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## Rights and Representation: Media Narratives about Disabled People and Their Service Animals in Canadian Print News

### Comments

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**Rights and Representation: Media Narratives about Disabled People and Their Service  
Animals in Canadian Print News**

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**Abstract:**

Canadian news coverage is reflecting and shaping an evolution of thought about how we must publicly account for animals' roles in the disability rights movement. Through a textual analysis of 26 news media articles published between 2012 and 2017, this research demonstrates that the media play a key role in reporting on discrimination, yet media narratives about service animals and their owners too often fail to capture the complexity of policies and laws that govern their lives. In Canada, there is widespread public confusion about the rights of disabled people and their service animals. This uncertainty is relevant to both disability and animal oppression. This research identifies nine frames within the media narratives, as well as evaluating perspectives from critical animal studies in the news articles. These frames, which emerge in the media reports, in their descriptions of human and (less often) animal rights, illustrate public confusion surrounding these rights. The confusion is inevitable given the many laws in Canada that govern service animals. Thus, to give context to the news coverage, this article also surveys the legal protections for disabled people who use service animals in Canada, and suggests that until the news media understand the legalities surrounding service animals, they will not be well equipped to fulfil their role of informing the public. This is a lost opportunity in light of the media's potential role as a pivotal tool to educate the public about disability and animal rights.

**Keywords:**

Service animals, service dogs, media representation of disability, human rights

**Rights and Representation: Media Narratives about Disabled People and Their Service  
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**Introduction**

In 2016, a Winnipeg woman named Emily Sydor entered into a legal battle centered on her service animal, a pot-bellied pig. Sydor appealed a city order to remove her pig, Podgy, from her home. According to the *Winnipeg Sun*, under the city's Pet Ownership bylaw, Podgy is not considered a domestic pet. Sydor won her legal battle to keep Podgy—by proving Podgy's status as a service animal (Pursaga, 2016). Now, Sydor and Podgy are characters in a modest but growing collection of stories about service animals in Canada that reflects an evolution of thought about nonhuman animals' role in society and a growing disability rights movement.

Compelling as they are, these media narratives often fail to fully describe the legal

frameworks guiding the rights of service animal owners.<sup>1</sup> There are many laws relating to service animals in Canada, yet these laws are widely misunderstood by the public and journalists writing stories about service animals. Narrative accounts emerge in court opinions and in memoirs from disabled people (see especially Michalko, 1999 and Kuusisto, 2018). Media coverage of service animals, however, sometimes results in more confusion. Despite the wide local coverage of Sydor and Podgy's story, the Canadian public is left wondering what this means for other animals, and which laws, if any, can protect human-animal relationships.

Clarification within these stories is difficult to find, in part because there is no coherent uniform law that governs service animals in Canada (Doctor & Meggs, 2017, p. 2) In addition, contrary to the widely held conception that law can be made neutral and is apart from society, Lee Epstein (1995) argues that formulation and implementation of law varies greatly by time and place. This is especially true with disability law and service animal law. Therefore, it makes sense to first examine laws and cases in context before we analyze media narratives. In Canada, these laws are generally under provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Each jurisdiction has its own unique legal framework governing service animals, and some provinces and territories provide more rights and protections than others (Doctor & Meggs, 2017).

Disabled people who use service animals in Canada experience discrimination in important facets of life, as described vividly in media stories: people with disabilities having been denied access to restaurants, taxicabs, public transportation, and housing; yet, they rarely

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<sup>1</sup> This paper looks at media coverage of service animals because this is a term regularly used in North American laws. As such, "service animals" was one of the search terms used to gather the news articles for this project. Service animals are animals that are trained to do work and perform tasks to benefit disabled people. While emotional support animals also do work that benefits disabled people, they are only considered service animals in some Canadian jurisdictions and are not considered service animals under United States law (ADA National Network, n.p). Thus, emotional support animals may be mentioned, but they are not the focus of this research.

take action. Many people do not know they have rights, let alone how to pursue rights-related remedies. This confusion also contributes to discriminatory conduct; service providers and other members of the public do not know what their obligations entail and may deny access (Sweet v. 1790907 Ontario Inc. o/a Kanda Sushi, 2015). For disabled people, a denial of access based on the presence of a service animal is impactful as they are ultimately excluded and face an affront to their dignity and autonomy. The media are natural avenues to broadcast this injustice. In the case of non-human animals, however, the media does not consider the social justice issues that extend to them and may not even care (Sorenson, 2014). Unfortunately, journalists are not necessarily more equipped to navigate the legal morass than the general, already confused, public. Therefore, it is important to clarify the various legal protections relevant to service animals and their owners.

Further on in this project, we explore the potential connection between critical animal studies (CAS) and critical disability studies (CDS), particularly in the context of Canadian media coverage involving interdependent relationships between disabled people and service animals. The small but complicated works surrounding these meeting points of CAS and CAD is, as Carey Wolfe (2008) points out, a location of study rife with potential for challenging, ethical debate. Disability theory invokes several interlocking systems of oppression, and as Sunaura Taylor (2011) asserts, disability theory has already “accidentally” created a framework of justice that “can no longer exclude other species” (p. 198). Therefore, we turn our attention towards the intersections between human and nonhuman subjects, whose relationships we read about as we analyze Canadian media coverage of disabled people’s personal and social experiences with various service animals.

