

Is meat the next plastic?

Robert Blood, founder and managing director of SIGWATCH

August 2018

Workspace provider WeWork's announcement in July that they were banning meat from all their cafeterias, company events, and forbidding staff to expense meals containing meat, caught the headlines, not necessarily in a good way. However, we think they may be on to something. Our data indicates that meat consumption is heading towards an ethical tipping point, when public sentiment will switch against meat, and companies and politicians will be forced to play catch up, just as has happened with plastic at the end of last year.

The leading edge indicator for our prediction is a significant jump in the amount of activist campaigning concerned with the environmental cost of meat within the last four years, and especially within the last 12 months.

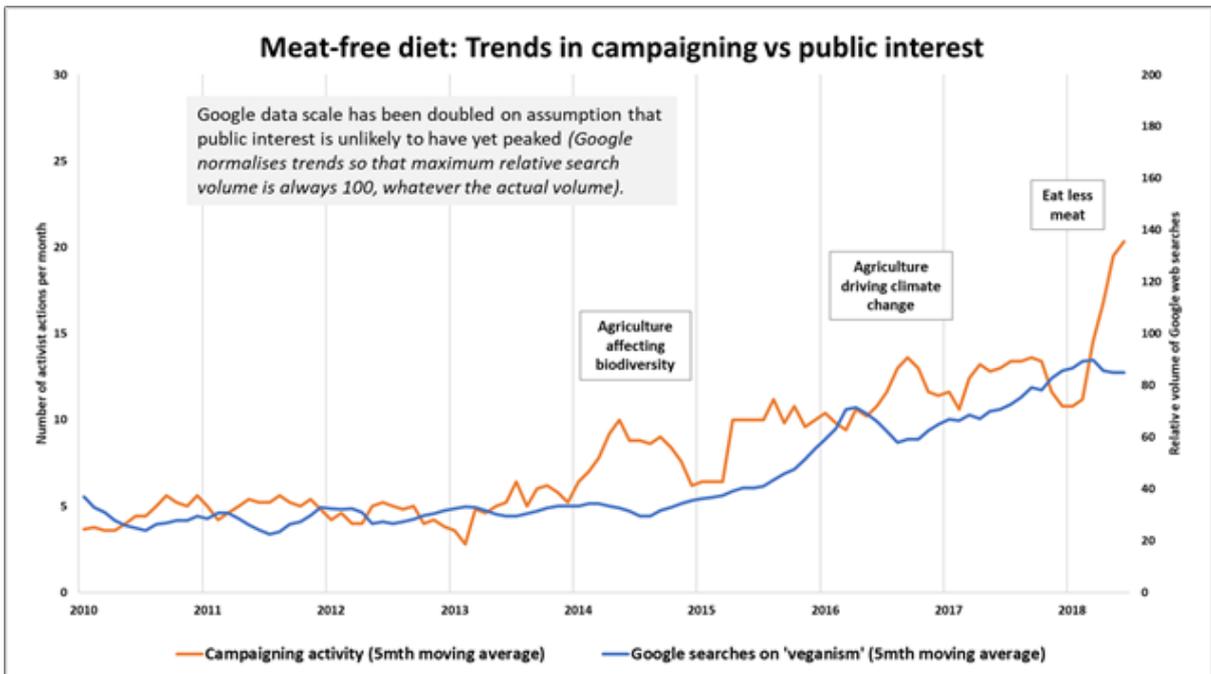
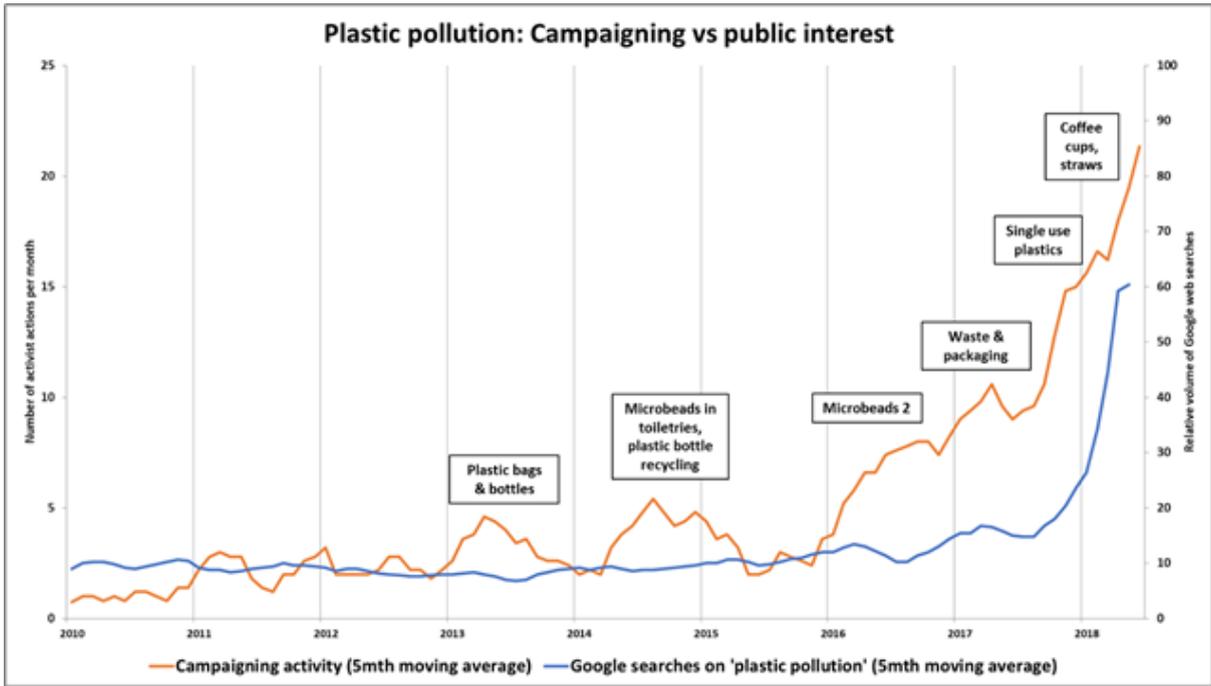
Today there is four times as much NGO campaigning activity linked directly or indirectly to eating less meat than just five years ago. The rise is strongest in Europe but we are also seeing it in the US, although there it started more recently.

