Will Potter:

[reading] It's the first story we learn that comes before all others. Before we learn about God, money, or the Pledge of Allegiance, we learn about the farm. Before we even speak and learn language, we're shown pictures of animals and learn to make their noises. Farmed animals are our first stories, our first picture books, and our first toys. Before we can even walk or recite our ABCs, we learn about the little red barn.

Jerusha Klemperer:

But do you really know what happens on a farm? Have you seen where most farmed animals live, and how? Have you ever encountered a video made by animal rights activists of animals in pain and being mistreated? Did you scroll by? Did you watch? How did that video affect you, if at all?

On today's episode, we talk about bearing witness to the way animals are raised for us to eat and about the laws that have been passed in states around the country to keep us from doing so. Who benefits from us staying in the dark, and what are the larger repercussions of hiding these truths behind factory farm walls?

I'm Jerusha Klemperer, and this is What You're Eating, a project of FoodPrint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet, and people. We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices, as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy and the system changes you push for.

Will Potter:

My name is Will Potter. I'm an investigative journalist and author. My work has focused on attacks on social movements and the right to protest, especially labeling activist groups as terrorists. My new book is “Little Red Barns: Hiding the Truth, from Farm to Fable.” It really started off as a similar investigation into new censorship laws and then turned into a much bigger investigation of factory farming and authoritarianism.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I thought we could start by talking about what most people picture when they picture a farm. How does that differ from the reality of how most of our food, especially meat, is produced?

Will Potter:

I think we all know what a farm looks like. It's the little red barns with the happy cows and happy pigs and chickens and the happy little farmer. Then the reality is that over 99% of animals that are raised in animal agriculture today are raised on very different farms. They're industrial operations, factory farms. This changed, and the consequences for both animals, for consumers, for workers, for the farmers themselves has really happened outside of our awareness and outside of sight. We're just kept in this kind of trance state that we see in the advertisements of the little red barns.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Most farmed animals are raised on what we'd call factory farms. Each year, we raise about 10 billion cows, chickens, pigs, and more in this country, and it's impossible to do things on that scale in the way it was done when our great-grandparents were alive. Instead, most animals live out their lives in

warehouses in cramped and stressful conditions where they're not able to express their natural behaviors and are sometimes treated with extreme cruelty.

Will Potter:

When I was coming up, I started working in newspapers when I was 17, and it's really been my whole life in those different capacities. It's been in news and investigations and teaching journalists and working with different organizations. Someone who's been kind of a north star throughout that has been Upton Sinclair. I think most of your listeners probably know him as the guy who wrote “The Jungle,” maybe you were required to read it in high school or college, probably grossed out by it and are told, "Well, this is what fixed the food industry and made food safe." So part of this project for me was reconnecting with that legacy, and also going into his archives and other journalists' , searching for answers of what it means to bear witness now in this digital era where truth and fact are being questioned. Frankly, someone like Upton Sinclair would undoubtedly be labeled a terrorist by industry and the FBI for the type of work he was doing.

What I found was both kind of a confirmation of this as part of a long history of trying to hold these powerful industries to account, but also the problems have been repeating throughout history. Upton Sinclair had a huge impact with “The Jungle,” but he also came to view it as backfiring. The regulatory mechanisms that he helped introduce into our country were co-opted by industry. A term that is so common now that economists call it regulatory capture, the idea that the industry being regulated actually gets control of the reins, so to speak, it is driving the show, so it's both inspiring and caused a lot of questions and doubts about how do we break through this and truly expose what's happening with factory farms today?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Upton Sinclair did all of that with just words. You mentioned we're now in a different era and actually probably have passed through a few different eras since then of what we can show beyond words, in terms of photography, video. You said, "To truly see injustice, we need more than visual imagery. Our sight has to be informed with a broader understanding of context, history, and the individual." And then how do we process what we've seen? How do we process that context, history, and what do we do with the knowledge that we have?

Will Potter:

This is really the heart of the challenge of this book and why it kind of consumed me for a decade are these changing thoughts about what it means to witness and what it means to see at a time when our sight is constantly questioned, and I arrived at that statement that you mentioned. There are a few different pathways. But one of them, it was thinking about stepping back from this issue of factory farming and censorship and looking at other sets of videos. For instance, in the, what immediately comes to mind, I think, for everyone are the police video and citizen video of shooting unarmed, overwhelmingly Black and brown folks on the street and police violence.

A lot of similar questions are there that folks are wrestling with of, "How much do we need to see? At what point does exposing ourselves to scenes of cruelty and violence kind of have a numbing effect? At what point does it start to be debilitating and not a call to action or a motivation, but kind of a paralysis?" These are some of the questions that were really swirling around with me, and I arrived at the point of, "It's important to see." I have this faith as a journalist. We have to expose, we have to bring sunlight, all the metaphors we always talk about with journalism and information, but I don't think that's

enough because people are bringing their own history and context to process or to ignore what's being shown to them. I think we do need that broader historical context and nuance, and we also need, frankly, a degree of grace for how we allow ourselves to see and what that does to us personally by bearing witness.