### **Background: Canadian Legal Protections for Disabled People and their Service Animals**

We place laws surrounding service animals and their owners into four broad categories, each of which are covered in the media articles we analyzed, described below. The first and most significant protection for service animal users in Canada is through its human rights laws. Each province and territory has a human rights statute that protects disabled people from discrimination and requires that service providers and employers accommodate people with disabilities (Barnett, Nicol & Walker, 2012; Halsbury's Laws of Canada – Discrimination and Human Rights (2018 Reissue) HDH-220 Nature of duty, and William F. Pentney, *Discrimination and the Law: including equality rights under the Charter*, loose-leaf, 2019 – Release 5, (Toronto, Ontario: Thomson Reuters Canada, 1985 -), page 2.12). Complaints of human rights violations are common, as is illustrated by the many media stories that document human rights complaints as the main avenue for redress. Human rights laws are, indeed, a powerful tool in Canada, and are often described as quasi-constitutional, which ensures elevated protection (University of British Columbia v. Berg, 1993, page 370 to 371; Halsbury's Laws of Canada – Discrimination and Human Rights (2018 Reissue) HDH-23 Special status of human rights statutes). Additionally, human rights complaints are an attractive avenue as, in some circumstances, complainants can receive monetary compensation for injury to “dignity, feelings and self-respect” (see, for example, *Kamis v. 1903397 Ontario Inc.*, 2015 HRTO 741 (CanLII paras. 59 to 61); *C.C. v. J.L. o/a [...] Restaurant*, 2014 HRTO 1625 (CanLII) para 89.)

Not all denials of access will be adjudicated as a violation of a human rights law. A number of factors are considered in making a determination as to whether denying access to a disabled person's service animal is an actual violation of law. For example, the duty to accommodate is not unlimited. Service providers need only accommodate to the point of undue hardship. Cost of accommodation, as well as health and safety, are relevant considerations for

assessing whether an accommodation will cause undue hardship (Barnett, Nicol & Walker, 2012; Halsbury's Laws of Canada – Discrimination and Human Rights (2018 Reissue) HDH-220 Nature of duty).

Featuring prominently in the service animal cases is the issue of competing rights, for example, the right of a disabled person to access a service with their service animal against the right of a service provider who has a severe allergy not to be exposed to the animal (see, for example, *McCreath v. Victoria Taxi*, 2015 BCHRT 153 at paras. 22 and 39). This narrative plays out in cases involving taxicabs, where the driver refuses to take a passenger citing allergies as the rationale. In *The Canadian Press*, Goffin (2017, p. #) illustrates the dilemma of conflicting rights: “the two most common reasons [Uber Canada] drivers have provided for not wanting services animals in their cars: dog allergies and religious rules about contact with dogs.” Thus, various factors must be assessed and weighed in assessing human rights complaints, and the manner in which human rights laws apply to service animal users requires reference to the statute itself, as well as any relevant case law, regulations, guidelines, and similar explanatory material produced by human rights commissions. Ultimately, there will usually be some uncertainty in assessing whether unjust treatment towards a disabled person and their service animal is a human rights violation.

Secondly, some jurisdictions have legislation that is specific to service animals, such as Newfoundland and Labrador's *Service Animal Act*, British Columbia's *Guide Dog and Service Dog Act* and Ontario's *Blind Persons' Rights Act*. This category of legislation serves as another form of protection for service animal users. Unlike human rights laws, which broadly protect against human rights violations in many areas of activity and on several different grounds, this form of legislation provides protection for disabled people specifically in relation



to their service dogs or other eligible animals, as the case may be. They typically protect disabled persons who use service animals from discrimination and prohibit the denial of certain housing, accommodation, services or facilities in any place to which the public is customarily admitted. However, there is no consistency across jurisdictions. The laws provide definitions for which animals are covered. Some laws apply only to dogs (e.g., Ontario's *Blind Persons' Rights Act*, R.S.O. 1990, Chapter B.7) and others apply to service animals more generally (e.g., Newfoundland and Labrador's *Service Animal Act*, S.N.L., 2012, Chapter S-13.02). Some apply only to people who are blind (e.g., Ontario's *Blind Persons' Rights Act*, R.S.O. 1990, Chapter B.7), while some apply to a broad range of disabled people, such as people with learning disabilities, epilepsy and hearing loss (e.g., Newfoundland and Labrador's *Service Animal Act*, S.N.L. 2012, Chapter S-13.02, s. 2(b), NL Human Rights Commission Guidelines Regarding the Use of Service Animals, pp. 1-2). As reported in some of the media articles, British Columbia's *Guide Dog and Service Dog Act* (SBC 2015, Chapter 17, s. 4) is noted for its attempt to address the problem of "service animal impersonation."

Importantly, one common feature that distinguishes these laws from human rights laws is that they do not provide for personal remedies to the disabled person, as do human rights laws. Rather, they create an offence for which the offender may be liable to pay a fine (e.g., BC Act s.8, Ontario Act s.6 and Newfoundland and Labrador Act s.10). The absence of a personal remedy to the disabled person explains why the people featured in the media stories overwhelmingly chose to take their battle through the human rights system.

Thirdly, Ontario and Manitoba each have an additional form of protection: broad accessibility legislation with its goal of achieving accessibility, and barrier removal, for disabled people through accessibility standards. The standards cover areas, such as goods, services,

employment and buildings (AODA s. 1; AMA s. 2(1)). Each of these laws provide some protection for disabled people who use service animals. The protections are found in the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA), specifically its Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation (s. 80.47) and the *Accessibility for Manitobans Act* (AMA), specifically its Customer Service Standard Regulation (s.8). For example, pursuant to the Integrated Accessibility Standards regulation to the AODA, service providers must ensure that a person accompanied by a service animal is permitted to enter their premises with the animal and keep the animal with them, unless the animal is otherwise excluded by law from the premises, for example, because of food handling regulations (*Integrated Accessibility Standards*, O. Reg 191/11, s. 80.47(2)).

