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## Press Reports of Animal Hoarding

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## **Press Reports of Animal Hoarding**

### ABSTRACT

This article explores how the press reports nonhuman animal hoarding and hoarders. It discusses how 100 articles from 1995 to the present were content analyzed. Analysis revealed five emotional themes that include drama, revulsion, sympathy, indignation, and humor. While these themes draw readers' attention and make disparate facts behind cases understandable by packaging them in familiar formats, they also present an inconsistent picture of animal hoarding that can confuse readers about the nature and significance of this behavior as well as animal abuse, more generally.

Despite the plethora of studies of crime reporting by the media (Best, 1999; Cohen & Young, 1981; Ericson, 1995; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Potter & Kappeler, 1998; Sasson, 1995), researchers have neglected to study how the press covers crimes against nonhuman animals. Although this inattention likely reflects social science's general disinterest in studying human-animal relationships (Arluke, 1993), violations of anti-cruelty statutes are neither

minor nor rare. For example, in a typical year in Massachusetts there are approximately 5000 complaints of animal abuse and neglect, some involving unprovoked, planned, and brutal attacks on animals that leave them severely injured or dead (Arluke & Luke, 1997). Common too are “passive cruelty” cases that are not so deliberate but still cause protracted suffering in animals.

As a form of passive cruelty, animal hoarders keep large numbers of neglected companion animals in inappropriate, inadequate, and over-crowded conditions that cause starvation, disease, behavioral problems, or death (Campbell & Robinson, 2001). These cases often involve humane societies, animal shelters, and others concerned with the protection of animals who struggle to manage the problem of people who amass dozens or even hundreds of animals, purportedly out of concern and love for them (Lockwood, 1994) and then deny them even the rudiments of humane care and, sometimes, the necessities of life. According to Patronek (1999), most hoarders are female (76%), a large proportion (46%) are 60 years of age or older, most are single, divorced, or widowed, and almost half live alone. The most common animals involved are cats (65%) and dogs (60%). Patronek also estimates that there are 700 to 2,000 new cases of animal hoarding every year in the United States.

The motivation for these cases is usually not rational, but even if rational, it is misguided. Researchers have suggested many causes for hoarding that fall short of overtly psychotic behavior (Worth & Beck, 1981), including addiction, attachment disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and zoophilia (HARC, 2000). This behavior is quite different from that of animal collectors whose motivation is less likely a matter of mental pathology but more an instance of preoccupation with an avocation. These people systematically accumulate many different creatures for a variety of reasons while usually providing appropriate care and housing for them. Unfortunately, the press usually blurs this distinction by referring to both instances as collecting.

The building blocks of press accounts of hoarding cases are the individual, private troubles experienced by hoarders, co-dwellers, family, friends, and neighbors. As a private trouble, acquiring large numbers of animals can present problems of a highly personal nature. Hoarders and those living with them often are socially isolated and suffer ill health; neighbors contend with noise, noxious odors, and unwelcome animals on their property; and relatives and friends experience frustration and shame. Sanitary conditions often

deteriorate to the extent that dwellings are unfit for human habitation. Obviously, hoarders' animals face trouble from lack of food or veterinary care and from exposure to unsanitary and dangerous living conditions.

Press reports of the private troubles of hoarders, co-dwellers, friends, and neighbors transform these individual experiences into a public issue, as occurs with crime incidents in the news (Sacco, 1995). Mills (1959) and Best (1995) have described the process by which private troubles, such as homelessness or unemployment, are transformed into public issues through the media's ability to selectively gather up, invest with broader meaning, and make available for public consumption the building blocks of individual experiences. The raw material for the media's construction of stories are the reports and opinions of experts that are put into certain reporting conventions, such as the crime story, in order to make stories newsworthy, appealing, and understandable to readers. Individual cases become symptomatic of a larger problem, various "experts" offer their explanations of the problem's causes, and certain types of social control agencies become identified with the proper management of the problem.

In so doing, the press helps to construct the reader's understanding of the issue at hand and to shape the public's emotional response to it as well. Indeed, the power of the news media derives from its ability to elicit emotions in readers. Eliciting emotions not only draws readers' attention, it can promote action on certain issues by helping "new" social problems gain support and momentum (Spector & Kituse, 1977). For instance, publication of child abuse horror stories played a prominent role in the success of the child maltreatment movement during the last 25 years (Johnson, 1995).

It is important to examine how the press transforms animal hoarding from a private trouble to a public issue because this may be the sole source of information most people get about this behavior. In fact, these reports may be the public's major source of information about animal neglect in general, since routine cases of neglect are unlikely to be deemed newsworthy by the media. These reports also may influence the thinking of professionals who create and enforce social policies that affect the welfare of animals. Our focus, then, is to explore how the news reports animal hoarding and what impact these reports might have on public and professional attitudes toward animal hoarding specifically and animal abuse more generally.