Leah Garcès:

My name is Leah Garcès. I am the CEO of Mercy for Animals, and I've been an animal activist for the better part of 25 years, fighting for a better food system. Mercy for Animals, a mission and our ultimate vision is to end the exploitation of animals for food, but the way we see ourselves doing that is by ending factory farming and constructing a compassionate, just food system. We mostly do that through changing institutional policies. So that looks like changing corporate policies that use animals in the food supply or government policies that are legislating how farmed animals are treated in the state or country.

Mercy for Animals first started doing undercover investigations in 2001, believe it or not. Our very first one was conducted undercover in two Ohio egg factories, factory farms, and our investigators went in and out over a couple of weeks. They were filming what was happening, the reality of factory farming, and they were giving water to dehydrated hens, and they even rescued a few hens that looked like they weren't going to make it. That was a real template for us. This made waves in Ohio and rural Ohio, where this was recorded, and it was one of the first of its kind back then, nearly 25 years ago now.

We've since done over 100 investigations across multiple countries, and the core idea that remains core to Mercy for Animal's mission is that we have to shine a light on this darkness because the industry fears transparency and it only functions as well as it does because it is in secret. The more we can bring out that secrecy, the better. The power of that transparency is extremely effective. Video footage, it serves as this very powerful tool for exposing reality that can't be denied. It'll be interesting to see how AI impacts our ability there and how much we'll have to prove this is real versus AI. That is a challenge that we're thinking about.

But up to now, words were one thing. Words could be denied, words could be made up, but you couldn't make up a footage. You couldn't make up this suffering. You couldn't make up this cruelty that you could see that was so visceral. We were able to expose this systemic animal cruelty, even unsafe work conditions, even unsanitary food safety violations, and it's led to incredible impact, like facility... We closed a slaughterhouse in Brazil. Our footage was assisting in the Supreme Court, upholding Prop 12. Our footage has led to major supermarkets and restaurants changing their policy, under pressure from the public who were outraged that this was how animals were being treated in their supply chain. It's very effective. The footage doesn't just shock. I think this is important. It holds companies accountable. It doesn't let them get away. We are bearing witness to the suffering that they are allowing and making a profit out of, and we're exposing that. We're shining a light on that.

Will Potter:

There's been a series, more than a series, there's been kind of an onslaught of undercover investigations. Beginning around 2010 or so, this really started to gain steam from NGOs and nonprofit groups doing investigations, and they've exposed both really extreme acts of cruelty that have led to, in some cases, actual criminal prosecutions for the first time. That's included things like workers beating and sexually abusing animals, attacking animals with rebar pipes, punching and kicking, standing on their heads, suffocating them, this kind of gratuitous cruelty that we can talk about and unpack what's happening.

But I would argue, even more important than that is that these investigations have shown standard industry practices, and that's what's really freaked out Big Ag the most is they're showing things like battery cages, which are the dominant way of raising chickens for eggs. I think most people have some idea of these kind of stacks of cages that birds get trapped in the wire, they get pushed down into the waste pits, they're not able to move or turn around. Lesser known are things that are standard industry practices with pigs, like gestation crates, which keep the mother sows unable to move, even itch themselves or scratch an itch or to nurse their young. And then there's kind of the feedlots and waste lagoons.

In “Little Red Barns,” I go much more in depth into the hidden environmental impact. All of these have been incredibly threatening or perceived as threatening to the industry because they're showing what happens every single day out of sight and really hidden behind that veneer of the little red barn.

Leah Garcès:

MFA did its first undercover investigation in 2001, and so we had a good run. We had a decade run really where no one figured out what we should do.

Jerusha Klemperer:

These videos are not just perceived as threatening to industry. They are an actual threat in that they forced the industry to change.

Leah Garcès:

Taking California as a great example, we have Prop 2. And then 10 years later, we had Prop 12. Prop 2, it was a ballot initiative requiring simply that farmed animals had enough space to turn around and flap their wings and do basic movement, which is insane that we have to ask for that. We released two undercover investigations from large egg farms in California, and this helped pass Prop 2. Ten years later, we similarly were working on the ground to get Prop 12 passed. Again, voters voted in favor of it, and this established that there would be no cages and crates or the sale of products from cages and crates essentially for all farmed animals. We did undercover investigations again in the lead up to that which helped bring the images to the voters so that when they were going, they were thinking, "This is what we're voting to change." Now, the pork industry challenged Prop 12 all the way up to the Supreme Court, which was upheld in May of '23.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You said things picked up steam in 2010, but I wondered if you could start with 2008 and what happened with... I think it's MowMar Farms, and how that ushered in an era of transparency or at least the beginning of a push for transparency.

Will Potter:

MowMar was a real turning point that I found in my research. This was an investigation where PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, had a couple of investigators with pinhole cameras, and they were recording workers, just kind of unbelievable cruelty. I've seen a lot of this stuff, and this stood out even among that. I don't want to just bombard listeners with the kind of gruesome details, but the significance of that is it made global headlines. It led to thousands of people all over the world reaching out to MowMar.