In theory, Ontario should be more accessible to service animal users than other parts of Canada, where broad accessibility legislation is absent, as the AODA requires that proactive steps be taken to ensure accessibility. However, there is no evidence that this is the case, as it depends on the extent to which awareness is raised and service providers actually comply. In this regard, The Honourable David C. Onley, in the third review of the AODA, noted that “[s]ome of the most contentious issues brought to the Review involved service animals. It was reported that many people with service animals are having trouble entering businesses and other public venues – in direct violation of the Customer Service Standards” (Onley, 2019, p. 41). Reviews of the AODA, in 2014 and 2019, note the importance of enforcing the AODA and making this enforcement known, given that many constituents of the Act find reliable information about its enforcement “difficult to locate” (Moran, 2014, p. 60). A general absence of information about the AODA, combined with ineffective enforcement, has earned the Act a commonplace reputation for having “no teeth” (Onley, 2019, p. 49).

An additional limitation of accessibility legislation in Canada is that, in contrast to human rights laws, accessibility laws, such as the AODA, like the service animal-specific laws described above, do not allow for individual complaints of discrimination. For example, for people who are denied access with their service animals, this type of legislation provides no personal recourse (Jacobs, 2018, p. 19). In general, the difference and relationship between the AODA and Ontario's *Human Rights Code*, is a source of confusion for the public (Onley, 2019, p. 24). Each of these findings, together, again point to the role of news coverage in highlighting AODA requirements and violations so as to improve compliance and ultimately accessibility for disabled persons who use service animals.

The fourth protection for service animals relates to harming or interfering with service animals. Canada's *Criminal Code*, for example, makes it a crime to injure a service animal (Criminal Code, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46, s. 445.01). Some provincial laws also make it an offence to harm or interfere with a service animal (e.g., *The Animal Protection Act, 2018*, S.S. 2018, c. A-21.2, s. 33).

In summary, while there are four categories of legal protections for disabled people and their service animals, only one of them, being human rights laws, provides for effective remedies for disabled people who have been wronged because they were denied services or access when accompanied by their service animal. Persons with disabilities may view the human rights avenue as worth pursuing since they might be awarded a personal remedy if their case is successful. Highlighting these human rights cases in the media, by enhancing public awareness, has the potential to encourage use of this avenue as a tool for promoting inclusion. A trend of positive outcomes may, in the long-term, enhance accessibility on a systemic level too.

## **Literature Review: Disability and Animal Studies**

Connections between disability and animal studies are increasingly acknowledged across both fields, yet analysis of these relationships remains sparse. Critical disability studies scholars are chronicling the challenging, ethical debates, and contradictions at the intersection of animal and disability studies (Oliver, 2016), including analysis of their own experiences being-in-the-world with animals (Michalko, 1999; Price, 2017; Taylor, 2017). Meanwhile, critical animal studies offers a radical, overarching “liberationist” suggestion: that nonhuman animals are not human property, and we do not have the right to do whatever we want with them despite a long-held understanding that animals ought to be positioned resourcefully and used to serve their human counterparts (Ensminger, 2010; Sorenson, 2014; Zamir, 2006; Zapf & Rough, 2002). Notably, Kelly Oliver’s work (2016) merges both fields through the concept of interspecies interdependence, which includes conceptions of both disability and animal justice that accounts for relationality between human and animal bodies alike. Undoubtedly, disability makes a difference in how we understand animal lives, and scholarship to this end is gaining momentum (Price, 2017; Santinele Martino & Lindsay, forthcoming, this issue; Scorza & Cavalheiro, 2011; Shek-Noble & Jones, in press).

Yet, concepts such as interspecies interdependence are not widely understood by the public, thus these concepts fall outside of how media stories are framed. In addition, media stories about the intersection of human and nonhuman lives have yet to be critically analyzed by researchers (Shek-Noble & Jones, in press). Such stories remain humanistic, privileging human interests over non-human animal interests, which seems too substantial a point to bypass in a project rooted in news coverage of humans and their connections to nonhuman, sentient beings whether through personal interaction, law, policy, or otherwise (Huss, 2010; Taylor, 2011; Zapf

& Rough, 2002). For instance, scholars including Carey Wolfe (2008) and Rohan Todd and Maria Hynes (2017) have re-read the intersections of disability and animality through Temple Grandin's popular accounts of autistic identity and animality. However, as Wolfe (2008:117) observes, Grandin's work designing slaughter strategies for cattle still falls outside of scholarly debates around the speciesism embedded in the unnecessary killing of animals, despite the ontological possibilities Grandin opens through her personal accounts of animality. Indeed, both the media stories we encountered and the legislation that informs them places human interests and perspectives ahead of non-human animals, with the exception of protections found in the *Criminal Code*. As such, the topic of speciesism<sup>2</sup> became impossible to ignore given the cultural history of human and service-animal relationships.

Arguably, the backdrop to many contemporary media stories about human-animal bonds is not discipline-specific scholarship, but a common preoccupation with non-human animals as "equipment" or "aides" that runs deep in North America. Dogs hold a particular place in this cultural history, being the primary non-human animal trained to assist disabled people (Cohen, 2011). Guide dogs came to North America after word arrived that blinded World War I soldiers were successfully using guide dogs in Germany (Eustis, 1927). Blind American Morris Frank brought the first trained guide dog to the USA in 1928, and in 1929, he established *The Seeing Eye* to train guide dogs in North America (The Seeing Eye, 2015). In the following decades, the work of trained dogs expanded to include use in law enforcement and the military (Ostermeier, 2010). They also partnered with a wide range of disabled people and became known synonymously with disability labels: Epilepsy dogs, PTSD dogs, and autism dogs are among the

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<sup>2</sup>As Richard D. Ryder described it in 1975, speciesism refers to "the widespread discrimination that is practised by [humans] against other species" (p.16).

