**When social media gallops ahead  
Horses, welfare and social licence to operate  
World Arabian Horse Organization 2019 Congress, Australia  
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## Slide 2

I would like to thank the WAHO Executive Committee and the Arabian Horse Society of Australia for inviting me to come and speak today, and to the local organizing committee for coordinating such a great event.

The title of my talk is ‘When social media gallops ahead’.

* We will take a look at what the term “Social Licence to Operate means
* its potential impact on for Arabian horse sports and breeding
* new ways horse sports can think about how their business is done

In this presentation the term Sport includes any human-horse activity, for example, halter showing, racing and polo.

The term organisation refers to governing bodies, event committees, clubs or private contractors fulfilling the same roles.

## Slide 3

We will first look at what is social licence to operate? It’s a term that’s been around for quite some time, particularly in the business, banking and mining sectors, but it’s a new idea for the horse sports and Arabians.

While there is no fixed definition, broadly speaking social licence refers to the public acceptance of your activity. It is not a written agreement, instead it refers to many smaller issues raised by the public as points of concern, for example horse welfare. Everyone here is involved in one or more parts of the horse industry and you may be aware of welfare issues raised in social media.

It is possible for enough public pressure to occur to make any sport face losing their social licence. Just before Christmas 2018, British Horse Racing was being questioned about its welfare practices in the UK Parliament as a result of an electronic petition with over 100,000 signatures.

An example of a sport being stopped by a third party is when in late 2015 the FEI removed the last two UAE endurance ride events of the year from their calendar, citing horse welfare as the reason for their removal.

## Slide 4

Here are some media story examples. There may be some headings here you are familiar with.

Headlines scale down to photos and comments on individual social media feeds, however collectively they all form a part of the story about your sport.

It is worth spending a moment to consider what the future headlines for your sport might be? What are the traditional practices that might be considered OK now, but in the future could be questioned?

For some this could be different techniques used to prepare a horse for the show ring, or perhaps how horses are kept, for example if they live in isolation.

## Slide 5

Globalisation has changed human behaviour and the way we do business. Once disruptive business models are now profitable, for example, Air BnB™ and Uber™.

One name for this new type of (mainly) online transactional behaviour is the ‘sharing economy’. So most of us have looked on a website perhaps to book a hotel room, been able to compare prices, and see feedback from other people. As another check, we put a note on our Facebook page and ask our friends.

The official hotel star rating is no longer the first selling point for many people. So, we ask how does this affect how we run our sport?

## Slide 6

Disruptive technologies and the sharing economy mean that in the business of running horse sports, adaptation is needed so that old and new ‘ways of doing things’ can work together - at the same time (and faster).

New ways of doing things could mean a mix of traditional leadership and social leadership, flatter governance structures and finding ways to speed up decision making.

For example, on the top left of this cartoon shows a traditional model of governance, and on the top right the drawing suggests flatter structures are more common when coupled with technology.

In reality, both styles need to work together, within the same sport, at the same time. Horse sport needs remain relevant and meaningful for people in a modern age.

## Slide 7

The sharing economy attitude has led to a ‘contemporary’ version of the social licence to operate.

The public is giving new meanings to the words of legitimacy, credibility and trust. As more people access the Internet world-wide, the greater the ‘social’ impacts on the business of sport.

## Slide 8

Let’s take trust as an example. Trust is no longer assumed to ‘just happen’ because the organisation has ‘good’ governance, people and practices.

Trust has to be negotiated every day ‘with’ your members and the wider public.

Another way to look at this is to remember that in today’s Internet world, useful and not so useful decisions about horse welfare leave a digital footprint - a hoof print if you like - that may last forever.

It is important that organisations work continuously on horse welfare and share positive information not only about what ‘could’ be done, but what ‘is’ being done.

## Slide 9

In this ‘new world’ organisations will need to reflect on self-governance, because the public is watching.

There is also a need to reflect on how improvements to horse welfare practices are undertaken and look for ways to engage stakeholders in decision making.

