, where horses are kept at riding schools and livery yards, easily accessible for owners and riders living in the city. The city itself has been left for motorized vehicles, and human–animal encounters in urban areas are now dominated by pets, pests, and wildlife such as seagulls, hedgehogs, and insects.

The horse, when brought into the city center for special events such as parades, is celebrated as something out of the ordinary. Occasional sightings of horses may evoke different responses: nostalgia for times gone by, recognition of a species familiar from leisure activities or popular culture, and wonder at an exceptional sight. This is the urban cultural landscape where the mounted police currently operate. During the 20th century there were mounted police units in several cities across Finland,³⁵ but since 2016, the only unit remains in Helsinki, with 10 police horses. Despite the unit’s small size, they make themselves visible in the city, patrolling daily in

the streets, parks and squares, as well as in major public events. For many inhabitants of the city, the police horses are a familiar sight.

Human–animal relations in social media

As an epistemological starting point for human–animal studies, relationality places emphasis on shared events and experiences with animals or cohabiting with them, as well as knowledge about them as individuals.³⁶ Methodologically, such research focuses on, for example, stories and recollections about experiences of interactions with animals, interpreted according to different cultural understanding of them.³⁷ The accounts of encounters and relationships with horses I have analyzed in this paper can be understood as stories of how they are experienced, interpreted, and remembered. Such an approach makes everyday experiences with the animal other visible in a different way than would static descriptions of the animal or the relationship.³⁸ The interpretations of animals and their subsequent expression can be understood as performances of animality that contribute to the production of human–animal relations. The performative approach is also useful for analyzing the ways in which sharing experiences of different human–animal encounters produces understandings of animal agency.³⁹

In analyzing the agency of animals there is always the methodological challenge of animal otherness. Research materials about animals are produced by humans and dependent on how the actions and agency of animals are contextually interpreted and described. It is possible, however, to analyze actual animal actions as they are represented in textual materials, something that has interestingly been discussed in animal history – as Saha points out, animals represented in historical writings did have agency ‘irrespective of how their actions were represented by human bystanders’.⁴⁰ In discussing animal agency in this paper, I refer to the ways it is interpreted and performed on social media.

This paper is based on an analysis of social media materials, that is, postings and comments, published on the Facebook page of the Helsinki Mounted Police (later HMP).⁴¹ The page is part of the ways in which the HMP connect themselves to the equestrian culture and the wider world of horse enthusiasts. They are also present on Instagram, and outside social media they have their own shows in horse fairs and other major equestrian events, and they acquire their horses from private horse owners via public calls. This connection is visible in the Facebook discussions which mainly revolve around horses, as the site is rarely used for official communications by the police force.

The paper belongs to the rather novel tradition of social media research.⁴² Animals and their relations with humans are depicted and represented in social media in different ways.⁴³ As Turnbull et al. write, ‘[a]ctual animals are digitized and circulated as independent ontological beings, experienced uniquely, reminding us how nonhuman bodies always co-fabricate urban space from the outset’.⁴⁴ These bodies are not, however, a homogenous group, no more than their real-life counterparts. Wildlife captured on camera for a fleeting moment remain unknown to the viewer, whereas individual animals sharing their lives with humans can be physically encountered by those who write about them, as is often the case with the followers of the HMP Facebook page. Sharing the stories and memories of the actions of these actual beings and encounters with them feed into the ways that urban space is imagined.⁴⁵ Thus, relational networks in social media are not isolated from other relationality in life but, instead, part of ‘a network of independent and overlapping social connections’.⁴⁶ Social media representations become embedded with real life relationality by providing another dimension to it, as part of a larger relational network.

The data analyzed consist of postings by the Helsinki Mounted Police, including videos and photos and comments on the postings by the followers from January 2014, when the page was first set up, to June 2016. By that time the material, with 132 postings and their comments, comprising over 50,000 words altogether, was fully saturated. From 2016 onwards, the Facebook site

increasingly repeats itself, which was observed by scanning the content up until 2020. All of the postings were extensively liked and commented on. The most popular postings received over a hundred comments and several thousand likes. Some of the commentators had contact with the horses offline, sometimes around the time of writing the comments, but often in the past. The material contains reports of everyday life and work with police horses in different parts of the city, supported by information about the work of the mounted police, care for the horses, and individual descriptions of them. Due to the interactive nature of Facebook data, I have especially looked for links between postings and their comments, as well as between comments.