many “types” of service dogs popping up in news stories. At their best, news accounts replace hierarchical and speciesist conceptions of non-human animals with the rhetoric of “partnership” and “teamwork.” In the North American context, service animals are known to assist disabled people through a kind of partnering framework. A service animal definition in North America related to partnership can be found in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), where a service animal is “any guide dog, signal or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

In her writing about the common reduction of service dogs to their functionality, Oliver (2016) has found space between the fields of CAS and CDS to cultivate what she calls “an ethics of proximity based on interspecies companionship” (p. 242), suggesting that when service dogs are legally understood as tools and/or equipment, we overlook the emotional bonds humans inevitably form with animals. In arguing against myths about service dog functionality in particular, Oliver also draws parallels to non-human animal functionality and mainstream ideas of disabled people’s integration into society, thereby demonstrating Taylor’s (2017) long-held point that the non-human animal body is integral to understanding the ways disabled people experience oppression. We argue, then, that an analysis of news media exposes the shared systems and ideologies at the intersection of animal and human oppression (Taylor, 2017). Further, as in Sydor and Podgy’s story, the ownership of service animals is often blended in with categories of pet ownership—an issue that emerges most fully in CAS. Commonly, such discussions are relegated to the biomedical realm that asks whether the benefits of service animals are more significant than other interventions/therapies (Scorza & Cavalheiro, 2011; Zamir, 2006). Rebecca Huss (2010) attempts to pull researchers toward non-human animal-centric concerns in relation to the biomedical, such as training kennel conditions, injury to dogs

used to pull mobility devices (such as wheelchairs), the general well-being of the non-human animal based on its caregivers' actions toward it (which brings up issues of stress and abuse), as well as the non-human animal's life prospects after retirement. These are, overall, quality of life concerns.

Tzachi Zamir (2006) also draws attention to the grey area between using and exploiting non-human animals by "turning them into" companion or service animals (p. 181), though he also points out that such relationships offer opportunities for animals to live "longer, safer, and more comfortable lives" than they would "in the wild" (Zamir, 2006, p. 183-184). A small body of literature to this end, however, covers conversations specific to policies and practices of animal-assisted therapy (AAT). Zamir invites ethical debate when he points to the increasing popularity of AAT and asks if non-human AAT is exploitative, ultimately suggesting that some non-human animals "gain little or nothing through AAT and lose a lot" (Zamir, 2006, p. 189). This dynamic is particularly present for non-human animals who do not thrive in the company of humans, such as "stressed rodents in petting areas in educational and therapeutic institutions" (Zamir, 2006, p. 184-5). Non-human animals like snakes, birds, aquarium-kept dolphins, and monkeys live lives that are, in full or in part, on display for people who may experience therapeutic benefits from handling their bodies (Zamir, 2006). However, Zamir acknowledges that these types of non-human animals do not live exclusively uncomfortable lives, and some might live very well (Zamir, 2006). Meanwhile, other non-human animals, such as horses, cats, and dogs, can exist more comfortably with humans.

Further, the human-nonhuman service animal arrangement tends to be closely categorized as a pet-owner relationship, and this dynamic was commonly reflected in our news article data. CAS points to an ethical and moral relationship that is far from "clear-cut" (Zamir,

2006, p. 188). Distinguishing between use and exploitation in both pet-owner and service-animal-user relations is undoubtedly difficult, and also controversial. Ultimately, Zamir (2006) concludes:

A world in which practices like AAT exist is an overall better world for these [animals] than one that does not include them, and this provides a broad, moral vindication of forms of AAT that rely on these beings. On the other hand, rodents, birds, monkeys, reptiles, and dolphins gain little by coercing them into AAT. Such practices are therefore exploitative (2006, p. 195).

Indeed, non-human animals have historically been used in caring roles for various groups with cross-disability experiences beyond AAT. These include experiences of aging people (Banks & Banks, 2002; Garrity et al., 1989), incarcerated people (Prison Pet Project, 2019), people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS (Carmack, 1991), people in hospital (Friedmann & Thomas, 1995), among others. Importantly, the voices of AAT/service animal users are absent from much of the literature even though non-human animals continue to be used today under U.S. federal law that categorizes service animals as useful for psychiatric support, emotional support, therapy, and other specified purposes (Huss, 2010; Zapf & Rough, 2002). Seven psychosocial functions of animal ownership for humans include: companionship, keeping a person busy, offering a person something to care for, becoming a tangible object to touch and stroke, becoming an object of focus, promoting exercise, and promoting safety (Katcher & Friedmann, 1980; PAWS, 2007; Zapf & Rough, 2002). Many of the animals mentioned in the media narratives were demonstrative of these functions, and were thus owned for individual human utility.

Service animals have long served a socio-cultural role, even possibly decreasing the social stigma of people with easily perceived disabilities. “Service dogs substantially reduced the



tendency of able-bodied people to ignore or avoid the disabled person,” according to a 1988 research (Eddy, Hart, & Boltz, p. 39). These working non-human animals may improve social perceptions of people with disabilities (Hart, 1989), and assist in removing barriers to social participation by facilitating conversation and stabilizing psychological well-being (Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Valentine, Kiddoo & LaFleur, 1993; Zapf & Rough, 2002). Wolfe (2008) proposes that the vast role of non-human animals found in the equally vast landscape of disability speaks to wider notions of inter-species interdependency. Wolfe (2008) goes on to use the juxtaposition of service animal and human as an entry point into the topics of postmodern subjectivity and post-humanism. Specifically, Wolfe (2008) refers to the “unique” forms of subjectivity that places neither the human nor the non-human animal as subject or object in human-service animal relationships (p. 122). Instead, Wolfe argues, there is “something else” that would encompass a “shared trans-species being-in-the-world” constituted by relations of respect and communication. These relations are inherent, as “anyone who has ever trained — or relied upon — a service dog would be the first to tell you” (p. 122). Importantly, it is often people in partnership with service animals who tell stories to journalists, thus making it possible for representations of these bonds to become part of our socio-cultural landscape in new and challenging ways.