Why is this important? First, activist groups make the weather on a wide range of issues, from the environment to human rights. Second, campaigners rarely step up activity on an issue unless they believe they are getting a positive response from the public, media and policymakers. Take the now very hot issue of plastics. The sudden rise in public concern over plastic pollution, indicated by a five-fold increase in the volume of Google web searches globally on the topic at the end of 2017, and mirrored in an equally dramatic rise in media attention, came a full four years after NGOs first 'unfolded' the plastics issue through a matrix of micro campaigns. These focused on packaging, plastic bottle manufacture and recycling, microbeads in toiletries, single use plastics, recyclable coffee cups and most recently, plastic straws and crisp packets.

Similarly, there has been a significant upsurge in public interest in veganism (i.e., non-animal product diets) in the last four years, shown by a steady growth in the volume of Google web searches globally on the topic. This rise followed a similar rise in NGO campaigning by about eighteen months as NGOs developed campaigns initially focusing on the impact of intensive livestock-supporting agriculture on biodiversity and the climate and culminating today in direct appeals to eat less meat.

We have seen similar effects with other issues that have shifted from 'simmer' to 'boil' such as fracking and digital privacy. A rise in NGO campaigning anticipates a later rise in public concern, which in turn forces the issue onto the political agenda and demands a response from governments and business.

But why should the meat issue bubble up now? After all, vegetarianism is hardly new. Britain's Vegetarian Society was founded in the mid nineteenth century and a number of famous people including George Bernard Shaw, Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi adopted this lifestyle change at the time.



What has changed is that the pressure to eat less meat is no longer only coming from its strongest promoters, the animal rights movement. While always strident, the animal rights position never had mass appeal. Even the health case for eating meat that emerged in the late 1960s with growing concern over dietary cholesterol only changed the *type* of meat consumed. In the US, beef consumption per capita has fallen 40% since the mid-1970s, but poultry consumption has risen as much so net meat consumption has hardly changed.

Today, green campaigners view meat consumption as one of the most important drivers of climate change and biodiversity loss, due to ranching and animal feed crops encroaching on rainforest and other virgin habitats in Latin America and south-east Asia. They have taken up the vegetarian cause both directly, with appeals to eat less meat, and indirectly, by fighting the expansion of animal farming and especially intensive livestock production. Within the last year Greenpeace has launched anti-meat and animal farming campaigns in France, Germany, Russia, Switzerland, Austria and New Zealand. As well as calling for people to cut meat consumption, WWF has stepped up engagement with the food industry to reduce the environmental impact of meat production.

The campaigners' environmental arguments for eating less meat seems to have given vegetarianism new impetus, especially amongst Millennial consumers who are known to view eco NGOs especially favourably. This helps explain why we are hearing much more about meat substitutes and 'meat-less' days in office canteens, especially in the public sector. The middle classes are becoming more vocal in questioning meat consumption, and non-meat meals are no longer viewed as an eccentricity. Even veganism is creeping into the mainstream.

Businesses need to be thinking now about how to stay in sync with the public mood and not get caught out by public and media pressure for action or by faster moving competitors that steal the limelight or make them look like uncaring laggards.

The WeWorks initiative may be shocking but within the next one to two years it may well become commonplace, albeit less aggressively implemented. For most firms, it will be a matter for employee relations: be fair to all staff and offer choice not punishment. The case of plastics is instructive. Firms exited the most egregious applications like straws, and encouraged people to reduce plastic use by discounting drinks for customers bringing their own cups. On meat, businesses can support employees without punishing meat eating, by presenting it as encouraging wiser, healthier personal choices and incentivising people who want to eat vegetarian options.

For firms at the heart of the food industry, the consequences of reduced meat eating will inevitably go much deeper. Manufacturers, retailers and hospitality chains will want to offer tasty and good value non-meat choices to maintain market share. Consumers will doubtless appreciate healthier versions of popular products. For farmers and livestock producers, the options are much less clear. Until meat can be produced with much less or nil environmental cost – think 'meat-less' or non-animal meat – the writing seems to be on the wall for much of the agriculture that we have taken for granted for hundreds of years.

About SIGWATCH

SIGWATCH is a data gatherer and consultancy specialising in activist campaigning. It tracks the activities of over 9,000 NGOs across the world, identifying emerging issues and quantifying their impact on corporate targets and industry sectors. Many of the world's leading multinationals use its data and insights. For additional information or to request a free trial of SIGWATCH please visit www.sigwatch.com