The data was analyzed thematically, with themes such as horses at work, equine agency, memories of encountering police horses, and care for horses. In the material, the actions the horses are interpreted by the mounted police and the commentators. This may be expressed by giving voice to the horse in the form of direct speech, on the basis of interpreting their bodily actions as messages to humans or other horses, or by indirectly describing the horse's perceived thoughts, feelings, and intentions.⁴⁷ These interpretations are based on their authors' different understandings of the horses as animals.

The police horse at work

Interpreting animals in situations of interaction is a process where the animal's movements, actions, and personality as a whole are understood – and communicated – in a contextually specific way.⁴⁸ This relies on different conceptions of horses based on, for example, historical understandings of horses as working animals, contemporary ideas of horses as athletes, emotional attitudes toward horses as companions, and recent findings in modern ethology. All these come together as cultural conceptions of what a horse as an animal can be.

On the Facebook site, the police horses are consistently presented as individuals with names, life histories, and personalities, and their actions are interpreted by the police officers and commented on by the followers. Furthermore, all horses share the role of an employee, an 'equine police officer' with fixed (if variable) working hours, explicit duties, statutory rest breaks, annual leave spent at pasture, and even retirement. This is evident in how a new police horse is introduced:

Started his career as an official with annual leave and gets on well with his colleagues. (HMP, 7.7.2014)⁴⁹

Years later, an addition has been made to the original posting:

RETIRED IN A DISTINGUISHED WAY.

Porcher notes that animals differentiate between work and free time through spatial context and human action, for example the use and removal of harness.⁵⁰ In the data, the behavior of the police horses during their free time is interpreted in terms of understanding them as animals, to grasp empathetically what it is like to feel and act like a horse in that situation.⁵¹ A comment on a video of two horses playing in a field during their summer break reads:

Lovely to be able to be WILD once a year <3. (Comment)

Such comments perform the horses' animality, that is, construct interpretations of them as enjoying their life in a way typical for horses. Communicating the interpretations online reinforces conceptions of them as working animals, in specific structures and spaces produced by humans.

Koski and Bäcklund suggest that the desirable traits of an ideal dog 'reflect the characteristics of an ideal human being in modern society',⁵² for example sociability, flexibility, tolerance of

stress, and ability to co-operate and control emotions. In the data, however, the ideal police horse is depicted in almost opposite ways. Based on the expectations regarding their specific work they are performed as different from other horses, epitomizing the contextual nature of human–horse relationships. This is visible in how new horses are advertised for on the Facebook page:

Is there a shaggy gelding grazing behind your sauna, whose purpose you are not entirely sure of? Is there a very stubborn being at your yard, whose worldview is very much focussed around food and enjoyment? Is there a horse at your riding school who is too big and who spontaneously disappears in the middle of the lesson? Do you get a total stop in the dressage arena at competitions? It is from these premises that our best officers are made of at the moment. (HMP, 18.6.2015)

In the posting, the individuality and agency of police horses are acknowledged, to the extent of suggesting that a degree of exceptionality is expected. This is supported in the comments, for example by one commentator writing about a specific horse who had not been interested in dressage training but succeeded as a police horse. Such comments enhance the identity of the police horse as ‘different’, further emphasized by the mounted police themselves in their subsequent comment:

A horse that thrives with us has not necessarily done so elsewhere, and a horse that thrives with us has to be a well-functioning work horse. (Comment by HMP)

That the police horse is perceived as different from other horses echoes the identity of the mounted police unit within the police force. According to von Essen, officers in the mounted police used to be perceived as ‘colorful’ by the rest of the police force in the 1900s. This image has since diminished, however, their status is still relatively low in the police hierarchy.⁵³ The actions of the horses thus seem to be incorporated in performing a shared identity of ‘otherness’ in the mounted police. Similar interpretations of animal agency are visible in stories about working with police horses, as well as in the introductions of individual horses. The following description creates an image of a modest employee who knows his job:

Palaad is a very proud, big, 178 cm high palomino. Does not give way to anyone in the stable nor in traffic. Functions in any kind of situation, except if there is a tram coming round the corner. [. . .] Palaad gets on with all his work mates and is able to fall asleep even at the red light in the middle of the busiest rush hour. (HMP, 21.4.2014)

In the phrase ‘functions in any kind of situation’, the horse’s action is depicted as machine-like – emphasizing the animal’s reliability at work. Such action by an animal may actually refer to the animals’ willingness to cooperate with humans, something that Despret calls ‘secret agency’: ‘[w]hen animals do what they know is expected of them, everything begins to look like a machine that is functioning’.⁵⁴ The police horses are clearly depicted in this way.