### **Methodology: Framing in Media Stories**

Often, contemporary media representations of service animals in Canada are triggered when disabled people pursue legal recourse and their stories became public enough for media attention. This qualitative textual analysis applies frame theory to these and other representations of service animals in Canadian news media. Through framing, the news media

shape how audiences understand media narratives about disability (Haller, 2010). O'Malley (2008) explains that frame theory refers to the expectations of the world that are “based on prior experience, against which new experiences are measured and interpreted” (p. 21). Past literature thoroughly documents how news media frame disability through images and words, often using clichés or negative stereotypes: For example, a disabled person as inspirational for participating in regular life activities (Haller, 2000; Jackson-Kelso, 2018). Framing occurs not only in the body of the text of the story, but through images, headlines, and page layout or the story's position in a broadcast line-up. Importantly, media ignore some disabled people and issues altogether; they are then outside the frame.

A news frame is defined here as a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Chosen by journalists and editors, news frames are almost entirely implicit and taken for granted, which is why we posit that it is the sociocultural history of human and nonhuman animals that dominates media narratives rather than scholarly analysis of these relationships. Such frames do not appear to either journalists or audiences as social constructions but as primary attributes of events that reporters are merely reflecting. News audiences accept news frames as “normal” (Goffman, 1974; McKee, 2005). These frames have implications for news coverage of service animals because many journalists still misunderstand the actual experiences of disabled people (Haller, 2010; Jackson-Kelso, 2018).

This inquiry focuses on the text of news stories from publications across Canada. A number of disability studies and media scholars have identified frames within media narratives: Frames that present disabled people within the context of illness, charity, pity,

inspiration, or as burdensome, etcetera (Clogston, 1990; Haller, 2000). Other literature points to concerns that people with disabilities are portrayed as a liability; their humanity an afterthought (Haller, 2010; Jones, 2014). Many times, these news frames are imbued with the ableism present in North American culture (Davis, 1999; Dolmage, 2017; Linton, 1998). Moreover, as Haller (2010) explains, dominant societal beliefs, shaped by an ableist culture, influence media content which, in turn, influences wider cultural understanding of disability. This process is further outlined in Jones's (2014) account of the evolving experiences journalists covering disability in Canada, and the call for common ground between disabled people and journalists. This common ground may be found in new media, such as social media platforms, and when media represents more empowering frames in which disabled people are shown to be a minority group with civil rights, diverse individuals who are just like nondisabled people, people with legal savvy who use the courts to fight for disability rights, and consumers who are a vital part of a country's economy (Clogston, 1991; Haller, 2000).

Because journalism tends to both reflect and shape social attitudes towards disability, close readings of news narratives offer insight into how issues surrounding service animals emerge in the lives of disabled people. Therefore, evaluating Canadian news coverage of service animals using frame theory offers close, material examination of the intersections of critical disability studies and critical animal studies.

This study applies frame theory using the textual analysis methodology proposed by Alan McKee (2005), which examines dominant cultural discourses in news texts. The analysis also employs Christians and Carey's (1981) notion that the qualitative researcher should assess all aspects of the media texts such as story sources, direct and indirect quotes, language/terminology used, themes about people with disabilities and service animals and

missing perspectives about the topic. For this study, a qualitative assessment was chosen because it fits well with the analysis of frames in news texts.

Given the gap between intersectional disciplinary analyses of human and nonhuman animal relationships and common, sociocultural understandings of these relationships tied to animals as functional property, we watched for four specific CAS perspectives in our media analysis that address links between ableism and speciesism, outlined below (Taylor, 2017; Oliver 2016; Taylor, 2011). Significantly, despite the wide role of service animals and their significant presence in cultural locations of disability, academic discussion in the field of CAS does not often focus on service animals (Huss, 2010). We hope to remedy that with our media research. In short, we read news coverage with an awareness that ethical and moral boundaries of ownership remain up for debate, particularly in a political economy that, to paraphrase Oliver (2016), reduces everything and every being—animal and human alike—to “usable equipment or productive labour” (p. 247).

We conducted a full Lexis-Nexis search using key words: service animals, disability, people with disabilities, and Canada. We analyzed all stories on the service animal topic in Canadian daily newspapers found in the Lexis-Nexis database from 2012-2017 (N=26).<sup>3</sup> The years were selected to give us the most recent full five-year time period. With the ever-shifting legal landscape regarding service animals, we did not want to analyze articles too far in the past. We also did not analyze any CBC or other broadcast outlet stories because many do not have full transcripts or print versions online. In addition, broadcast news has a different structure than print news because it relies heavily on images. A close reading of the news texts evaluated the

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<sup>3</sup> Lexis-Nexis does not include every newspaper in Canada. As such, this study does not include all print stories about service animals over the chosen five-year period.

media stories for frames, sources, disabilities, laws, content reflecting ableism and speciesism, and service animals mentioned.

### **Qualitative Textual Analysis Findings**

The textual analysis revealed nine prominent frames in the Canadian news stories. Table 1 lists these frames. Stories could have multiple frames/themes in one media story. For example, a number of stories present service animals as a disability and human rights issue and frame it as a “fight” for rights. Most stories reflected the confusion that citizens—and journalists—have over understanding Canadian policies and laws regarding service animals, even misunderstanding the training that valid service animals have been receiving for decades. For example, blind people have routinely used trained guide dogs since the 1930s in North America (Eustis, 1927).