What I found behind the scenes is this is a turning point in the industry where the industry started shifting the narrative, and they really huddled. They brought the Pork Producers Council, the MowMar owners, all these different folks. Publicly, they decided to say things like, "Oh, we had no idea this was happening. Of course, we value animal welfare. We love our animals more than the consumers do because we care for them every day." These kind of standard talking points. But behind the scenes, they're playing the counterattack, and the counterattack was to criminalize video and make it illegal and to label it terrorism to record that type of egregious footage. They really set out to, after MowMar, change the conversation. It was no longer the animals being beaten who are the victims. It's the farmers who were exposed.

Jerusha Klemperer:

In what way would an act of recording make farmers victims?

Will Potter:

Well, I can say, from the industry's perspective, some of the statements they've made, they've made statements in the New York Times, saying that these undercover videos are unfair because it's much like someone watching a video of open heart surgery for the first time was their comparison, saying that everyday consumers just don't get it, they don't know the realities of farming, they don't know the challenges and what it's like, and it unfairly paints them in a negative way from people that are kind of city slickers and don't understand what they're seeing. They've also cited the public backlash. Companies cutting ties with these producers, individual consumers, like I mentioned, sending emails and phone calls and protests, all of this is characterized as not lawful response from an outraged consumer base, but as actual acts of terrorism. That language, I think, is especially important that we highlight because they're not pointing to anything that is anything like what most people would consider terrorism at all.

It's video, it's protest, it's phone calls, it's being held to account in the kind of public sphere, but they're characterizing this as equivalent to a national security threat that they're the victim of. Therefore, if you believe that framing, then you need the FBI, you need DHS, you need big lawyers, you need everyone to swoop in, government subsidy to come to the rescue of these farmers being victimized. So it really inverted the whole conversation. It was, frankly, a quite brilliant move because, all of a sudden, we're talking much less about what happens to animals and we're talking about animal activists and we're talking about farmers and how much they're suffering.

Jerusha Klemperer:

It's interesting too, because it was... part of their argument was, "Well, you can't shut down this farm or this meat packing facility or whatever because we need this food. You need this food. We need to feed America," and I thought, "Oh, this is the beginning of some of those things we saw during COVID, the kind of exceptionalism that gets applied to food and ag businesses," like, "We couldn't possibly shut down the meat packing facilities during this extremely dangerous public health crisis because we need to feed the world."

Will Potter:

That's such an important point because there is this narrative of the deck is stacked against them, the industry is tightly regulated, and they have inspectors at every turn. A lot of it is just this kind of mythology. The reality is this is an industry that overwhelmingly operates without checks and balances on their operations. They describe themselves, like you said, as so essential. They can't be shut down.

There's actually cases where that happened, of egregious things were exposed, and then members of Congress intervened to reopen slaughterhouses that were putting public safety at risk. So this language is employed to skirt scrutiny.

One of the biggest, I think, pieces of misinformation is around animal welfare. We all have heard of the Animal Welfare Act. Agriculture talks about how tightly they're regulated. What's left out of this is that the Animal Welfare Act, by law, specifically defines animals as not including animals both in laboratory research and on farms. Right out of the gate, the overwhelming majority of the animals that are raised and used and abused or under the control of humans in these settings are exempted from any scrutiny because the industry said so. Then at the state level, the industry has gone even further and they've fought for what are state law exemptions on whatever they call customary practices. The industry gets to define that. If Big Ag says it's customary to tail dock piglets, chop off their tails without anesthesia, debeak, cut off beaks without anesthesia, the list goes on, as long as the industry says, "Well, this is how we normally do it," by law, it can't be considered cruelty.

There are these competing narratives of, "Well, we're the victim of government regulation and all these things." And then at the same time, the whole system is designed to exempt farms from oversight.

Tyler Lobdell:

My name's Tyler Lobdell. I am a senior staff attorney with an organization called Food and Water Watch, and we are a nationwide environmental public interest organization. I specifically focus on factory farming or industrial animal agriculture and the public health, environmental, animal welfare, and, frankly, just societal and market consequences of that system. My study of the law really focused on environmental and animal law and where those things overlap and this negative synergistic effect where we have these certain industries or certain sectors of our society and economies that really have... Their foundations are based on harming animals and humans and the environment all at the same time. It's kind of embedded in their business model. I really come at these issues from a systems perspective and looking at it from why have we ended up with such a destructive, frankly, irrational system that really only works for one very small segment of people, and that is the corporate money bag holders, the folks that get to walk away with all the cash and the rest of us are sort of left with a fallout. How do you end up with a system like that?

In my advocacy at Food and Water Watch, we work very hard to be strategic and have our work both help people in frontline communities, but also shed light on or change the status quo around why these systems are in place in the first place. Because factory farming is not efficient, it's not humane, it's not good in really any respect, but we have had policies in place that have really encouraged the worst actors and have rewarded them pretty heavily. It's fascinating to do the kind of work I do and have exposure to the reality of factory farming, and then to go to a grocery store and to see the way products are marketed and to see how obvious it is that these companies want consumers to think of their products as something very different than they are.