In the data, the use of humor in descriptions of the horses is common. The horses are performed as greedy, lazy, seeking fun, and not interested in their duties – a picture that echoes the popular image of a useless employee. In a post about a pair of mounted police officers having a break while patrolling in the city on a summer day, there is a photo of a horse reaching for a muffin from the rider of the other horse. The situation is interpreted from the horse’s viewpoint, and the interpretation is supported and expanded in the comments:

Derkuni thinks firmly that part of the chocolate muffin belongs to him. (HMP, 6.9.2015)

Big-D was kind to offer help eating one of the muffins => <3 (Comment)

According to Redmalm, binary oppositions – such as human/animal – that are central to society can be challenged by playing with otherwise strict categorical boundaries – such as nature/culture.⁵⁵ The police horses are animals that are thoroughly culturized by the system in which they operate and live, but this does not negate their animality. The ‘horseness’ of the horses is performed in the postings, recounting their everyday antics in a lively way that is made possible by the use of humor to distance the reader from the apparent dissolving of the nature/culture boundary. These performances epitomize how boundary crossings can originate from the actions of animals in a cooperative relationship with humans.

Encounters and memories

The police horses are part of relational networks that cross the boundaries of the virtual and the real. In these networks, police horses are followed and admired as social media celebrities, but also as real animals that can be seen, touched, and interacted with outside social media. This is visible in the data in multiple ways: the commentators refer to encounters with the horses and their riders as they patrol in different parts of the city, seeing the horses in special public events, and knowing the horses personally, often from a time before becoming a police horse. Especially the latter phenomenon contributes to a network of encounters, relationships, and memories, where a single horse can have multiple identities developed in different relationships. The specially organized PR events are communicated online by the mounted police with videos and photographs, and memories of all these different encounters evoke emotions and comments in the readers. Events that may entail a risk of violence are seen in the comments as a risk for the horses, not for the humans involved. The presence of horses instead creates a feeling of security, sometimes supported by interpretations of how the horses feel:

I saw you last Saturday night in Mansku, in the middle of a rather noisy group of football fans. The horses are wonderfully calming, I didn't feel nervous anymore. It felt like the situation was ok after all, when the horses were so relaxed too. (Comment)

Memories of encountering police horses are located in specific urban spaces, illustrating the crossing of the paths of the police horses and the followers as part of everyday life, sometimes on a regular basis. This is visible in the following examples, the first one in a park and the second near the commentator's home:

I used to sell ice cream at Töölönlahti, and the police horses came there and poked their heads in the window, and I fed them ice cream wafers too. (Comment)

A familiar sight almost every day, as I live near the yard. A cozy clatter, especially in summer when the balcony door is open. Good that you are there :) (Comment)

When these encounters are a recurring event in the commentator's life, they form a temporal and spatial pattern that, when shared online, become part of how interaction with animals in urban space is collectively experienced and imagined, contributing to the co-production of multispecies urban imaginaries. The temporal aspect is further emphasized in comments that include memories from the time when the horse, before life in the mounted police unit, was known to the commentator. These memories reveal relations between the horses and humans from their past, something that is part of the animal's life history, not necessarily visible to other commentators:

Our lovely ex-vaulting pony Parsa <3 (Comment)

Derkun <3 Oh, the number of headcollars he managed to destroy when he was with us :-D (Comment)

I wouldn't recognize Palaad as the same horse who, as a young horse, carried his rider around like a wet rag! The rest of us prevented further bolting by blocking the road with our own mounts :) But I guess he was just trying out with an inexperienced rider. (Comment)

The comments about a shared past reveal yet another identity to the horse than the one performed by the mounted police in their Facebook postings. Knowing the horse from another time constructs a personality for the horse, based on memories of the horse's agency. The memories are often embodied and include material objects such as headcollars, used in the practices of care and handling of horses.⁵⁶ Sometimes, as in the last comment, the horse seems to have changed since the previous encounter, and the perceived change itself becomes the object of interest.