#### **Table 1. List of media frames found 4**

**Frame 1.** Service animals are a human rights issue.

**Frame 2.** Using service animals in public spaces is a battle or fight.

**Frame 3.** Service animals are like an assistive aide or assistive device.

**Frame 4.** Canada has no standard service animal law and policy countrywide.

**Frame 5.** Concerns about service animals or other nonhuman animals come from misunderstandings, rather than actual problems with service animals.

**Frame 6.** Invisible disabilities like PTSD, seizures and diabetes are misunderstood, so people with those disabilities who use service animals are suspect.

**Frame 7.** Service animals provide safety for disabled people.

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<sup>4</sup> Table 2 below lists examples of the frames from the news articles.

**Frame 8.** Laws should deal with conflicting disabilities regarding service animals (i.e. people with allergies versus people who need service animals in public spaces).

**Frame 9.** Service animals are trained and are different from pets.

In the analysis, we also investigated four specific CAS perspectives that address links between ableism and speciesism and found some were absent. The perspective that service animals are recognized as individuals, labourers, and/or companions (Taylor, 2017) was not found. It is clear that just like ableist narratives in the news media, so do speciesist perspectives appear in which service animals are presented as any non-human animals would be, not as working partners of disabled people. The perspective that service animals are recognized as property (Oliver, 2016) was found in media narratives, especially in their framing as a form of “assistive device” for disabled people. For instance, this was stated explicitly in a *Toronto Star* article about service dogs for autistic schoolchildren: “Supported by lawyers and equal rights activists, they are fighting for the dogs to be viewed as assistive devices, no less essential than hearing aids in helping kids absorb curriculum” (Zlomislic, 2014, p. A1). This links directly to Zamir’s contention (2006) that animal-assisted therapy using dogs is a moral vindication of their use by being good for the disabled person and positively stimulating for the canine.

Service animals are credited with human ingenuity and/or success (Taylor, 2011) in some of the media stories, but mostly when they provide safety for disabled people or in dramatic rhetoric of a service dog saving someone’s life. For example, a service dog in Manitoba was the cause of possible eviction for a woman with Alzheimer’s. The story’s perspective from the woman’s son said: “The animal is crucial to his mother's safety” (*Winnipeg Sun*, Sept. 29, 2016, p. A4). The safety function of service animals has been confirmed in the service animal literature (Zapf &

Rough, 2002). Media stories did not equate the societal oppression of disabled people to the lives of non-human animals or the oppressions of non-human animals by humans (Taylor, 2011); however, disabled people's need for service animals to have an equal status in society is framed as bearing on fundamental human rights, such as rights to housing and to participate in the community.

Most of the stories in this analysis were about service dogs, with service pig Podgy (Pursaga, 2016) the focus of several articles, as well as a story about a man in Hagersville, Ontario, who wanted his snake to be declared a service animal (Sonnenberg, 2016). Most stories included quotes from the disabled individuals who used service animals, and represented people with both apparent and invisible disabilities. Many stories discussed the legal recourse Canadians with disabilities had to take when they were the victim of discrimination because of their service animal.

Examples of media narrative content reflecting the frames can be found in Table 2. The frame list is in no particular order. Frame 1 emerged quickly, with many references in the stories to Canada's human rights codes, human rights tribunals or disabled people themselves explicitly stating their human rights had been violated. When a blind man was told his guide dog had to leave Ali Baba's Restaurant in Toronto in 2014, he said it was one of many violations of his rights that he often experiences: "Toronto, it's a big place. There's so many people that just don't understand human rights" (Forani, 2014, July 5). Frame 2 was easily found with stories using the word "fighting" in perspectives from lawyers and disability rights advocates. Hill, 52—the same blind man whose guide dog was removed from the restaurant—recalls thinking:

Why do I gotta go through this? It's tough enough to get around being a blind guy, but to **have to be fighting** (boldface added) just for your rights all the time . . . We're not in 1955 anymore. This is 2014 — and Canada yet, (Forani, 2014, n.p.)

Frame 3 was more nuanced; statements and quotes in the stories discussed how animals aid disabled humans. In this quote from an article in Ontario's *Port Perry Star* about the Scugog Accessibility Advisory Committee honoring a school that allowed an autistic child's service dog there: "Animals can play a role in helping all of us maintain a quality of life" (Walker, 2012). This frame ties into CAS literature about both the positive and negative interdependence of non-human animals and humans, as Taylor (2011) explains, "We treat [animals] as if their bodies exist solely for us," (p. 194), instead of realizing that humans, too, are animals and that animal oppressions of all kind matter as we are bound up in interspecies interdependence (Taylor, 2011; Oliver, 2016).

Frame 4 emerged in most stories when sources told journalists about the lack of laws governing service animals in Canada. A 2014 *Toronto Star* story explained:

While federal law protects a blind person's right to be accompanied in any public place by a service animal, the rights of children with autism who rely on trained dogs to keep them safe, regulate unruly behaviour and help them develop socially are not so clear (Zlomislic, 2014, Feb. 3, p. A1)

Notably, this article about parents asking schools to allow their autistic children to have their service dogs by their side in schools is on page one, indicating *The Star's* belief that this is an important topic. Frame 5 was typically an implied frame from people's ignorance about service animals as reflected in the stories, which had to be explained by disability rights advocates:

"Laurie Letheren, a lawyer with ARCH Disability Law Centre, said concerns about service dogs



are often overblown because of a basic misunderstanding” from the general public that these are well-trained working non-human animals, not pets (*Toronto Star*, 2014, Feb. 3).