You will see animals on pasture, you will see animals sometimes literally with a smile on their face, and the reality just could not be more different. The reality of it is that the way animals are raised and slaughtered in this country is unpalatable for consumers. Instead of recognizing that and changing how products are made, these industries have just decided secrecy, and keeping consumers in the dark is their game plan. Standard operating procedures in the factory farm industry are very difficult to see, are very difficult to watch for most to any human being.

This is one of the main reasons why the factory farm industry has spent so much effort undermining undercover investigations or discrediting organizations that do bring this reality to light because it is a discrepancy that, one, they don't want brought into the light of day, but, two, it really underscores their stranglehold over regulation and over decision makers in our society, because the only reason they get this sort of level of secrecy and this level of insulation is because of their level of control. They don't like their power structure to be exposed because that also sort of brings up really important questions about how we've structured our society and how our food systems works.

Jerusha Klemperer:

From this desire for secrecy and keeping consumers in the dark, as well as this new defensive crouch of the farmer as a victim, you get a spate of laws that have come to be known as ag-gag laws.

Will Potter:

Ag-gag refers to ag as an agriculture and gag as in “to silence.” That was a term coined by Mark Bittman, the food writer at the New York Times, as he was describing these new, at the time, state bills that were being introduced and debated that were not going after the cruelty that was being exposed. They were explicitly criminalizing investigators, whistleblowers, and journalists who exposed those things.

At first, it was about specifically outlawing the video, and that led to a real big pushback in the press and by consumers, as you might imagine. And then it started shifting and they said, "Well, okay, we're just going to go after, in some states, people who misrepresent themselves on their job application, like an investigator might not reveal that they work for Mercy for Animals, for instance, and trying to turn that into prison time into a punishable offense." They've also done things like include mandatory reporting requirements, which is especially sneaky because they're arguing, "Well, we had no idea this was happening on our farm. If someone saw it, they should have to turn that over and notify authorities within 24 hours." The reality is the people most likely to see this stuff are overwhelmingly immigrants, not native English speakers. They don't have access to attorneys. More broadly, the purpose of an investigation is to see patterns. In short, ag-gag was about shutting down those investigations and shutting down those patterns of revelation, and it was quite successful. It passed in about 10 states.

Now, flash forward, there's been successful constitutional challenges, but these ag-gag laws have also spread globally to Canada and Australia, and they're being discussed throughout Europe.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can you talk a little bit about the good old boy network that created these bills? Why did they all arise at once, a bunch at once, and then kind of a domino from there? Why do they all sound the same? The language is the same, the titles are the same, in some cases, all around the world.

Will Potter:

That's something that I described in “Little Red Barns,” kind of the hunt for an answer to that because, on the one hand, either all of these folks are just equally brilliant and phrasing legislation the same way down to the exact wording, copied and pasted, or there's something else happening. What I found was both the good old boy network, which people I think are aware of in terms of old money, old politics that are kind of pulling the strings and especially state legislation, it's both this relationship between industry and lawmakers and how they work secretly behind the scenes, and sometimes not so secretly.

There are many instances I talk about in the book of industry actually sitting down with lawmakers and writing these ag-gag bills to protect their profits, handing it off to lawmakers who are then sometimes quite open in the legislative hearings, talking and saying, "Oh, it's good to see all of our buddies here. It's good to see all of our friends. We are here in the ag committee to shut down these terrorist animal rights, vegan hippies." They throw every pejorative you could imagine, to say, "Well, those are these weirdos. We're here to protect our friends."

But there's other more insidious ways too. There's secretive groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council that is really a pay-to-play system. Corporations pay tens of thousands of dollars to be part of this lawmaker network where they get to draft model bills that are to their interest. And then they're introduced all over the country with voters having no idea that this was literally written by corporations. So there's a few different pathways here, but I think the important thing to remember is this wasn't just a strange coincidence. They huddled very quickly, and I should say they huddled across industry. As someone who's reported on social movements so much, the infighting is so unbelievable within protest movements. When it comes to industry, there's not a lot of that. The pig industry was saying, "Oh, if this happens to the chicken industry, we're going to be next." So you had all of these groups, not just groups, but entire major industries, coming together and saying, "We got to shut these investigators and journalists down."

Leah Garcès:

We were in the courts with other organizations fighting to strike those down. Utah's ag-gag law was struck down as unconstitutional. There were challenges that were put. Iowa's was struck down as unconstitutional. What it did really was expose how hard they were trying to hide something so unfathomable, something so horrific that they were desperate to hide. The public and the media were being told, "We're going to make it illegal to have transparency in our food system," and the media did not like that. The media did not like being told, "If you get this footage dropped off at your door, you can't show it." They didn't like that. So we had the media on our side, we had the public on our side. Really, it helped us at least in getting the public and the media to say, "They're really hiding something here."

It did make it so that we had to spend more money in courts, we had to spend more time in courts, and we had to think and hire lawyers to figure out, "How do we avoid jail? How do we make sure that our undercover investigators are protected?" That added a whole line of work in our movement that still exists today, protecting the freedom of speech, the freedom of media, the freedom to see what is going on in our supply chain. We have to now fight for that. We have to pay for that through lawyers and courts.