Sometimes memories about the same individual horse are discussed by more than one commentator, creating a relational network of remembering. There used to be a mounted police unit in the city of Turku, but this was closed down in 2016. In the comments below, a horse transferred from Turku to Helsinki is remembered by several people, from times before and during the horse's career in Turku, including cross-generational memories:

I rode Ivan's dam for a while after she came to Finland, before she was moved to her new owner :) (Comment)

Actually Ivan came in her dam's belly from Belarus (through Russia of course) and his breed is the Belarus horse, a native horse breed <3 I imported Sonata, Ivan's dam. (Comment)

My daughter occasionally exercised Ivan and also presented him at the young horses' festival before Ivan joined the police force 😊 (Comment)

Remember to give our old staff member a few lumps of sugar every once in a while! (Comment)

The comments shift the focus from what is known of the horse in the present to the horse's life history beyond their current life arrangements. The lifespan of horses is rather long, often 20–30 years, and it is common for a horse to change hands during this time, and keeping track of the horse's past is not always easy. Remembering is, however, not only about bringing the past to the present, instead it always involves creating something new in the new context.⁵⁷ The relational networks combine virtual encounters with memories of real, embodied relations between horses and humans from different times. In these encounters, the horse may not be exactly the same, but the discussions online help understand the transformations taken place in the role, identity, and routines of the horse.

Relational networks of interspecies care

At retirement, a new home is sought for the police horses. Sometimes they can return to their previous owner or another familiar person:

Last week Ateno and Maxwell retired. The picture is from the last shift of the gentlemen. Ateno 'Atte' returned to his previous owner as a hobby horse, after serving the police for about two years. Maxwell 'Max' moved to live as a hobby horse with a human with whom he had shared a big part of his life, and started his retirement directly at pasture. (HMP, 26.5.2015)

Here, the relational networks of horse enthusiasts surrounding the mounted police are mobilized to provide future care for the horse. The horses, acquired through these networks, are returned to them to be cared for. The networks thus act as a resource of care – in more ways than one, as I will show in this section.

There is a rather broad understanding in contemporary society that animals interacting with humans should be cared for as individuals and that their subjective experiences should be appreciated. Such an understanding of care is visible in the data, as caring for the horses is extended to the virtual network, epitomizing how care does not always have to be local but can reach over long distances.⁵⁸ The recipient of care living far away may be felt as emotionally proximate, and ‘caring for is not necessarily related to physical closeness’.⁵⁹ This is seen in the ways in which the Facebook followers care about the welfare of the police horses who are only virtually present. Care for the horses is contextually expressed as concern for or approval of the ways in which their needs are attended to in the daily practices and routines by the mounted police staff. For example, a posting about the horses being at pasture for their ‘summer holidays’ prompts several approving comments, emphasizing the benefit of grazing for horses.

For many commentators, the welfare of the horses seems to be an issue that they feel deeply about. This is evident in the following exchange between a commentator and the mounted police on how the horses cope with moving on the hard surfaces of city streets:

What kind of shoes do police horses have? You do have to move a lot on hard surfaces, and the tarmac can also be slippery under the shoe. (Comment)

The horses have normal shoes, but there is a pad between the sole and the shoe. They also have small studs in the summer, just because of the slipperiness. In the winter we put bigger studs on again. (Comment by HMP)

As in this example, the worry about the care for police horses is often explicitly situated in urban space. There are several examples in the data of horses feeding on lawns in parks, prompting comments that reveal an interest in the daily care practices. In a humorous posting by the mounted police, in an attempt to verbalize the viewpoint of the horses, their agency is performed in relation to horses’ species-specific need to be fed at short intervals. Here, questions of care are intertwined with the horses’ work routine in the city:

‘BREAK! finally. I thought this moment would never come as we left the yard at least a hundred hours ago’, Derkun mused in Hakaniemi. The council ‘flower vases’, still waiting for flowers to be planted, come handy as feed containers. We took our own hay with us from the home yard. (HMP, 1.5.2015)

Care in the mounted police is, however, not one-way. Sometimes the horses themselves are depicted as providers of care, not only in their daily patrolling but, for example, when they visit care homes for the elderly and donate blood to patients at the equine hospital. In the comments on the latter, the commentators relate to the horses’ experiences with worry, comparing them with those of humans in a similar situation.⁶⁰ The mounted police reply in a reassuring manner that the equine blood donors will be cared for:

I wonder if the horses feel dizzy after giving blood. Do they get a vitamin drink afterwards? (Comment)

Horses, too, can be a bit exhausted after donating blood. Therefore, they can have a couple of days off or do very light work. (Comment by HMP)

The exchange indicates to an embodied way of caring, where physical distance is diminished by the virtual proximity created by social media. Caring for the horses is shared between the mounted police (proximate) and the commentators (physically distant, virtually proximate), resulting in a complex relational network of interspecies care.