## Method

To better understand the nature of these stories, we conducted an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) of newspaper accounts of animal hoarding. This method of analyzing documentary evidence relies on the observer's insider understanding about a setting or phenomenon to interpret its meaning and emphasis (Johnson, 1975). The goal is to capture broad meanings or themes in what is studied rather than to report statistical frequencies about it. In the present case, the goal was to capture how the press characterized animal hoarding and hoarders. Although our approach to capturing these themes is qualitative and not quantitative, readers can gauge the meaning of adjectives used in our analysis to get a rough sense of frequencies. General magnitude levels (e.g., "a few," "most,") are used rather than summary statistics. The following list couples these terms with their percentage approximations: rare = <6%; few = 6-10%; some = 11-20%; many = 21-50%; most = 51-80%; vast majority = >80%.

We examined a total of 100 articles from 1995 to 2001 in papers throughout the United States and Great Britain. Articles for review were generated from two sources: the media files of the Tufts University Center for Animals and Public Policy and online newspaper abstracting services (Lexus-Nexus Academic Universe and Newspaper Abstracts). Searches used the following keywords: animal, pet, collect, hoard, cruelty, SPCA, feces/fecal. We gathered articles until analysis of major themes reached saturation, a point when the investigator judged that review of additional data would not produce new themes. Of course, because news reports about animal hoarders were infrequent, we could collect only a convenience sample of articles. We are confident, however, that there was no inherent bias in these abstracting services that might exclude some articles, making it likely that our sample was representative.

Initial sorting yielded broad categories such as condition of the animals, condition of the premises, description of investigator and/or officials, description of hoarder, role of animals, relation to animals, reasons generated for hoarding behavior, insight into hoarding behavior, response to investigation, action taken against hoarders, community opinions, history of past episodes, other themes, and comments about pictures and captions. Using these categories, we more closely analyzed stories to identify underlying themes in how the press communicated information about hoarding to readers.

## Results

Content analysis revealed five emotional themes in newspaper articles about animal hoarding: drama, revulsion, sympathy, indignation, and humor. These themes were not mutually exclusive, nor was there a striking difference in the frequency of their representation, except for humor, which appeared least often in our sample. Although these themes capture readers' attention and make disparate facts behind cases understandable by packaging them in familiar formats, they also have implications for how readers understand the nature and significance of animal hoarding and, more generally, animal abuse.

### *Drama*

The most common journalistic convention used to report stories about hoarding is the dramatic crime story format that relies heavily on criminal justice sources. Law enforcement authorities are called to a scene of trouble where they intervene to help victims and deal with wrongdoers. More specifically, authorities surprisingly discover large numbers of suffering or dead animals who are taken away from angry or grieved owners who face charges of cruelty and possible conviction and sentencing.

The drama begins with a surprise discovery of large numbers of neglected animals by public officials called in to investigate complaints of strange odors or to put out fires. Initial complaints about hoarders usually came from neighbors who complained about "strong" or "obnoxious" odors or "stench" and, less often, nuisance problems like "barking loudly," as opposed to animal mistreatment *per se*. There were no complaints about animal mistreatment by hoarders, probably due to their social isolation and concealment of animals inside homes. It was common for hoarders to be described as "uncomfortable around people" or as "quiet and somewhat reclusive." Hoarders boarded up their windows, rarely appeared outside, or did not answer their doors when knocked, making it difficult if not impossible for neighbors to know much about them or their animals.

Presenting hoarding as a crime story meant that articles often emphasized, in dramatic terms, the perspective of law enforcement authorities who intervened to help victims (i.e., animals) who were harmed by perpetrators (i.e., hoarders). Use of terms such as "rescued" or "removed" implied that animals

needed to be “taken away” with some urgency by benevolent authorities who would improve an animal’s ill health or intolerable situation. Other terms were more neutral on this point, including “seized,” “confiscated,” “impounded,” or “claimed.” A few articles used terms such as “raid” that underscored the law enforcement approach to managing hoarders and the aggressive steps needed on behalf of animal victims.

More specifically, the “official” voice typically painted each case as the “worst” or “most horrifying” case “ever seen.” One article cited a humane official who said, “‘You can’t imagine people accumulating that sort of filth and garbage’ . . . Frazier said that it was the most foul scene he had encountered in his six years on the job.”<sup>2</sup> If not the “worst ever seen,” cases were “among the worst.” Similarly, officials often described the neglect of animals in superlative terms. For example, an official claimed that one case represented the “largest number of neglected animals ever seen.”

Although many articles noted that hoarders could be charged with cruelty, reports of charges actually being filed were not routine. “Criminal charges may follow” was typical text. A few cases noted other charges being filed, including child endangerment or assault and battery of an investigating police officer. Charges of animal cruelty sometimes simply were dropped if hoarders agreed to give up their animals. Of course, the failure to report charges actually being brought against hoarders was partly because newspapers prefer breaking stories, so coverage of hoarders was usually limited to early phases of investigation when homes were first entered and animals seized, before cases were adjudicated.