Tyler Lobdell:

I think the key distinction and where a lot of the litigation fault lines have landed is whether or not states are criminalizing speech in some way, so this goes to that constitutional conversation. There's a big difference when a law says, "You can't access a property," versus, "You can't conduct speech near that property." One of the places that states have really evolved is to lean into that conduct side of things to get themselves out of the speech box because our constitution doesn't protect conduct in the way that it protects speech. Speech is thought of pretty broadly under our Constitution, which is great. Recording with a camera is considered speech because you can't go communicate a message without documenting information and gathering evidence. It's all kind of wrapped up together into this act of speech. So I think that's one of the key features of why these laws are illegal, because they... and the difficult position

that states find themselves in because their intent is to criminalize speech, and so they are sort of desperately finding ways to do that without doing that, if that makes sense.

For folks that were to dig into this deep, you would find there are several states with ag-gag laws that have never been challenged. This may be the reason why, that you have this speech, conduct divide. For anybody listening who's working in this space, I think that the drone conversation is sort of the next frontier. From my perspective, several states have pretty patently unconstitutional laws about drones right now. Another big part of this is, and it's a little bit in the clouds, this really is about our constitutional rights, which are under attack in shocking ways right now, unrelated to this. But our ability to engage in news gathering and our ability to call out power, speak truth to power, is really a central feature of what makes, I think, our society tick, and this is a really good example of where power is eroding that really significantly and blatantly.

No matter how they want to go about it, the idea that just because factory farm owners have more money and have this bludgeon of sort of policy control, that that means that the rest of us just have to sit down, shut up, and take whatever they'll put on the grocery shelves for us is just not acceptable. This really is about some really fundamental core values that a society should care about that get really boring and in the weeds once we're like, "Which level of scrutiny under the First Amendment should apply?" That's not really the point. The point is that we, as a society, should understand how corporations are treating us and our planet and the animals that we rely on.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I'm interested in this way in which ag-gag laws really try to pit farmers and animal welfare advocates against each other and make it a very adversarial relationship. I notice in the way that you talk about it, you don't talk about like, "This farmer did this." It's this company and these vast tracts where there's no one around or whatever. These are company-run endeavors.

Leah Garcès:

It's been an evolution for Mercy for Animals because we used to prosecute workers and farmers. We used to bring that footage to the police. We used to bring them to court. About 10 years ago, we realized what a mistake that was in the sense that that was giving companies a scapegoat. It was allowing them to just say, "Oh, it's just one bad apple. We're not like that. That's just one crazy person, one cruel person," and that wasn't our intention. It was before we understood that workers and farmers are also cogs in the machine, that they're just like animals, they're trapped.

2014 was when I went through that personal evolution, meeting a chicken factory farmer myself, Craig Watts, who really opened my eyes to how he was trapped in this cycle of debt and struggle. He allowed me openly in North Carolina to film in his farm, and he said, "I have no control over the space, over the breed. I'm not allowed to open the windows. I'm not allowed to change the air temperature. I am a chicken babysitter. I signed up to this thinking I could make money and feed my family. Just like you have a job to make money and feed your family, so did I. I didn't know it was this. I had no idea, and now it's too late because I'm a million dollars in debt. I'll lose everything."

This was an evolution for our movement to understand that these farmers and the workers in slaughterhouses were also victims of an oppressive system and that we had unlikely allies in these folks. We began to change who we really held responsible at any time because the problem is systemic, and we want to show this is a systemic issue and that the one who holds the kind of controls here are the

corporations. We have to hold them again and again and again responsible for the way animals are raised, and we have to force their accountability, we have to force their responsibility.

It's critical that we are allies with the farmers and the workers in a system that oppresses everyone in it and that corporations, like Costco or McDonald's or Ahold or any of these companies, they're the ones we have to hold responsible.

Mike Callicrate:

Yeah, the videos that came out early on, like the Craig Watts videos that Leah Garcès did, didn't surprise me at all. I realized I know how much pressure these people are under, that are producing for these companies. That was not at all a surprise to me.

I'm Mike Callicrate. I own a company called Ranch Foods Direct. We've been around 25 years. It was about 25 years ago, 26 years ago, that I didn't want to be a part of the industrial model of food production where producers were a cost to be reduced, and we're being forced to externalize a lot of costs on the environment, at the expense of animal welfare, at the expense of our communities. So I decided to create a new pathway to the market for myself called Ranch Foods Direct, which sells directly to the consumer as much as possible.

But what I see in this industrial factory model of farming where the farmer is really under pressure is I sort of see the transfer of anger, and it's taken out on the animal. In particular, these corporately owned farms like the Smithfield farms... There were some Tyson farms in Wyoming that I saw video on them, where they were abusing the animals. I just saw that as a human being being mistreated and not being paid a living wage whose life was unlivable, taking out that anger on that animal. It was just a transfer of emotion and anger. This is top-down stuff, and, boy, these companies want to portray themselves as whatever the word might be of the day, whether it's sustainable, whether it's regenerative. Even McDonald's is claiming they're going to support regenerative agriculture. Cargill, Whole Foods, they all want to say they're supporting regenerative agriculture. Meanwhile, they don't buy from the truly regenerative producers because they're higher priced. Yeah, I'm just not a bit surprised at any of the videos that have come out, and I kind of wish more of them could come out.

