

# THE INTERNET AGE OF MISINFORMATION

By Renée Geelen

The internet was invented by scientists to make it easier to share information with the goal of making scientific discoveries faster for the good of the world. Somewhere between the public launch in 1995 and today, it has instead sometimes become a vehicle to flood the world with misinformation and deceit.

Just look at the anti-vaccination network who leapt on a study – now discredited – that allegedly linked vaccines to autism. Never mind that the scientist has been struck off, and the study made worthless by further studies. Celebrities took hold of the idea, and now the world is facing measles and whooping cough epidemics thanks to unvaccinated children.

How did society get to the point where people feel they can't trust the wonders of modern medicine? And anyway, what relevance does this have to horse racing?

Misinformation about racing flows just as freely on the internet, and many people in racing dismiss it as being "only a few people" or "everyone knows that it's not true". Racing is a high profile sport that needs to make sure its public profile is maintained, and not sullied by wild misinformation spread on the net. We should all take this misinformation seriously because the people reading it are our future customers. Racing will always need people who want to come to the races for a day out, who will punt on the outcome and who will buy shares in a horse hoping to own a piece of the next champion. These people need to know the reality of how much care and attention are



Many retired mares are bred with

given to racehorses, from the moment they are conceived, during their racing careers and after.

The racing industry has always had a strong internal focus towards animal welfare. The industry bodies take care of the wider issues of animal welfare through the strength of their anti-drug policies and enforcement, their safety policies and through the use of racecourse vets to both ensure that horses are in a fit state to race when they are on course and to give immediate assistance to horses when required.

**"In the long run, science and good data will beat falsehoods..."**

No other equine sport has such a high level of regulation and veterinary assistance.

For over 200 years, Australian racing has kept a record of a horse's pedigree and race record, often in more detail than we can track our own genealogy. We keep track of all the horses at stud, including approximately 3,000 maiden mares and freshman sires each year, and in the unusual event that a horse happens to die in training or at the races, RISA keeps a record of that too.

The record of what happens after racing is different. Owning a pleasure horse is not like owning a car, there is no central registration for them and it is not anyone's business to ask what others do with their horses. The racing industry has no legal right over non-industry participants.

Unfortunately, this creates a lack of data leaving a hole that animal rights and anti-racing folk can fill with invented nonsense in order to get donations out of an unsuspecting public. Documents acquired from Consumer Affairs Victoria show that the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses (CPR) gathered donations of \$14,599.90 in 2012/13, and all because they spread sensationalist

misinformation about our racehorses.

In order to put a stop to this we need data, which is why the Australian Racing Board (ARB) took a stand on this issue over a year ago and in a separate professional capacity, this author was commissioned by the ARB to use my scientific background to design and undertake a survey on our retired horses.

CEO Peter McGauran claimed, "This is a ground breaking study that injects statistical rigour and accuracy into an emotive debate characterized by exaggeration and distortion. The community in deciding between the competing claims wants accurate and reliable information. The racing industry, like all competitive animal sports, operates under a social licence and must adhere to community standards. If we lose the confidence of the public, we will become marginalized and gradually become irrelevant. Racing is a mainstream sport with enormous cultural and economic importance and adheres to the highest integrity and animal welfare standards. This survey shows that the overwhelming majority of racehorses enjoy a productive or secure retirement courtesy of their owners who genuinely love the animal. That's the way it should be. Owners are responsible for the humane treatment of their horse(s) both during and after their racing careers. By all means let's have the debate on the retirement of racehorses, but let's have it on the basis of the facts, not an ideological obsession. The community deserves better than the propaganda and outright lies of the Animal Rights lobby."

The ARB study was designed to collect timely data about where our racehorses went on retirement from the industry. An initial list of 25 trainers was compiled that represented the major city and country based stables across Australia. These trainers had an average of 100 horses that had raced for them over the past three seasons, and by tracking these horses we ended up with information about 2,514 horses. Because of the initial bias towards large stables, the survey was later expanded to include 21 other country trainers to capture a wider range of horses across the industry. The response rate was much lower, with only 12 trainers responding with data for 737 horses, resulting in a total of 3,224 horses surveyed.

The results were:

Still Racing	Combined Results	Total	% of Retired
Different Trainer	662	21%	
Still in Work/Spelling	1,015	31%	
Exported	77	2%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,754</b>	<b>54%</b>	

Completed Racing Career	Combined Results	Total	% of Retired
At Stud	664	21%	45%
Sold/Gifted as pleasure horse	450	14%	31%
Returned to Owner	205	6%	14%
Died/Euthanised by Vet	109	3%	7%
Unknown	19	0.6%	1.3%
Career in Racing	17	0.5%	1.2%
Knackery	6	0.2%	1.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,470</b>		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,224</b>		

The two stages of the survey highlighted two aspects that will be interesting (or maybe obvious) to readers. Horses in large stables were more likely to be retired to stud (54%) compared to smaller country stables (19%); and the rate of being transferred to another trainer was also higher in large stables (31%) compared to only 16% from country stables.