Authorities often removed animals, euthanizing many and treating others. Since the law enforcement viewpoint dominated these articles, hoarders did not routinely comment on these actions; when they did, there were predictable protests of unlawful and unnecessary seizure of their “children.” Some hoarders were characterized as being more actively resistant to authority, having histories of being uncooperative or hostile toward them. One article featured a headline reading “Notorious Cat Hoarder Jailed” and detailed the exploits of a “wily and elusive foe.” Another article noted that “as is true of most animal hoarders, [the hoarder] had a track record,” listing her history of being deceptive and difficult with authorities as she chronically acquired animals. Yet another hoarder was described as “so belligerent the police were called



to help,” at which point he wrestled with police, got sprayed with pepper spray, and was finally arrested. It also was common for articles to describe repeated attempts, sometimes spanning years, to take animals away from hoarders who resisted these efforts by authorities.

Despite the crime story format, hoarders appeared to be handled leniently in court. There were few reports of guilty verdicts or no contest pleas, rare reports of fines, and extremely rare reports of jail time. A number of articles reported “warnings” of stiff sentences; in one case, the article reported that the hoarder “could face up to 17 years in prison.” More often, hoarders were forced to give up many or all of their animals, prohibited from having animals for a limited or indefinite time, prohibited from breeding animals for a limited time, or restricted from having more than a certain number of animals. In addition, hoarders were put on probation, ordered to perform community service, ordered to reimburse their towns or local shelters for the cost of veterinary care and food, or fined. Several articles suggested that restrictions on keeping animals were experienced as harsh by hoarders. In rare reports of hoarders receiving sentences of jail time or fines, these punishments were not for animal neglect *per se*. More typically, non-animal related offenses resulted in jail time. For instance, one hoarder, charged with “extreme” neglect of 28 animals, was immediately jailed because of child neglect and charges of “felony child endangerment.” In other cases, hoarders were sentenced to jail for contempt of court, fraud, and violation of probation.

### *Revulsion*

As they described the drama of these “worst” cases, articles concentrated on hoarders’ lifestyles and living conditions in ways that could elicit disgust in readers. Hoarders were reported to violate societal taboos regarding proper personal and domestic, cleanliness, order, and safety.

Articles often focused on the squalor of hoarders’ homes. Exemplifying this pattern, a few headlines read, “Man cited in keeping 60 Labradors in Filth,” “Cats Seized from Squalid Home,” and “Menasha Woman Gets Jail Term for Keeping Pets in Filthy Home.” The content of articles followed suit. “Dog Lover Gets More Time to Clean” described a case of a woman with 140 dogs (not reported as neglected) whose house was declared a “public nuisance” by health department officials because its floors needed scraping and scrubbing

to get rid of the feces and roaches. In addition to being extremely unkempt and unsanitary, hoarders' homes were sometimes abandoned, falling apart, or burned because of their owner's neglect. In one case, for example, the hoarder had a candle on her television set that dripped on an adjacent plant, which in turn ignited the television, causing it to explode, blow out the front window, and start a more general house fire.

Descriptions of stench-filled, dilapidated, run-down homes created an image of hoarders as pathetic, troubled people whose life-styles clearly separated them from prevailing community standards. Detailed descriptions were common of feces, urine, and spoiled food found throughout hoarders' homes, flying in the face of conventional cultural norms that restrict domestic animals' movement, excretion, and eating to limited and specified areas. Not merely unaesthetic and chaotic, hoarders' homes were uncivilized. Homes and yards also were littered with animal carcasses, further contributing to the image of uncivilized chaos. A few reports described scenes of carnage and death, with animal corpses scattered throughout the hoarders' homes in varying degrees of decomposition, occasionally being eaten by other animals. One article noted "house covered with feces, several inches thick in places" with "dead, dying, and half eaten cats" throughout the home. When humane workers arrived at one home with more than 200 dogs, they found ". . . dead dogs hanging from windows. There were pieces of bodies of dogs. Some dogs were dead in their cages . . . some adult dogs were feeding on puppies." Several articles reported that animal cadavers were discovered in refrigerators. One, for instance, reported that investigators discovered 29 dead cats and a decomposed 6-inch alligator in the hoarder's freezer. One bag of frozen cats was marked "S. Sauce." There was some question about whether five bags and a large pot of spaghetti sauce also in the freezer might have been made from cat meat.

The result of the urine, feces, decomposed food, and cadavers was utter chaos and "overpowering stench," as though hoarders and their animals had sunk to a level of existence that was subhuman if not subanimal, far below civilized standards. Articles suggested that this squalor was so bad that neither humans nor animals should live in such uncivilized conditions. Rather than simply describing this squalor, media accounts usually quoted humane officials, house inspectors, or firefighters who recounted in graphic terms the extreme

clutter and stench they encountered, how it affected them, and the steps they took to overcome it.

Officials typically reported that hoarders' homes and lives were "out of control." Many articles noted that animals had "overrun" homes or had "total run" of homes. Two headlines exemplified this point; one read: "Home Found Overrun with Birds [215 birds "in cages stacked from floor to ceiling in every room"]: Resident . . . Found Dead" and the other read: "More Than 100 Dogs Take Over Home, Life." Articles' text elaborated this out-of-control image. In one case, the hoarder lived in the attic because she had completely given over the rest of her home to animals. Another article said, "It was like a jungle in there. They had plenty of food, but the cats were living almost one on top of the other on one floor of the house. It was appalling." In another case, an animal official claimed that the house was literally "running with cats. . . . [they] were observed perched on top of appliances, living inside furniture and cabinets and ranging through the several rooms." In yet another case, cats were found living in the crevices of the walls. The animals appeared to be in control, free to do whatever they wished.