I got out of CSU with an animal science degree in 1975, and I told people, "Do not confuse that animal science degree with animal husbandry." It took animal science to put a pig in a gestation crate. It took animal science to put a hand in a battery cage. It took animal science to put an animal, a beef animal, in a hundred thousand head feed lot. That is not animal husbandry. That's animal science. When I speak to Temple Grandin's class in Fort Collins at Colorado State University, I would start out, "I'm Mike Callicrate. I graduated from this university in 1975, and I want my money back." Of course, that gets their attention.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I asked Callicrate, who welcomes visitors and isn't afraid of them taking pictures, what a visitor to his cattle farm would see when they got there.

Mike Callicrate:

Well, let's say you're driving down Highway 36 and you see the Callicrate Cattle Company sign and you follow the directions and you drive in. You're going to sign in at our office and you're going to be welcome to look at everything. If we happen to be slaughtering that day, you're going to be able to go out to the slaughter facility, which is a purpose-built slaughter facility on our farm where the animals never get on a truck. They walk into slaughter, so there's no stressful ride. I've got a friend, Jon Baker, in

Iowa that has to put five to 600 miles on his finished cattle to get him to a meat packer. So none of that... and of course that's going to be a better product to eat too because it's so much reduced stress, but you're going to see workers that are highly skilled that can do everything on a kill floor.

So it's not just one thing all day long to kill 6,000 cattle at an IVP plant. Say in Garden City, Kansas, they're going to kill maybe 15, 20 head of cattle today, or they might be killing 30 hogs on a given day. The animals don't vocalize. They don't really make any noise. They're handled humanely. They're moved humanely. It's slow and easy. It takes us about 20 minutes to process one beef animal. You can go into the kill floor and you'll see the box, the chute that the animal will enter, we'll euthanize it and it will be bled and hung. Within 20 minutes, that carcass is going to be hanging in a cooler. When that cooler is full and ready, we'll back the semi-trailer up and we will ship the carcasses, not the live animal. We'll ship the carcass to the cut plant in Colorado Springs where that carcass then will be broken down with the parts and the pieces that go into our retail stores and into our wholesale markets.

But you're going to see just a laid back, easy-going kind of an operation. It's clean, it's well-kept, and you're going to see that that slaughter waste is... Not to waste anything, but our slaughter waste goes right into the manure pile where it's composted. Eventually, after that process, that manure then is spread on our own land, on our crop land and on our pasture land. Adding the slaughter waste to that really improves the nutrient content, and that ends up back on the land. So we've got this circular kind of an economy, circular kind of a model that is really from soil to soil.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Once ag-gag laws were passed, people were in fact arrested for taking photographs and making videos.

Will Potter:

Amy Meyer is an animal rights activist who was in Utah at the time, and Utah was one of the first states to pass an ag-gag law. When it passed and there was a lot of pushback, you had supporters saying, "Don't worry, this is just about the extremists, the radicals. This isn't going against everyday people." Specifically, in the record of the bill being debated saying, "We're not going to go after people filming from the street." Amy Meyer heard that you could see animals from the street at a slaughterhouse being pushed by heavy equipment.

AUDIO:

Oh, my God.

He's a cow-

He's alive.

... on that bulldozer.

Yes, he's alive?

He's alive.

Thank God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God.

Will Potter:

She knew from being an animal rights activist that similar exposure led to the largest meat recall in history. Cows that are too sick to walk, that are called downers by the industry because they're so

common, are not supposed to enter the food supply. That's a risk, as I hope people understand. But the industry wants to get every last dollar they can, so this happens quite a bit. Anyway, Amy went down there. She filmed from the street. She was cited for this under the ag-gag law. She reached out to me, and we talked about it. I tried very hard to get major media outlets to let them cover this. Eventually, I published it on my own site. Within about 48 hours, it created such an uproar that the Draper City prosecutor's office agreed to drop all the charges.

The reason this is significant, well, for a few reasons. One, it showed that this is being framed as going after these extremists, but we all have the tools in our pocket to be an Upton Sinclair today. We have very high tech... Compared to when I was coming up in newspapers, we have a whole distribution system, publishing platform, high-resolution cameras, everything right in our pocket. Any one of us could be the one who sees something and exposes it. That means any one of us is at risk. It also means that when we hear this rhetoric of, "You have nothing to worry about," we should be really alarmed because they're trying to make us kind of acquiesce and be lulled into thinking that this isn't putting our basic civil rights and press freedoms at risk.

Jerusha Klemperer:

As it turns out, ag-gag laws were not the first ones designed to stop animal rights activists from telling the public what happens on farms.

