

How farmers got to grips with social media

Farmers are using Twitter and Facebook as new instruments for influencing public and political opinion, says the Wageningen researcher Tim Stevens. He analysed the debate on animal welfare conducted on social media by animal activists and farmers.

text Albert Sikkema photo Rob Engelaar / Hollandse Hoogte

Tim Stevens, who is soon to receive his PhD in the Strategic Communication and Public Administration and Policy chair groups, analysed the discussions about Dutch food production on social media between 2011 and 2015. The main topic of these discussions was livestock farming. Animal rights activist groups such as Wakker Dier raised issues such as overfed chickens and 'factory farming' with its 'megabarns', chiefly targeting supermarkets or politicians. When they denounce these 'powers that be', they generally get a lot of support on social media. But in 2013 a direct conflict suddenly blew up on social media between Wakker Dier and farmers, says Stevens. The subject of controversy was the now banned calving jack that farmers used when delivering calves. Wakker Dier wrote an open letter to the then State Secretary of Economic Affairs Sharon Dijksma, saying the jack, a symbol of factory farming, should be banned, and that the government should enforce the law. The farmers felt under attack and reacted on social media by saying that the calving jack saved lives, and sharing photos and stories about their successes in using it. The discussion died down after a few days.

About 10 days later, a young farmer started a new Facebook page called 'Anti-Wakker-Dier', condemning the campaign against the calving jack. The page got 10,000 likes within one day,

and regional leaders of the Christian Democrat party CDA fell in line with the campaign. That got the online conflict into the daily papers. Wakker Dier quickly came in for criticism from farmers who used Twitter and Face-

'Farmers have learned that they can frame the news on social media'

book to express themselves collectively. Many more of these kinds of conflicts followed later. 'They often don't last long,' says Stevens, 'but they simmer and then flare up again as soon as there is another incident.'

ALL AGAINST ALL

These 'all against all' conflicts, in which two large groups accuse each other on social media, have their own typical dynamics, says the PhD student. In the first phase, animal activists problematize a certain farm practice and ask politicians to take action. In the second phase, farmers mobilize opposition, framing themselves as food providers. And in the third phase, the Secretary of State announces a

political decision, after which the conflict dies out.

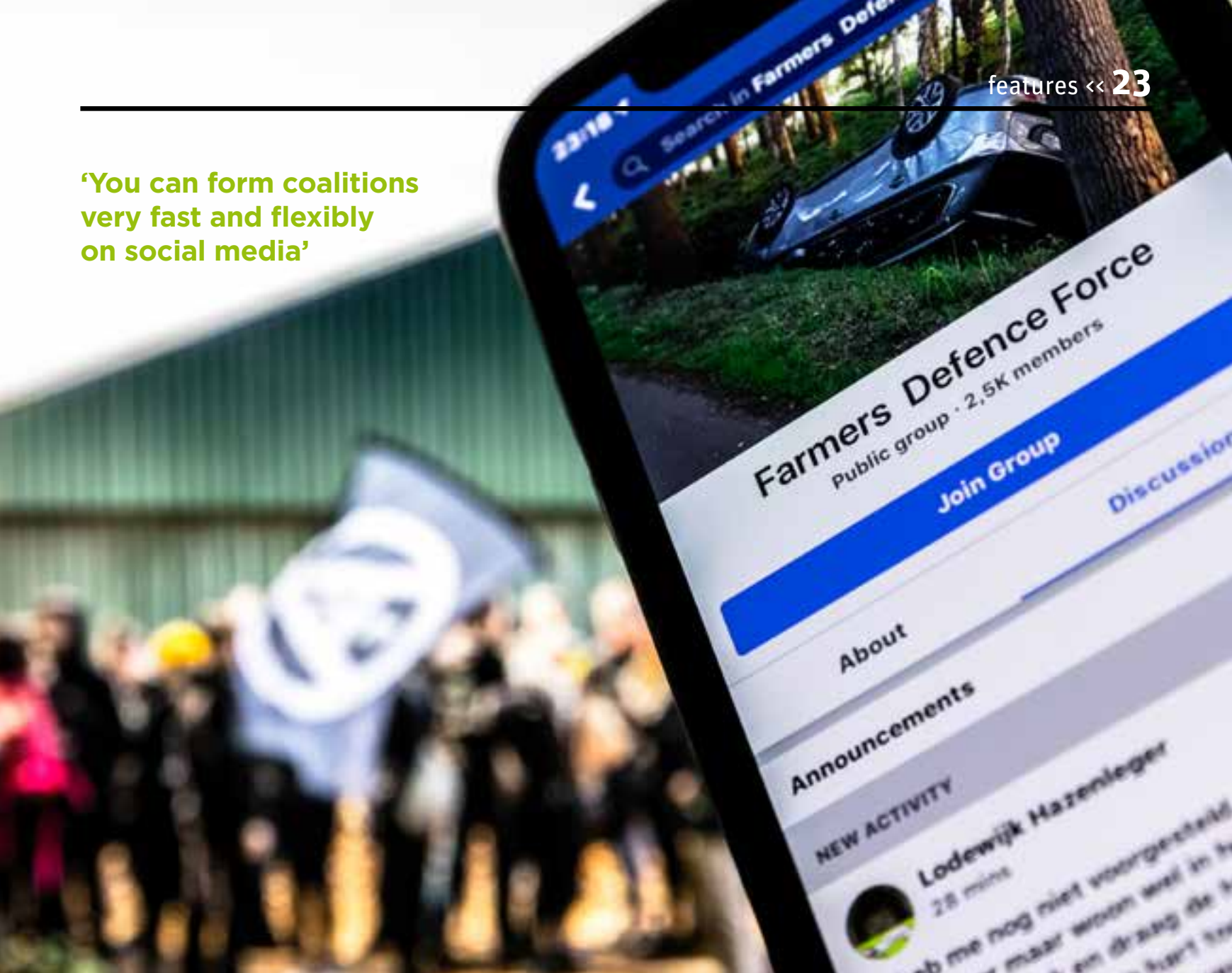
'What was special about the conflict about the calving jack was that the two parties had different views but used the same framing,' says Stevens. Both Wakker Dier and the farmers claim to love animals very much and to want increased animal welfare. They base their arguments on the same values and both say that we need to look at the facts and not react emotionally. Also, both parties start from the principle that whatever is natural is also good for animals. 'But then activists and farmers have very different ideas about what the facts are, and what is natural.'