With animals "in control," hoarders became more animal-like in their everyday habits. For instance, their eating patterns could resemble those of animals. One article noted, "She eats dog food and grain along with her animals." In one case, a hoarder relinquished use of her kitchen, choosing to eat in her bathroom. Another article described how the hoarder's son "has to eat in the loftier of the bunk beds to keep Spot, vaguely Dalmatian and the unquestioned leader of the pack, from picking his plate clean." Sleeping, too, became animal-like for some hoarders. Other articles described this behavior, including a hoarder who "sometimes slept" with her 200 rabbits in "two cramped and filthy sheds," a hoarder who lived in a six-foot square rabbit hutch with her dozen cats and dogs, and a hoarder who said that she "used to sleep on the bottom bunk . . . but I kept waking up with too many dogs on my chest. They were cutting off my air supply."

The emphasis in articles on the disgusting or horrifying state of hoarders' homes and lifestyles overshadowed reports of animal suffering. The use of superlatives to describe animal suffering was less common than their use to describe squalor and uncivilized behavior. In one such case, an animal control officer proclaimed about a case of 23 dogs in "pitiful condition" living

in 3 inches of feces, without food or clean water, “We haven’t had anything of this magnitude in four or five years.”

More commonly, animal neglect was noted in a number of articles without much detail. Although there were reports of animals suffering from respiratory and eye infections, heartworm, diarrhea, conjunctivitis, flu, ear mites and fleas, and malnutrition, only a few articles actually described, with some detail and flourish, the horrific condition of animals. A rare photograph showed visual evidence of neglect. In one such case, a young horse was shown with debris on its forelock and mane. In another case, the photograph showed a badly matted cocker spaniel. Another photograph showed a horse whose hooves were untrimmed and beginning to curl upward.

As might be expected, child neglect trumped animal neglect in both headlines and text. In one such article, the headline read, “8 Children Taken from Squalid Home” and text described a couple charged with child endangerment for letting their eight children live amid animal carcasses, excrement, and spoiled food. Toward the end of the short article, there was brief mention that the local humane society “was expected to cite the couple” because a horse and cow were found dead from neglect and starvation on their property. To some extent, these articles positioned animal hoarding as the cause of child endangerment or “environmental child neglect” rather than a problem in its own right. For example, one article entitled “Girl’s Escape from Filthy House in Detroit Leads to Kids’ Rescue: Animals and Garbage Filled Home” detailed the chaotic and unsanitary mess in this home including “clouds of fleas,” animals standing in feces and urine, caged animals, broken toys, human feces, and “crumpled religious pamphlets and posters.” Most of the article chronicled the “pitiful” plight of the children who were severely neglected by their parents. A single sentence noted the condition of the animals—an undetermined number of cats, hamsters, and a guinea pig were “so diseased that they were put to sleep.”

Other articles were mixed or ambiguous in their reports of animal neglect. Some noted neglect in certain animals, but not in others. According to the animal control officer involved in one case, nine cats were in “tough shape . . . you could tell those animals were pretty sick just by looking at them” because they had “severe ringworm” and “various respiratory ailments.” Yet, over 20 cats left in the home had “no serious ailments,” as was also true of the

hoarder's six dogs. In another case, a humane official said that the hoarder's dogs were "mistreated and badly cared for," but only 20 out of 249 seized dogs were "put down . . . because they were in extremely poor health." Other times, it was unclear how many animals were involved, how many were neglected, or what their condition was when the case broke. For instance, one reported "dead from neglect and starvation," which in its brevity could make it hard for some readers to imagine the nature and extent of suffering experienced by these animals. Another article merely said that the animals "were not cared for properly and were living in dirty cages."

In fact, many articles made no mention at all of animals' poor health or suffering, describing them as healthy and active or at least not suffering serious health problems. One such article noted that the hoarder's 10 horses and nearly 100 ducks, turkeys, and chickens "aren't in good condition . . ." [but] "most are suffering from the types of ailments you would expect from animals living without proper nutrition or medical care. None of these ailments are life-threatening." Photographs of hoarders' animals in their homes often featured animals that appeared healthy and active and, less commonly, in "normal" interaction with hoarders. One article, for example, used four photographs, all of healthy or active animals and a sign outside the hoarder's "sanctuary" reading "Beyond These Gates Lies a Safe Haven for All of God's Creatures."

### *Sympathy*

Articles about animal hoarding also conveyed a theme of pity or sympathy for hoarders. The image of hoarders as sad people came through most apparently when articles attempted to explain hoarding. Although a few articles gave no explanation for hoarding, many did, providing a quick diagnosis of animal hoarder "syndrome," "disorder," or "profile" by citing any authority figure present with an opinion, including housing inspectors, firefighters, police, animal control officers, and humane officials as well as unnamed "researchers" or "authorities."