Will Potter:

This has been the heart of my work for quite some time, since before September 11th. But after 9/11, all of that accelerated. The summary of, I guess, my first book, Green is the New Red and a lot of my work is that animal rights and environmental activists who have never harmed a human being became classified by the FBI as the number one domestic terrorism threat. There was a whole host of efforts that were used to criminalize and shut down protest, but one of them that I think was one of the most dangerous was a federal law called the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. This was rushed through Congress with only a handful of lawmakers in the room. I was the only opposition witness to testify in a congressional hearing against it.

As I talk about in “Little Red Barns,” I tried to raise just basic civil liberties and press freedom arguments and say, "Regardless of how you think about different protest tactics, this is putting civil disobedience on par with terrorism. It's putting journalism at risk, and specifically undercover investigators, nonviolent, peaceful activists who are just documenting." I was ridiculed for it. The supporters hit back pretty hard. We got some heated back and forth, but that law passed. What's important about that Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act is not that it didn't lead to these mass roundups of activists across the country. It had what lawyers call a chilling effect that it really made people afraid of being prosecuted as a terrorist. I would argue that that fear is the most dangerous part of the ag-gag efforts and all of these other authoritarian campaigns is trying to make people afraid to use their rights. That's really at the heart of all of this.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Yeah. I was interested to hear that you kind of referred to a larger corporate strategy to have law enforcement treat all activism or progressive activism as terrorism.

Will Potter:

It's very much been corporate-led. Going back to the 1980s, this term of ecoterrorism was invented by industry as a PR campaign, and they used their connections to the FBI and what later became Homeland Security and similar agencies to push that agenda. This has all been led by the corporations who have money to make off of hiding in this darkness and really obscuring oversight. What's really troubling about that is that these are the government agencies that we're told or we expect to be prioritizing public safety. This money and taxpayer money that we think is going towards, I don't know, things like attacks in an airport or hijackings or mass shootings, God forbid we have any attention on that, are instead being used to protect corporate interest. This isn't just a hypothetical civil liberties argument.

In “Little Red Barns,” I go quite in depth into the paper trail, FBI agents approaching activists for vegan potlucks, for protests, anti-circus protests. Just the most kind of benign activity is being sucked up in this drag net. I think regardless of how folks feel about animal rights activists or vegans or whatever, that really puts all of our safety at risk. To the point, and this is one of the most damning things I found in my research, the FBI was told that repeatedly. They were told by the Justice Department and by Congress and even by groups like West Point military academy that, "If you keep focusing on nonviolent animal and environmental activists, it's going to allow the rise of white supremacists, far-right militias, and straight up neo-Nazi groups." These agencies refuse to change course, and that's exactly what happened. I would argue that the FBI's priorities on this, on farms, is directly complicit with January 6th. What we see right now is an outright fascist and white supremacist movement that's growing in the States.

Jerusha Klemperer:

There have been some really significant and powerful wins in fighting ag-gag legislation that's been proposed. So yes, it passed in Utah, and Amy Meyer felt the consequences of that, but it also failed quite mightily in a few places. I was really interested in your story about Tennessee.

Will Potter:

The inspiring thing about that to me was seeing the coalitions that emerged to fight back. Now, to use a farm analogy, social movements can be really siloed and really fragmented. In part, you get pulled into your own set of issues and passion and dedication, but the result of that is sometimes factory farms or certainly animal rights more broadly is seen off to the side, kind of removed from broader social struggles and progressive struggles. What was inspiring for me to see was groups, everybody from Western Watersheds Project, food safety groups, environmental labor, Teamsters, AFL-CIO, women's rights groups, all coming together with the same message that, "Well, if we let them silence and really truly shoot the messenger for this one industry, they're going to come after everybody else." It's already happening. We've seen that happen.

One of really the kind of most rewarding parts of that to me was seeing all the press freedom groups and journalism organizations get on board and recognize, "Okay, this is being described as these radical activists, but what they're doing is professional and they're conducting themselves journalistically, even though they're not journalists." This is important for the public discussion, public safety, public benefit, and our democracy. So seeing all of those groups huddle in contrast to the pork and chicken and beef industry was a really inspirational counterbalance because it's like, "Okay, there is a lot of money and power stacked against us, but look who's showing up on our side and look how much we actually have in common." By pulling back from the framework from animal rights activists, "Oh, we're vegans, we're trying to get rid of all factory farms," and instead just widening it a little bit to let these other groups into the fold was really cool to see.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Is there concern for you all as you think about this really powerful tool that you've had in your tool belt for these past 10, 20 years? Are we in danger of these tools losing their power?

Leah Garcès:

We are definitely in danger. I see two sides of the same coin. One is what I would qualify as compassion fatigue. We have people who say to us, "I can't look at that. I care. I can't look at it. I can't look. There's so many horrible things out there, I can't see another horrible thing." So we can't get past the threshold because people are saturated with horrific imagery and disturbing imagery. The second is the other side of that coin, which it's not shocking to people. When you can open up your phone and see a murder that happened that day that's all over the news, when my child, my 17-year-old, can open up his phone and see that without trying, it's very difficult to get the shock of how animals are treated across. It's very hard.