Stakeholders are people with a vested interest in making sure your sport has a future. These could be riders, owners, sponsors and businesses.

Stakeholders are also part of the wider community therefore involving them in decision making will mirror positively outwards into the public domain.

## Slide 10

Social licence is evolving away from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Social Contracts (SC) where the business voluntarily proved they were ‘doing good’ and entered agreements with society. For example, when a mining company employs local people, and invests profits back into roads, schools and sanitation.

Instead, the modern social licence sits within the community - and sport organisations cannot ‘un-own’ it and walk away.

Social licence is the community’s attitude towards the horse sport.

There is an opportunity for the sport to work to make sure the attitudes are where possible, positive.

## Slide 11

Here are a few examples where horse organisations are taking action, using different models of engagement.

The story from the Quebec Jockey Club is an example of fostering cultural change to take place. The club is trying out two days of driving races without whips, before collecting and sharing feedback with participants.

On the bottom right, Harness Racing Victoria now requires all harness racing drivers to complete an online animal welfare education course before being able to renew their licence.

On the top right is story about Horse SA, the organisation I work for, which is holding a two-day professional development event. We will talk about this topic of social licence and how to position horse welfare in a positive light. That approach in itself is a change, as many people only talk about welfare when things go wrong.

## Slide 12

Social licence involves everyone who has a responsibility for the welfare of a horse not just the overarching sports administration.

This includes people who have direct care of a sports horse, or care through other job roles, for example officials and ground staff.

Sport participants who use social media contribute to maintaining the sports reputation. There is no longer a clear line between ‘us’ in the organisation and ‘them’ in the public sphere. It is blurry. Quite often people chat online and in the same conversation move between being a supporter before then taking the viewpoint of an outsider.

## Slide 13

What does this ‘new world’ mean for horse sports? Horse sport organisations feature a business model involving the partnership of a horse and rider, driver or handler on a competition ground.

## Slide 14

Horse sports can now be viewed world-wide 24/7 from television broadcasting through to an individual person’s smart phone live streaming and photos.

This is good for promoting sport, however when it comes to horse welfare, the audience is potentially naïve and applies their own values. What your organisation thinks is a suitable welfare standard may not seem so for people outside of your sport. It’s important to be able to explain to the public in animal welfare terms, what you do and why.

## Slide 15

One reason for the changing public attitudes is that increasingly, the average person looks at horse sport as a human and non-human athlete on a human-constructed field-of-play.

There is greater online discussion about animal sentience and animal agency and if applying human attributes to an animal is appropriate or not.

## Slide 16

This photo is an example is how the public – or ‘fans’ - use technology to position the horse as a non-human sport celebrity. It shows how the crowd interacts with the Australian champion race horse Winx, by holding up smart phones to take a photo, which many would immediately post onto Facebook or send to a friend. Just think back to a few years ago, people would have been just waving with their hands instead.

## Slide 17

Other sport fans use technology to put themselves into the ‘game’ like these three ladies at the Australian International Three-Day-Event in Adelaide last November.

Sport information and opinion is traded in the same way as currency. The new ‘currency’ is trust.

## Slide 18

The public trust the sport and the participants to care for the horse.

When the public perceives that the welfare of the horse is at risk, then an ‘unstable’ online discourse starts.

A discourse is a conversation set in a social and cultural context, including words, pictures, sounds and symbols. Unfortunately, it’s just not one discourse, but multiple conversations all running at the same time on different social media platforms. No wonder it can became overwhelming.

## Slide 19

Negative comments may circulate from people claiming to be a ‘voice for the horse’, including tech-savvy ‘smart’ fans, sport watchers who are not fans, and supporters of the horse for example, other owners.

To add complexity - at the same time the human athlete is also a voice for the horse as the primary person responsible for their care.

## Slide 20

When social media gallops ahead…reputations can be rapidly ruined, there are financial burdens incurred in order to restore trust in the organisation, or it could be that people and sponsors may walk away.