Not surprisingly, comments by these various officials and experts about the motivations and behaviors of hoarders lacked much psychological depth, sophistication, or consistency. "Symptoms" of this "syndrome" varied from article to article and were often vague and clinically questionable, such as having "too much love" for animals. One article, for example, was particularly

sprinkled with a journalist's and humane official's talk about "obsession" and "addiction," at one point comparing hoarders to "tobacco addicts or shopping addicts." The effect of such popular psychologizing was to create a folk diagnosis of hoarding, in the absence of any official category for animal hoarding as a mental health problem or clinical diagnosis by trained mental health professionals.

Despite occasional references to being "crazy," "far out of reality," or "not all there," these folk diagnoses did not see hoarders as suffering from serious mental disorders. It was far more common for articles to paint a picture of hoarders as not seriously disturbed. One article said that the difference between normal pet owners who behave "sensibly" and hoarders was that the latter "don't stop at a few dogs or even a dozen." One hoarder of dogs, birds, foxes, guinea pigs, iguanas and a baboon was described as "a nice woman who needs a little help," portraying her as bizarre but well meaning. Similarly, in one Q and A with a humane official, a reporter asked, "What drives people to take in more animals than they can handle and how [can] people spot hoarders in their neighborhoods?" to which the official replied, they have an "illness" but "they're average, normal people."

Reports of how judges handled these cases further supported the image that hoarders were not seriously disturbed. As reported in the press, judges rarely suggested or required counseling for hoarders. Even when judges alluded to possible mental health problems in hoarders, they still did not typically order or recommend counseling. In one such case, the judge simply commented, "I think it's clear you are fixated on animals. In your obsession, you really are misguided." This reticence to recommend counseling is surprising for three reasons. First, a number of hoarders' behaviors seemed symptomatic of serious psychological disorder based on how badly they neglected their animals, homes, and themselves. Second, sometimes hoarders' own attorneys cited their clients' histories with mental illness, suggesting chronic and serious problems. Third, sometimes investigators specifically asked judges to approach hoarders as irrational or disturbed individuals. For example, in one case of a woman who kept a variety of wild animals—a wolf, foxes, hedgehogs, and a baboon—in a feces-cluttered two-bedroom apartment, investigators said that they hoped the judge would be able to "talk some sense into her."

Instead of mental disorder or criminal behavior, hoarders were portrayed as suffering from a blind spot that prevented them from seeing the ill effects of their basically good intentions. Sufferers of this syndrome had “too much love.” This blind spot, rather than diagnostic of serious disorder, cast hoarding in a positive light. Many articles characterized the impulse to “save” animals as a matter of having “too much love” or “compassion.” Hoarders were animal “lovers” and headlines such as “Compassion Unleashed” and “Animal Passions” emphasized this point. The text of many articles elaborated this theme. One, for instance, noted “This woman loved animals so much she could not turn them away.” Other articles claimed that hoarders loved their animals too much to give them up, even though they could not care for them.

Saying that hoarders suffered from “too much love” for animals assumed strong positive feelings toward animals that might well include nurturing and other behaviors typically coupled with love. Positive feelings for their animals simply went astray. It also grouped hoarders with “animal lovers” in general, which might serve to add some legitimacy or normalcy to their public identities in the press.

Because they had so much “love” for their animals, hoarders sadly appeared to retreat from human contacts, having little or no life beyond their animals. Hoarders’ animals were their “only family and friends,” “babies,” and/or “children.” The title of one article read, “Dog Owner is Told to Curtail His Collie Clan,” and elsewhere the article referred to the hoarder’s “pack.” One article pointed out that because the hoarder had so many animals, she did not take trips or use television or radio. A number of articles, somewhat pathetically, noted that hoarders felt like their entire purpose in life was taken away from them if their animals were seized and destroyed. “What else do I have anymore?” bemoaned one hoarder.

Readers’ sympathy might also be elicited in a different way. Although done infrequently and briefly, some articles provided the hoarders’ perspective, which excused or justified their behavior by framing it in a positive light or by casting aspersions on law enforcement officials and others. By providing accounts such as these, newspaper articles neutralized adverse perceptions of hoarders as social misfits or deviants, like others whose identities are questioned or stigmatized (Lyman & Scott, 1970).

Hoarders excused themselves by claiming that they never intended to harm animals, but only to rescue them from death or euthanasia. One hoarder claimed that she performed a “community service by taking in stray animals” and “saved quite a few lives of some of those cats.” Several said that they were trying to place some or many of their animals in other homes, only temporarily keeping them until these arrangements could be made.

In fact, many hoarders asserted that their animals were happy and healthy, painting a picture of their animals’ love for them. One hoarder was quoted: “I love the dogs, sir, and they love me. That barking people hear—that’s the dogs going into an orgy of ‘We’re so glad you’re home, Daddy.’” Another remarked: “The worst thing to me is a dog living in a crate or on a 6-foot chain. Even though these dogs aren’t sitting on somebody’s sofa, they’re perfectly happy running around.”