The other part is just how the algorithms change, how the media algorithms changed, how the social media algorithm has changed. We used to be able... through organic looks, like views, at our footage, it would get driven up. It's all monetized now. It's pay-to-play, and the whole system is how much can you pay is how much you get in front of people. As a charity, we can't compete with Tyson. It's very hard. The other thing is the algorithms tend to not favor the shocking things in some ways. They like the cute things and the silly things, the meaningless things, and it makes it harder to get a serious story across. So we've had to really think about how to evolve our strategy. And I will say, just because the algorithm and the media isn't picking it up doesn't mean people don't care. People are still people, and they still think torturing animals is wrong. That hasn't changed. We're just fighting to get the message in a very, very busy message world.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You mentioned how the FBI, for a long time now, has been focusing its efforts on these domestic terrorists who are not the people shooting up schools or any of these other horrors that we're seeing, but instead nonviolent animal rights activists taking videos. At the same time that they've been sleeping at the wheel while this kind of far-right extremism has grown, there's also, within that far-right extremism, a connection to animals and animal rights or the opposite of that.

Will Potter:

I struggled with this for so many years in “Little Red Barns” because it felt both like it was right in front of me and I also wasn't really seeing it. I say that with humility as someone who's done the farm investigations, my scholarship has been focused on fascism historically, and so to kind of miss this made me feel pretty silly and dumb. It's not that I missed it, but I didn't understand the gravity of the connection. Broad strokes, I'll say that fascists throughout history, and not just fascists, but authoritarians, dictators, whatever language you want to use, have always used the language and descriptions of animals to push their violence. When human beings are labeled as animals, it's generally a signal for the most egregious, unrestricted, unrestrained state violence to take place. We're talking like government pogroms, rounding people up, concentration camps. So there's both this, the dehumanizing of people that I think animal activists understand the danger.

We see that theoretical connection, but it's actually even more direct than that. I would argue that this story of the Little Red Barn dotting the countryside, the little farmer, it's the exact same story that fascist

groups have used for a couple hundred years to invoke this mythological past. That's what fascism is more than anything. It's saying, "We need to return to these glory days, this mythological era that the immigrants and the minorities and the journalists and the protesters have gotten us away from," and that imagery is really rooted in this idyllic countryside. We're seeing the rise of far-right groups recruiting at farmers' markets. I would argue, this whole Make America Healthy Again, it's both well-intentioned and there's validity to these concerns, but it's being co-opted into this homesteader, anti-science narrative.

We're seeing it with the rise of the carnivore diet and how young men, in particular, are a demographic that's being hit with this message that meat is strength, meat is masculinity. The tradwife narrative is coming up. It just gets really messy because there are all these pieces, and I think what is uniting them is that shared mythological narrative of this era that's been lost. We're Making America Great Again, we're returning to traditional values, like eating raw meat and raw milk and putting beef tallow on our face for skin and all this kind of nonsense. It's all wrapped in this same narrative.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You talked about the need to rewrite the hyperstory of the farm, and you're a storytelling expert, a professor of storytelling. That need is there for sure. How do we do that? The counter-narrative is very, very strong.

Will Potter:

And it's very appealing when people are afraid. I think we need to remember that. The story is so appealing because we have economic insecurity, we're worried about these global crises, the state of the country. There are a lot of changes happening that people either don't fully understand or make them uncomfortable. So that fear is being manipulated to push this simplified and... Frankly, it's a misinformation campaign. What I would argue, it's really tough. I thought for a lot of years that the way you respond to those false stories told by people in power to deceive and manipulate fear is by exposing why they're wrong. That's what I've done as a journalist. You try to document, show the receipts, point out the inconsistency, raise questions.

Increasingly through this project, I came to believe that it's not enough. I don't think the people that are signing up for the carnivore diet and the Make America Healthy Again, it's not about the facts and the science. It's about what feels right in a scary time. To me, that makes me think that writing a new hyperstory is really trying to not just debunk the misinformation, and there's so much of it right now in this administration in particular, but to lift up a different vision. It's not enough to tell people they're wrong or they're misinformed. I think we have to have a shared story that's speaking to our values. In some ways, I feel like we can't give up on the little red barn.

That image has been co-opted and manipulated, but, at the same time, it is part of our history. It does feel like home to a lot of people. There is a sentimentality there, and I think there is a model or a story we could tell about the little red barn that is reframing this. I've seen a lot of little red barns over the years, both at the CAFOs and also at farm sanctuaries and restorative programs that are moving away from factory farms. I would argue that we can't see all that ground and just say, "Well, all of this is nonsense. We can't trust any of it. " That's exactly what they want. We need to be strong and put forward a shared vision that's actually rooted in fact, but also our shared values.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What You're Eating is produced by Nathan Dalton and foodprint.org, which is a project of the GRACE Communications Foundation. Special thanks to Will Potter, Leah Garcès, Tyler Lobdell, and Mike Callicrate.

You can find us at www.foodprint.org, where we have this podcast as well as articles, reports, a food label guide, and more.