While doing the survey, notes were also taken on the different jobs that horses went on to do under the 'Sold/Given away as a pleasure horse' category, and they were quite wide ranging and interesting. Comments include "stars in horse movies", "stock horse in Broome", "eventer", "champion show jumper in Victoria", "polo", "sports broodmare", "nanny horse at stud", "ridden

by an 11 year old girl who loves him", "plays Phar Lap in the Outback Australia show", "owner's kids ride her", "riding for the disabled", "he's on a farm we bought for all our retired horses", and so on.

Stock horses, pony club, and show horses were the most common comments for where retired horses had ended up. Many country trained horses had owners who were graziers and used their retired horses on their farms.

This survey found that most retired racehorses find a new career after racing, and gratifyingly, from a scientific point of view, this data lines up with a previous survey done in 2002/03. It's taken more than ten years, but this data has recently been published by Professor McGreevy et al, and in summary, found that

of 1,333 horses that left a racing stable, 63% stayed in the industry with 243 (18%) going to stud, 229 (17%) moving to another trainer, 150 (11%) spelling, and 221 (17%) sold at auction. Of the 490 horses that left racing, 324 went to other careers, with a small portion being unspecified, dead or at a knackery. This study used their data to calculate that in 2002/03, an estimated 650 Thoroughbreds went directly from racing to a knackery.

Further background research for the ARB survey covered the issue of the total number of horses that retire each year from racing and if there are enough homes for them. Each year, 15,000 foals are born, 31,000 (aged between 2 and 14) are currently racing, and approximately 11,000 racehorses retire and require homes. We know that 3,000 of these retirees will go to stud, leaving 8,000 that need to find new careers. The scale of these numbers plays into the hands of the anti-racing groups, who appeal to city folk who have no experience with horses.

There are no more pony carts in our city streets, and most people have never ridden a horse. This lack of connection means that ordinary people are easily swayed towards arguments of cruelty in racing. If you don't know anyone who owns a pleasure horse, it's easy to think that there aren't many people who do. From this place, it's easy for animal rights groups to convince people that racing has a throw-away culture. And depending on which group is talking, there are wild claims that horse racing in Australia sends between 10,000 and 25,000 horses to slaughter every year.



Retired racehorse  
Guthrie Four



**THE INTERNET AGE OF MISINFORMATION (CONT)**

Animals Australia state on their website that the industry “discards” significant proportions of horses every year, while the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses (CPR) state that 15,000 Thoroughbreds are slaughtered every year by the racing industry. By chanting this, they are claiming that every Thoroughbred foal ever born is sent to the knackery. Given that both the ARB study and the McGreevy study have proved this to be utter nonsense, this misinformation can only be being spread by them for financial gain. And in those Consumer Affairs Victoria charity papers, how much of their donated \$14,990.90 was spent on actually helping horses?

\$313. That’s not a typo, and ten times as much was spent on buying camera equipment.

The ARB study is further validated by research done by Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) in 2001 that used economic, recreational event data and breed society data to estimate the number of horses in Australia. They estimate that there are nearly 180,000 registered Thoroughbreds in Australia, of which 32,000 are racing, 66,000 are breeding or young stock, 24,000 compete in registered non-racing events (eg the Royal Easter Show), and 57,000 are used for recreation. There are also 300,000 feral horses, 320,000 horses of other breeds (Standardbreds,

**“Racing is a mainstream sport... (that) adheres to the highest integrity and animal welfare standards...” - Peter McGuaran, ARB CEO**

Arabian, Quarter horses, pony breeds, etc), and 218,000 unregistered recreational horses in Australia (of which unnamed Thoroughbreds make up a significant proportion).

RIRDC uses an average life span of ten years for these horses, and this means that every year between 8,100 and 15,000 Thoroughbreds in pleasure homes will die of old age, illness or injury and will need to be replaced. Simply put, there are a minimum of 8,100 new homes outside the racing industry for our horses every year. And with programs like Off the Track making the Thoroughbred more sought after as riding horses, this will most likely increase over time as people shift from using other breeds and instead use Thoroughbreds.

Increasing popularity also increases the value

of our retired horses, which in turn makes them less likely to be sold cheaply to a knackery.

The ARB survey was just the first step in stopping the misinformation about horse racing. It has given the ARB some good data for discussion, with the next stage the development of the retirement form on the RISA website. As unveiled in July 2014, the new form aims to track every horse as they retire, in order to give the industry much more complete data about our horses without infringing on the legal rights of the new owners.

Now that this form is in use, our industry will be able to compile the data for all of our retired horses. We will know absolutely what happens to all of them. And we will be able to report on the data as well as track changes over time, allowing the industry to provide the answers to all sorts of questions. This project is not just about halting misinformation, but also about providing greater data for our industry. Loud sensationalist voices might get the attention of social media, but in the long run, science and good data will beat falsehoods.

Racing folk have always known that as an industry we care about ‘our’ horses, and spend time and money finding retirees a good home. Now we also have the data to prove to the general public that this happens on a broad scale.



A new career for Tailgate