A few hoarders acknowledged that their desire to rescue animals had gotten out of hand. One hoarder, charged with animal neglect by failing to sufficiently feed and water 48 horses, ponies, and donkeys, and 32 dogs, wept in court. The article reported:

. . . her intentions were to save animals, but she had acquired more animals than she could handle. Between sobs, [the hoarder] said she was sorry she had not cared for the animals properly. “I would go hungry myself before my animals would go without.”

Similarly, a hoarder in another case said,

I have loved animals all my life and would never set out to make them suffer. But because of my stupidity and arrogance in thinking I could cope, I made these gentle creatures suffer. It is something I will never forgive myself for.

One hoarder’s lawyer argued “This is not an animal abuse case. It’s an animal loving case that went too far.”

Hoarders also lashed out at people who stigmatized them as being mentally disturbed because of this unusual “devotion” to animals. “These people act as if you have a psychological problem if you want to help animals. I did nothing illegal, yet they treat me like a common criminal . . .” Some hoarders expressed a siege mentality, describing constant attacks by aggressive and



insensitive officials, implying that the problem rested with those who sought to take hoarders' animals rather than with hoarders themselves. "Demonic" was the description of one local humane society by a hoarder.

I give those cats the best food money can buy. Whenever I'm away I have people taking care of the cats. Those people [humane society] are just out to ruin me . . . All was going well until the humane society moved in.

Feeling harassed, one hoarder proclaimed, "Why don't they just leave us alone?" Another hoarder claimed that the humane officer investigating her case made threats, "saying he would get me and all of these animals would be euthanized." Another frustrated hoarder said, "They've been on us like locusts. . . . He [town official] just says anything. I have no sick or miserable animals here . . . We're doing our level best."

Sometimes verbal support for hoarders was reported from friends or co-workers who underscored the aggressiveness of officials. One article reported that friends of the hoarder considered her a "victim of constant hounding from county officials and neighboring ranchers—adversaries who color her strange for devoting her life to helping wayward animals." A neighbor defended one hoarder as someone who was eccentric but loved animals: "He's kind of different and sometimes people try to take advantage of him. In this case, he's kind of getting railroaded. It seems like the humane society is on a witch hunt."

And finally, some articles countered negative images of hoarders by having their friends or lawyers describe them in positive or sympathetic ways. "There is a part of her that's very intelligent," said a defense attorney in another case. "She just lives her life very differently . . . She's not malicious toward the cats. Her life is the cats." The article also noted that this hoarder—who spoke with an English accent and claimed to have attended Cambridge University was considered by her friends to be a "charming woman who regularly watches the TV game show 'Jeopardy!' and can answer all the questions." One neighbor said of her: "When she's dressed in normal clothes she just seems a class act. She's literate, intelligent . . . but she needs help."

## *Indignation*

Animal hoarding stories also rely on the journalistic conventions of irony and incongruity to elicit an emotional response from the reader. More than the suffering they might have caused animals, what is surprising in these stories are the details about the hoarders themselves; details that can make these stories particularly disturbing because the hoarders are people whose social positions or behaviors would lead readers to expect them to be exceptionally good animal caretakers.

Focusing on atypical and unexpected aspects of hoarding to elicit shock or indignation in readers is a tactic also taken by the media in its reports of child abuse (Johnson, 1995), as well in crime reporting more generally (Katz, 1987). Reports of child abuse by priests, teachers, scoutmasters, politicians or child protection workers are especially disturbing to the public because their social positions lead people to trust them. Similarly, the newsworthiness of some stories stems from hoarders who are like “respectable” or “white collar” criminals.

For example, some hoarders were people to whom the public normally would entrust their own animals for exemplary care. These hoarders operated kennels, shelters, or rehabilitation centers where animals faced unpleasant massing, illness, starvation, or death. “Animal Sanctuary Attacked as Spectacle” proclaimed one headline that described a hoarder’s “haven for abandoned pets,” including her “personal menagerie” of 65 dogs, 20 wolves, a bear, a fox, a raccoon, and several horses and burros, all living in “filth.” A similar irony was featured in reports of animal “fanciers” or breeders. One report described a “well-known breeder and shower of dogs . . . who left her cats in wire cages in the attic, her ferrets locked in a bathroom and her expensive Maltese show dogs shut in a bedroom.” Fourteen of her animals were found partially decomposed, abandoned and dead of dehydration. Some of the dead animals also were quite valuable, further adding irony to the story. In a few cases, hoarders had won awards for animal care. In one “despicable . . . extreme case” of neglect of horses, ponies, dogs, cats, and birds, the article noted that “ironically” the woman won a 4-H award for horse showmanship. Less common, but just as ironic, were cases involving veterinarians or veterinary technicians presumed to be trusted professionals in the care and welfare of animals.

Another type of ironic hoarder was the white-collar professional who departed from the more common portrait of hoarders as unemployed, part time, or retired people from working or lower class occupations. For example, in one case, a vicar and his wife were found guilty of neglecting 76 cats. A few articles stressed that the hoarders in question were well-educated and well-traveled.