Sometimes the comments on the care practices are clearly critical, as if the commentators did not trust the mounted police to care for the horses properly. Care relations are not void of power hierarchies,⁶¹ and in human–animal relations this is often inevitable. Power relations in virtual networks of care for animals can, however, be more complex. In the case of police horses, there are sometimes visible tensions among the commentators in determining what for a horse constitutes proper care, and debating the right course of action can be fierce. This is epitomized in the example concerning an experiment on the use of alternative medicine for horses in the mounted police unit. In some comments in the posting about the experiment, the practice is not considered proper for the police force. In others, the criticism is perceived as rather harsh, and alternative medicine is contrasted with the recent abuse of horses, mentioned in the introduction to this paper:

[P]olice resources should really not be used for this rubbish, [the police] should spend the money on learning to sit properly on the horse, then there would probably be no aches and pains in the first place. (Comment)

Good that the horses receive gentle care, to compensate for the ‘stick therapy’. Still remember the senseless beating of the horses last Independence Day. Good horses and carers. Carry on as before. (Comment)

The quotes illustrate the dynamics in interspecies care practices. These are not limited to power relations between humans and horses, but extend to relations between humans, suggesting a network where performances of interspecies care are contested.⁶² Haraway reminds us that power relations between humans and animals in contextual practices are shaped by different understandings of animality and the human/animal boundary.⁶³ What is understood as care is up to debate, and controlling the debate provides access to discursive power and, potentially, to a right to define the police horse as an animal.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the representations of police horses in social media. The focus of the analysis has been on interpretations and performances of animality and animal agency, memories of past encounters and experiences as well as contested understandings regarding care. Sharing these interpretations, memories, and understandings online contributes to the construction of relational networks and, ultimately, collective imaginings of urban space. Social media provides a platform for this collective imagination, making possible the emerging networks in which experiences and memories of the sometimes unexpected crossings between the paths of humans and animals can be shared.

The collectively produced contextual performances of animality and animal agency can support or challenge cultural conceptions of animals living and interacting with humans. Through interpretations of the experiences of animals as similar to or different from those of humans, they can contribute to the reworkings and even transgressions of the conceptual human–animal boundary. This can also happen when specific groups of animals and humans are given shared identities, resulting, for example, in a performance of shared human–animal otherness, as in the case of the Helsinki Mounted Police and their horses. The memories of a shared past with the horses, however,

reveal other identities for them, often invisible in their current life – thus epitomizing how perceptions of animals are situated, experiential, and relationally constructed.

Police horses are animals that are thoroughly culturized by the system in which they operate and live. In such a setting, the agency of the animals impacts their work routines and regimes of care that are, to some extent, negotiated contextually between the carers and the animals.⁶⁴ In social media, internet users participate in this negotiation with their questions and comments. For them, care at a distance is supplemented by virtual proximity, in which they can express their worries about animal welfare and care practices, resulting in a complex relational network of interspecies care. Within the power dynamics in this network, performances of proper care are occasionally contested. Ultimately, however, the networks can be mobilized to care for animals in real life, thereby rendering the networks virtual-real resources of care.

As Fletcher and Platt note, '[o]ne of the principal tasks facing animal geographies is to better understand the social world of humans and animals as they exist side by side, co-producing spaces'.⁶⁵ By moving and interacting in urban space – imaginary and physical – animals interacting with humans become an important part of collective memory and thereby act as place-making agents in urban imaginaries. For many participants of the online discussions analyzed in this paper, the virtually shared experiences of encountering the horses in the city shape their own experiences and interpretations of urban space, also for those who have never actually encountered the horses themselves. Through this activity, the city becomes a collectively imagined and shared space for interspecies encounters and memories, contributing to the co-production of multispecies urban imaginaries. It is clear that urban space can never rely on humans only but instead, animals play a crucial part in how urban landscapes 'evolve out of the mutual relations between people and nonhuman agents'.⁶⁶ Developing the concept of multispecies urban imaginary widens the focus of understanding the multispecies nature of urban environments and includes animals in the experiences and perceptions of city space – where they belong. The concept depicts human–animal encounters and interaction in urban space as they are individually experienced, imagined and remembered, and collectively shared.

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Notes

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