It may even lead to a sport governing body or governments to intervene, especially if organisations respond too slowly or ignore public sentiment altogether.

## Slide 21

In recognising welfare responsibilities, organisations will need to acknowledge the new level of public accountability where welfare decisions attract a global readership.

Sport administrators will need to also balance business sustainability with welfare decisions.

That is, to ensure the long-term survival of the sport sometimes decisions which improve horse welfare might affect the familiar way that sport currently runs. A fresh way or a re-invention of some parts of sport might be needed if horse welfare is to be protected and the business model is to remain viable.

An investment in horse welfare and investment into the people who are responsible for horses is an investment into the future of the sport.

## Slide 22

There are new ways for horse sports to think about how business is done.

Often, it is the audience which decides who and what is legitimate and credible. Crowd sourced information, friend recommendations and personal opinions count.

Sport bodies and science need to work out how they will ‘compete’ for attention and legitimacy in this space.

Sport and stud books alike will need to look at providing readily available information about the ‘how and why’ of horse welfare management - or someone else will tell your story for you.

## Slide 23

The sharing economy attitude has also set new expectations which impact on traditional structures of organisations.

Today, information is fast to get and share, and people are used to arriving quickly at a decision.

Horse sport needs to find ways to make more horse welfare decisions more quickly.

There is a need to prioritise building strong relationships between different sections of your membership base, for example breeders and owners.

When an organisation has strong relationships internally, it is easier not only to withstand negative social media, but to have goodwill amongst people to take a lead on welfare.

## Slide 24

The take away messages for Arabian horse sport organisations are that social licence to operate is not an afterthought.

Every sport, every organisation will need to work out what it means to keep and maintain a social licence.… and what it might look like when its lost.

Spending some time reflecting on these questions will help to set the scene for how to plan for and talk about the future of Arabian horse welfare.

An organisation may then consider writing this down as a dedicated Arabian horse welfare and communication plan, with an allocated budget and people to carry out tasks.

## Slide 25

Any plan will need to acknowledge that it is the Arabian horse sports and breeding organisation’s members and friends in close social networks that contribute to maintaining the organisation’s social licence.

However, a social licence will mean different things to different people, as will the future of Arabian horse welfare.

The same technology and social media platforms that seem to cause the problems can be used to help join up people to talk more often about welfare.

This is one way an organisation can take a lead.

## Slide 26

Education events can help build language about what is positive welfare, and ways to plan for continuous improvement.

As most of us know, it’s very easy to get stuck in a negative conversation about welfare, so we need to be pro-active about turning this around.

Harness Racing Victoria’s idea of an online course about welfare, or Horse SA’s face to face workshop for industry leaders are just two education ideas.

Also, a check of your organisation’s website to see how easy it is to find information about welfare and posting of regular updates on social media of welfare related achievements makes sure a positive digital foot print is being created.

There will no doubt be plenty of other actions that could be taken, however in the end, your members and supporters need to be confident to talk to others in an informed manner about Arabian horse welfare.

**Slide 27**

And for social licence to operate, where the priority is to maintain public trust in how we care for our horses, it is important to ensure that what is said ‘could be done’ is in fact ‘done’.

That is, the public should get the message that Arabian organisations ‘own’ their welfare story, and their story is a bright, sustainable future.

## Slide 28

This slide shows some of the resources we will be using in the upcoming Horse SA workshop.

The cartoon drawing outlining The Five Domains Animal Welfare Assessment Model and a description of how the model works in a paper by David Mellor are free downloads from the Horse SA website www.horsesa.asn.au.

In closing, I hope you now have a better understanding of: -

* what the term “Social Licence to Operate means
* its potential impact on for Arabian horse sports and breeding
* new ways horse sports can think about how their business is done

The take home message of today is that a Social Licence to Operate cannot be an afterthought. It needs to be actively protected and maintained.

I would like to acknowledge Central Queensland University and Horse SA for their support. Thank you for listening.