Because both parties argue for welfare, there was no question of choosing between different interests or values, says Stevens. Instead, the credibility of both parties was under fire: 'Who cares about animals the most? That caused the discussion to get very emotional.'

OOSTVAARDERSPLASSEN

That they had almost the same ideas about welfare was clear a few years later, when animal activists and farmers united on social media against the ecological nature management practised in the Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve, causing cattle and horses to starve. 'That is social media too,' says Stevens. 'As a participant, you can take different stands

‘You can form coalitions very fast and flexibly on social media’



in different discussions, and form coalitions very fast and flexibly.’

These insights were applied in the organization of the broad farmers’ protest that suddenly emerged last year. ‘The farmers are still mainly on the defensive on social media,’ says the researcher. ‘The animal activist groups are behind most of the hypes about food production. But the farmers have now learned that they must be very quick to explain and frame news about food, and that they can influence the public debate about food by the way they frame things.’

FARMERS MOBILIZE

What is more, they have learned to organize themselves fast and better via social media, says Stevens. ‘They can make arrangements for demonstrations and whip up anger in closed Facebook groups and on WhatsApp, so they can quickly express themselves collectively.’ Wakker Dier had already learned to play

that game, but now the farmers are seizing the opportunity to create a strong identity on social media. It is still often a matter of spontaneous campaigns and reactions, but there are now also groups of farmers who want to develop a proactive agenda on social media. Just like Wakker Dier, groups like Boer Burger Tweet and Team Agro NL are working on the strategic use of social media to make the discussion about food go their way. The consequences are evident, says Stevens. ‘For years, farmers played a small role in the media and in the image of food. The regular media were city-based, and the farmers were in the countryside. Using social media makes it easier for farmers to participate in the public debate. They can get their points on the agenda and address politicians directly on social media: are you going to do something? That creates a new dynamic.’ 

‘CALF LOVE’ AND OTHER EMOTIONS

Emotions play an ambiguous role in discussions on social media, says Tim Stevens. Participants try to discredit each other by saying those on the other side are reacting emotionally and therefore failing to provide rational arguments for their standpoint. But meanwhile, says Stevens, all the parties make use of emotional arguments or values in their discussions on social media. Women farmers present themselves as caring mothers and use the slogan ‘calf love’ to emphasize how well they look after the animals. Welfare activists share heart-rending pictures of animals and claim to be the ones who really care about them. It’s logical that such emotions are present, says Stevens. ‘You only take action if you feel something is valuable. Emotions are the driver of human behaviour.’