### *Humor*

Press accounts of hoarding sometimes trivialized it as “soft” news that entertains readers with oddities or curiosities. This departure from presenting animal hoarding as hard news is shared with media reports of child abuse, which sometimes also adopt a human-interest approach in their coverage (Nelson, 1984). However, compared to these reports, hoarding cases were more often handled in a light-hearted manner, emphasizing the comical weirdness of hoarders far more than providing details about animal neglect.

In one case, for example, the article’s major thrust was to document how the hoarder was an eccentric, cantankerous fake—a real “character.” The article suggested that she falsified her college attendance, had a phony English accent, lied about her age, had many aliases in court, wore fake animal clothing, and earned a living as a psychic. Moreover, the article questioned the seriousness of her neglect, asking “Her alleged crime? Owning Bugsy, Vampiria and their kittens.” Equally lighthearted, the article noted that this hoarder had been “playing cat and mouse with animal control officers for 13 years.”

Some of the lightness comes from tongue-and-cheek descriptions of hoarding that trivialize the issue. Headlines, for instance, took a humorous approach to hoarding through clever plays on words such as “Gone to the Cats,” “Saved By a Whisker,” or “Pet Hoarders Back in the Doghouse.” In the latter article, one of the humane officials, who seized the hoarder’s rabbits, cats, and dogs, “. . . said with a laugh, ‘It definitely puts a new spin on the term animal house.’” The press also seemed light-hearted at times when describing the large number and variety of animals kept by hoarders. Some articles referred to the hoarders’ animals as “zoos” or “menageries” when hoarders had a large variety of domestic, farm, and wild animals. One “menagerie” included dogs, cats, chickens, turkeys, goats, ducks, rabbits, and a peacock. In another case, the hoarder’s home was called a “feces clogged urban Noah’s Ark” full

of “strange creatures” including small birds, a wolf, foxes, hedgehogs, snakes, racoons, guinea pigs, iguanas, 14 dogs, and a baboon. Investigators also thought they saw an orangutan.

A few articles pitched stories about hoarders as laughingly bizarre. For instance, one brief report about a hoarder appeared as part of a weekly column, entitled “Funky Friday News of the Weird.” The paragraph described the home of a local postal worker who had “thousands of pieces of undelivered mail stacked from floor to ceiling” in his “upscale” Washington apartment. Also found were 58 live birds and turtles, 30 dead ones, and large deposits of human and animal waste. “Neighbors had recently taken to calling the hoarder, who was a loner, ‘Jeffrey Dahmer’ because of the scent that escaped when he opened the door. Co-workers described the hoarder as pleasant and well-groomed.” Paired with this paragraph were other news stories of “funky” or “weird” happenings. They included a story about a 91-year-old woman who fatally struck her 91-year-old husband of 67 years with a cane after “he had become too boisterous in demanding sex” and a story about an Australian football player who was ejected from a game and severely reprimanded because he attempted to diffuse a potential brawl by grabbing an opponent and “kissing him flush on the lips.”

## **Discussion**

The emotional themes described above present an inconsistent picture of animal hoarding that can confuse readers about the nature and significance of this behavior. First, readers might be confused as to whether animal hoarders should be regarded as criminals. On the one hand, some articles present hoarding as a criminal problem. The drama of the crime story convention sensitizes readers to thinking about hoarders as criminals—violators of the anti-cruelty law who are “busted” by law enforcement authorities who seize their “property” (i.e., animals) and possibly charge, prosecute, sentence, and punish them in court. On the other hand, despite frequent use of this convention, hoarders are not treated in the news as “bad” (i.e., serious criminals). Unlike child abusers who are demonized in the news by portraying them as intending to harm their victims and by providing highly elaborate descriptions of their abusive acts, hoarders are not portrayed as fully responsible for their behavior and descriptions of animal neglect are given less attention.

Although law enforcement authorities frequently seize their animals, hoarders rarely are charged with crimes and even less often are found guilty and punished. Moreover, when there are court-ordered punishments, they tend to be restrictions on animal ownership. Little of this smacks of serious criminal behavior, despite use of the crime story convention.

Second, readers might be confused as to whether hoarding should be viewed as part of a pattern of animal abuse or as something that is a stand-alone oddity. In the former instance, some articles do connect individual cases of hoarding to animal cruelty in general or to other hoarding cases. For example, articles commonly report the possible prosecution of hoarders, thereby reminding readers that hoarding is seen under the law as a form of animal cruelty along with other forms of animal mistreatment. Occasionally, articles even make a direct connection to other kinds of animal mistreatment, but it is usually to minor animal control or nuisance problems such as failing to leash dogs. Further, some articles talk about a “profile” of hoarders, suggesting a general pattern of behavior. However, more commonly, the crime story convention treats animal hoarding cases as rare and unique events, describing only the most immediate details of each case. Crime reporting in general does the same, as happens with reports of child abuse in the news (Nelson, 1984; Wilcrynski & Sinclair, 1999). Similarly, in its sensationalistic approach, the revulsion theme focuses on bizarre one-of-a-kind episodes that are individual, extreme cases. These approaches prevent readers from seeing or thinking about hoarding as part of a larger pattern of such cases or as part of animal abuse in general.