Stories reflecting Frame 6 typically mentioned invisible disabilities specifically, such as epilepsy or PTSD. Even after she provided documentation of her PTSD and records that her service dog was fully trained, Alberta soldier, Sgt. Shirley Jew, said Air Canada “told her PTSD isn't recognized as a disability that requires a service dog. Staff told her she'd have to travel with her pug-schnauzer-terrier Snoopy as a pet—for a \$50 fee” (Purdy, 2014, July 14, p. A4). A Veteran Affairs Canada pilot study supports the contention that PTSD dogs perform a service, contrary to Air Canada’s faulty pet classification (Veteran Affairs Canada, 2018).

Frame 7 covered both service animals and specialized detection non-human animals that provide warnings about disabilities or chronic illnesses such as seizure dogs or diabetes dogs. These stories provide an education for readers who may not know that non-human animals can be trained for such specific tasks. In a story from *The Canadian Press* about B.C. legislating against fake service animals, a service dog trainer explains the attributes of trained service dogs:

Laura Watamanuk, Executive Director of the Pacific Assistance Dogs Society, says public perceptions of service animals are often limited to guide dogs donning conspicuous harnesses to lead their visually impaired handlers. The dogs emerging from her school, she said, have skill sets that address a host of other, less visible disabilities. These include alerting deaf people to the sounds around them, warning diabetes patients of potentially dangerous changes in their blood sugar levels and providing therapy for those suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (McQuigge, 2015, April 20, p. A6).

Frame 8 was often about what was not included, essentially that sometimes rights of individual disabled people come into conflict with other people's disabilities. For example, nowhere in the story about the Canadian man trying to get his snake declared a service animal did it discuss the potential problem of him going into public around people with snake phobias (Sonnenberg, 2016). Surprisingly, Frame 9 was not as prevalent as might be expected; many articles did not explain the extensive training service dogs, in particular, receive from the time they are born. However, one 2013 story in *The Toronto Star* profiled the Oakville, Ontario training centre for service dogs:

'If I didn't get help I'd have to live in a home,' says the 40-year-old Victoria, B.C., man who has suffered life-threatening epileptic seizures and was in Oakville recently making final arrangements for the very assistance he needs to maintain independence. It comes in the form of Naveed, an almost two-year-old dog with a value of \$25,000—the cost of care and special training as a seizure response service animal by the Lions Foundation of Canada Dog Guides program, funded solely through donations and fundraising. The \$25,000 includes clients' transportation costs so they can participate in the final part of training, which lasts one to four weeks. Clients, who get the dog at no cost, learn to work with the animal as its allegiance passes from trainer to new master. Naveed is the 2,000th dog to graduate from the Oakville centre, which started training service animals in 1985, originally for people with visual disabilities (*Toronto Star*, 2013, June 22, p. GT4).

Most of the news stories missed playing the role of educator to their readers about service animals. Not unsurprisingly, they framed service animals as what they thought was most

attention-getting, essentially: a disabled person pursuing a case of discrimination through the human rights system; a person trying to have a non-traditional service animal, such as a pig or snake accepted; or conflicts arising when services animals are rejected from restaurants, airplanes, schools and other public spaces.

Many of the 26 stories analyzed shared similar characteristics, multiple frames, and confusion about service animal laws. Many even used puns about animals in the headlines; for example: “Doggone it,” (*Winnipeg Sun*, 2016), “Airline caught in a 'cat-22' over feline passengers,” (Schmidt, 2013); “Good dogs to get their day; With official ID, trained service animals will help send impostors to doghouse,” (Griffin, 2015); “Controversy unleashed” (Egan, 2017).

**Table 2. Examples of service animal frames in news media stories**

<p>Frame 1. Service animals are a human rights issue.</p>	<p>From a story about a restaurant asking a man to leave his Hearing Ear dog outside; printed in <i>The Mississauga News</i>: “When the restaurateur was asked if he understood that under Ontario's Human Rights Code Stelmacovich cannot be refused proper service, Bahl said the dog didn't need to be inside because he had friends who could help. Asked if he refused proper service he said, "Of course not." Stelmacovich says he plans to make a formal complaint to the Ontario</p>
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	<p>Human Rights tribunal over the incident. He feels it's time to take a stand for others who rely on guide dogs for help and are routinely refused service because of it" (Torstar Network, 2013).</p>
<p>Frame 2. Using service animals in public spaces is a battle or fight.</p>	<p>A story in <i>The Toronto Star</i> about the need for autistic children to have their service dogs in school with them: "Supported by lawyers and equal rights activists, they are fighting for the dogs to be viewed as assistive devices, no less essential than hearing aids in helping kids absorb curriculum" (<i>Toronto Star</i>, 2014, Feb. 3).</p>
<p>Frame 3. Service animals are like an assistive aide or assistive device.</p>	<p>A story in the <i>Port Perry Star</i> (ON) about the Scugog Accessibility Advisory Committee's efforts to make the town more accessible: "The dog is a companion to a child with autism, and helps the student stay calm. Councillor Larry Corrigan applauded the achievement and said he hopes to see more service animals welcomed into schools.</p>

	<p>"Animals encourage you," he said. "I know how animals can play a role in helping all of us maintain a quality of life" (Walker, 2012).</p>
<p>Frame 4. Canada has no standard service animal law and policy countrywide.</p>	<p>A story about the controversy over a pit-bull mix service dog in the <i>Ottawa Sun</i>: "There are a patchwork of regulations covering service animals across Canada, but Ontario is sometimes called "the Wild West" for its lack of statutory rigour" (Egan, 2017).</p>
<p>Frame 5. Concerns about service dogs/animals come from misunderstandings, rather than actual problems with service animals.</p>	<p>A story in <i>The Toronto Star</i> about the need for autistic children to have their service dogs in school with them: "Laurie Letheren, a lawyer with ARCH Disability Law Centre, said concerns about service dogs are often overblown because of a basic misunderstanding. 'You're not petting this dog,' she said" (<i>Toronto Star</i>, 2014, Feb. 3).</p>
<p>Frame 6. Invisible disabilities like PTSD, seizures and diabetes are misunderstood, so</p>	<p>From a story in which a woman with a support dog wasn't allowed to travel on Orangeville (ON) transit: "Linda, who has been given a pseudonym to protect her</p>

<p>people with those disabilities who use service animals are suspect.</p>	<p>identity, suffers from anxiety, depression, panic attacks and a fear of being in public spaces. Her support dog helps to alleviate those symptoms when she is out in public” (<i>Orangeville Banner</i>, 2017).</p>
<p>Frame 7. Service animals provide safety for disabled people.</p>	<p>From a story about the special training service animals receive, published in <i>The Times-Colonist</i> in BC: “These breeds can be trained as guides for the blind or visually impaired, as hearing dogs to assist people with deafness, as service dogs for people with physical disabilities, as seizure response dogs, for autism assistance and as diabetic alert dogs. ‘Most of our dogs provide an extra level of safety,’ Moncur said in a telephone interview from Oakville” (Watts, 2013).</p>
<p>Frame 8. Laws should deal with conflicting disabilities regarding service animals (i.e. people with allergies vs. people who need service animals in public spaces.)</p>	<p>From a story about Air Canada dealing with people flying with emotional support cats and the conflict with other passengers with allergies, printed in <i>The Calgary Herald</i>: “In a recent submission to the government agency overseeing traveller complaints, Air Canada</p>

	<p>characterizes the situation as one of ‘conflicting disabilities’ between a person with a disability by reason of their allergy to cats and a person with a disability (needing) a cat as an emotional support animal” (Schmidt, 2012).</p>
<p>Frame 9. Service animals are trained and are different from pets.</p>	<p>From a story about imposter service dogs in <i>The Vancouver Sun</i>: ““They're not pets that we bring around. They provide a service - I need her to pick things up. You can tell the way the dog is and the handler. You see someone walking around with her Chihuahua and she calls it a service dog. It's too small to be your service dog. I see it all the time”” (Griffin, 2015).</p>

### Discussion

Notably, many of the laws and policies relating to service animals in Canada are recent, and disability advocates are pushing for more clarification about regulation of service animals. On Prince Edward Island, for instance, a Charlottetown woman Karen MacRae has been advocating for the province to create legislation that would allow people with service animals to move

around freely without having to rely on recourse through the Human Rights Act to guarantee that right (CBC News, 2016). Encouragingly, existing laws and policies demonstrate a realization on the part of provincial governments that disability rights intersect with non-human animal rights and call for legal protection. Yet, it is concerning in that the recent reforms, while providing for greater legal rights, also exacerbate the piecemeal approach that has partly been to blame for the ongoing exclusionary conduct as portrayed by the 26 media stories we analysed.

However, this media analysis makes it clear that although the news media may be taking disability rights slightly more seriously, they are not focused on non-human animal rights. As John Sorenson (2014) explains, the notion that equity and social justice should be extended to nonhuman animals is unthinkable for many audiences, and we would add, this includes journalists:

These suggestions [for animal rights] are ridiculed even by many who consider themselves progressive and are fierce defenders of rights for marginalized human groups; indeed, a stated concern for other humans is often presented as precisely the reason for not being concerned about other animals, as if these two ideas were mutually exclusive (p. xv).

Nevertheless, these Canadian news stories about service animals do contain frames that illustrate that the news media does understand service animals as significant to the human rights, safety, and assistance of disabled people. Like most Canadians, journalists do not understand the legal position of service animals (when this exists), and misunderstand the important interdependence between service animals and their disabled partners. Journalists writing these 26 articles appear to understand disability rights as a human rights issue but are far from comprehending Sunaura Taylor's (2011) framework of disability justice that includes



all species. Our analysis illuminates intersections between human and nonhuman subjects as they appear in news articles about service animals and disabled people, but these articles are lacking true depth about the personal and social experiences Canadians with disabilities have with service animals and vice versa.

The gaps in this media coverage may be problematic in the coming years because the news media needs to shed light on disability justice and the workings of interdependence as a significant topic that informs disability rights and advocacy in Canada (Jones et al., 2019). There is impetus for journalists to play a crucial role in the public's understanding of the laws that pertain to service animals and an understanding of nonhuman animals themselves. First, media can be used as a tool to educate the public on the law, which will encourage service providers to respect rights, and more disabled people to stand up for their rights. Second, media can expose gaps in Canadian laws and policies by reporting on stories that detail discrimination; doing so may result in further law reform. However, as media framing continues to be a taken-for-granted process, it is expected that news stories about disability rights as human rights dominated our sample because this is the only category of legal protection in Canada that affords disabled people an avenue for effective redress. In telling such stories, though, the media must be empowered with legal knowledge: a major challenge.

### **Conclusion**

Our analysis of news coverage about disabled people's experiences with service animals reminds us that although legal protections exist in Canada for disabled people who use service animals, people and their animals continue to face exclusion from their communities. They and their service animals are routinely denied accommodation in school, public transit, eateries, and

beyond. Further, the legal protections afforded to people using service animals are confusing and inconsistent across the country. Therefore, news coverage of denials of access are entrenched in confusion about the rights of both disabled people and service animals in Canada. Often, media stories illustrate that journalists are as confused as the public. Until the media clearly understand the legalities surrounding stories about service animals and disability justice, they will fail to be a powerful tool to effect positive change for disabled people and service animals.

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