Third, readers can be confused as to how bad hoarding is for the welfare of animals. By providing elaborate and detailed descriptions, or even pictures, of emaciated, severely diseased animals, some articles suggest that many animals suffer enormously, thereby making a strong case for severe animal neglect or “passive cruelty.” Yet overall, this case is not consistent or strong when the articles are viewed in total. For instance, the emotional themes of many articles overwhelm readers with detailed, sensationalistic accounts of hoarders’ strange behavior and uncivilized living conditions that de-emphasize animal neglect or leave some question about its severity or scope. This finding is consistent with studies of crime news in general, which report that these stories focus much more on criminals than on victims (Graber, 1980; Sherizen, 1978). This de-emphasis is most evident in articles featuring the revulsion

theme. Here, the “disaster” of squalor is the dominant focus while animal neglect is given much less attention and detail, appearing to be less important an issue or even an afterthought in articles rather than their main focus. By focusing more on the hoarder’s living conditions, readers may be less horrified about animal neglect than they are about squalor. To the extent that the press can rouse public interest for new issues and problems, articles de-emphasizing animal neglect may not elicit enough horror in readers to lead them to regard hoarding as a serious problem or prompt them to take action to prevent or better manage it. There also is the possibility that the de-emphasis of animal neglect might lead some readers to question the legitimacy of seizure and euthanasia of these animals by shelter personnel.

Finally, readers might be confused by the press’s presentation of hoarders’ mental health status. Especially in articles emphasizing revulsion, serious psychological disorder of some sort seems patently obvious based on the “facts” presented. However, for the most part, hoarders are not treated in the news as “mad” (i.e., serious mental disorder). Judges almost never order psychiatric counseling for hoarders, and theories of causation supplied by various authorities and experts minimize the seriousness of hoarding as a psychological problem, equating it with everyday impulse control problems like smoking or gambling. Indeed, these theories are likely to provide sympathetic portrayals of hoarders as people who simply “loved animals too much,” portrayals supported by hoarders and their friends and lawyers who, when permitted, defend their actions as well meaning and perhaps excessive, but not a sign of serious disorder. Certainly, those articles appealing to the humorous side of hoarding do little to promote its image as a serious psychological problem requiring interventions by experts and study by behavioral scientists. These folk diagnoses of eccentric but not serious psychological disorder also mean that since articles see the problem of hoarding as lying within the individual, readers are not informed about the possible social context of this behavior. Because of this failure, as with crime reporting in general, no consideration is given to the role played by social forces outside the individual hoarder’s mind, such as his/her social class position, educational attainment, or subcultural membership.

It is not entirely the press’s fault that these inconsistencies exist in the news. In order to make sense of the phenomenon of hoarding, the press has to eval-

uate the discourse and interventions of disparate animal welfare, law enforcement, social work, legal, and veterinary practices. The result is that much of what readers see in the news is a product not only of what journalists do but also of how various organizations that enforce laws, rescue survivors, and investigate social problems make sense of these cases (Fishman, 1995). “Experts” from these fields, upon whom the press rely to define and explain events, have themselves been divided and unsure of how best to approach animal hoarders or even to define the nature of the problem itself. On the one hand, they view these people as seriously disturbed. On the other hand, they feel that punishment is warranted given how much suffering hoarders have caused. Their conflicting interpretations have, in what are sometimes emotionally charged instances, exacerbated the confusion of the press and made the task of orchestrating expert opinion extremely difficult.

Although press accounts reflect the confusion of various officials or experts about animal hoarding, the press also is responsible for culling and packaging certain information in ways to make events newsworthy. Doing so not only perpetuates inconsistencies to readers but also shapes their understandings about animal mistreatment in a more general sense. Although it is certainly important to make the public aware of hoarding as a form of animal neglect, one unintended consequence is that, in the absence of reports about more routine, less dramatic kinds of neglect, the bar may be raised too high for what the public comes to regard as unacceptable behavior toward animals. Because many readers may be exposed to little other information about neglect, they may come to understand its meaning in fairly narrow terms, limited to situations in which very large numbers of animals live in horrendous conditions over long periods of time when, in fact, the vast majority of anti-cruelty code violations involve fewer animals in less perilous situations. Of course, the press’s management of animal hoarding cases helps to sell newspapers by pandering to the public’s curiosity for the bizarre or their sympathy for the pitiful, but it does little to encourage an in-depth understanding of animal abuse and neglect. Without such understanding, society is ill equipped to manage the mistreatment of animals. Public assumptions about what is “real” cruelty and neglect will remain unchallenged, and in this context public policy debates about the proper treatment of animals and hoarders will continue to be played out in trivial and distorted terms.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> In the interests of privacy, the authors have not provided citations for quotations. The corresponding author will respond to requests for citations for this and other specific quotations in the article.

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