The rise and fall of the American Pit Bull Terrier

Has the media damaged the Pit Bulls reputation by creating fear?

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Abstract

Mass media coverage reaches a large audience by television, the Internet, newspaper, books, magazines, and podcast and message boards. How the story is told will affect how the audience will perceive information. By telling a story, the media is persuading its readers or listeners that will cause a reaction to the news. This reaction is either positive or negative, and this is how the ratings go up. News can induce prejudice or bias by showing images that can change viewer’s opinions. People tend to prejudge without learning all the facts about the subject. Some people naturally will trust the news to be accurate in its story and not listen to someone that is knowledgeable about the subject.
History of Pit Bulls and their gameness

The media’s continuance reporting negative story has triggered such fear toward the American Pit Bull Terrier, APBT that has caused the effects of why Breed Specific Legislation ordinance was formed in some towns or cities. American Pit Bull Terrier is the number one hated dog; yet there is that love hate relationship with the American Pit Bull Terriers, APBT. The breed is the most misunderstood. To understand the once beloved, loyal, and dedicated breed the public needs to learn the brief history how the dogs arrived at to where they are today.

During the 1800s, the American Pit Bull Terrier, APBT history was about dog fighting. The bull dogs fought many animals. The dogs during this time were “bull dogs” that would fight a bull. The word ‘pit” wasn’t a breed but a term used where the dog would fight. When people today hear the word “Pit Bull” right away it is assumed to be a fighting dog. In addition people view these dogs to be vicious and unmanageable dogs that loved to kill. In the 1800s the APBT were misunderstood much, like they are today.
According to the American Kennel Club there are 27 different terrier groups. The American Kennel Club states, “Terriers typically have little tolerance for other animals, including other dogs” (AKC Breeds by Group, 2010) this cross breed made sense since the dog was quick, and had a high prey drive. This breed is known as the Staffordshire Bull Terrier.

John Colby, from Newburyport, Massachusetts, started the American Pit Bull Terrier strain in 1889. He began breeding the dogs for dog-fighting here, and soon it became a popular sport in America until dog-fighting became illegal. It is important that the dogs be breed for temperament, gameness, and conformation. The Colby’s made sure his dogs were non-human aggression or the dogs were culled or killed. Human aggression and dog aggression are two different meanings that often confuse the public.

These dogs were in many homes and his or her functions were to care for the guardian’s children. American Pit Bull Terriers were “Nanny Dogs.” The APBT are used as working dogs on farms especially during the 1900s because the dogs would protect the livestock. The American Pit Bull Terrier was popular dog and was once the most trusted and loyal dog to own. The dogs were used in the war, on television, on the front cover of a magazine. The APBT, the mascot for our country showed pride, strength and dignity.

Before our canines became pets and working dogs their ancestors were wild animals. Recently, National Geographic had a documentary of “And man created Dog” the documentary
tells about the dog’s ancestors. “In the ultimate canine ancestral story, NGC traces the genetic journey from wolf to dog, taking viewers back 100,000 years to meet the "mother of all dogs."

It's no accident that dogs evolved this way, as humans have been selectively breeding them for around 14,000 years to serve our needs as laborer, companion, hunter, herder and warrior, as well as to suit our aesthetic fancy” (And Man Created Dog, 2010 p 1) Canines today will always have a natural pray drive that makes up the dogs history. Some canines have a stronger pray drive than other breeds. Our society needs to realize we can’t change our dog’s genetic history but we can change their behavior by proper training.

What happened to the APBT that everyone loved and is the number one dog hated by the public? According to Diane Jessup, “When the American pit bull became the "fad breed" again from 1983 - ? the breed was not so lucky. Many specimens have lost the physical and mental characteristics of the "real" American pit bull. This is due to one thing: "fad breeders" cashing in on producing dogs for the "fad market". (Jessup, 2010) Most of the American Pit Bull Terriers today are mixed breeds. Many young people began adopting APBT for the image however; at the same time they did not know how to handle the APBT nor did the owners train the dogs properly or at all. Many of dogs got loose and attack people. Drug dealers used the dogs to guard their ware. In dog-fighting many bitches were raped to force breeding. Regardless of what the intension were for having an APBT the dogs has taken extreme abuse.

A rough estimate of approximately 4.5 million people bitten by dogs of all breeds each year however; Pit Bulls are the blame for most of the bites in which not all dog bites are reported. According to Malcolm Gladwell, “Of course, not all pit bulls are dangerous. Most don't bite
anyone.” He provides an example about a Frenchwoman badly mauled; she had the world's first face transplant. Of all dogs, a Labrador retriever had attacked her (Gladwell, 2006). There are irresponsible owners that ruin the reputation for those that are responsible. In the case of Sherry Wooten of Tennessee was “charged with four counts of felony reckless endangerment for the four others injured by the dogs.” Also, “according to police, Wooten released the dogs from an apartment at 236 N. Manassas, "knowing that they were vicious in nature." (Callahan, 2010).

However, not only irresponsible dog owners the Pit Bull paparazzo’s are quick to release another story of a pit bull attack that creates public fear. The purpose is to generate public reaction without giving a story on why the attack happened. Without knowing more about the details to a story the public draws their own conclusion that “all” pit bulls are bad dogs and the public profile these dogs as “dangerous and uncontrollable.”

Breed Specific Legislation

Because the media and irresponsible owners this has created Breed Specific Legislation; an ordinance that has passed by legislative directing to specific breed(s) of dogs that deem to be “dangerous dogs” and has placed restrictions against them. Legislation has listed 14 different breeds as “dangerous dog.” Anyone that has a “dangerous dog” should be aware of the ordinance in the area they live in as this can affect them as well as their dog and can cost the dog’s life. Our legislation would have to identify each dog through DNA, and this would be costly. Legislations solution is to euthanize any dog that looks like a Pit Bull without the dogs DNA. Denver, Colorado, for example, has had a ban for 20 years, and animal advocates have been fighting to lift the ban for year. An article written by Stephanie Ernst, “The Killing of the Misunderstood
3,500: Denver's Pit Bull Ban” Stephanie recounts an article she read "For two decades, pit bulls have been public enemy #1 in Denver. But maybe it's time for a recount." And these posts appeared concurrently and in the hours and days, respectively, to come: "Inside Denver's 'Pit Bull Row'" and "3,497 dead dogs and other numbers from Denver's pit bull ban," the former taking us inside the "row" and showing us the sweet, scared faces of the dogs awaiting death there. Then a couple weeks later came this jarring post, revealing to us the piles of dead dogs. "Leaked photos of pit bulls killed due to Denver ban.

The solution would be to stop creating fear through bans, continuous media attention, and ban those from having Pit Bulls or any dogs that have created the Pit Bull problem by allowing those responsible to educate and train their dogs and those waiting for a new home to be more socialable around other dogs and in public. Michael Vick’s dogs are perfect examples that rehabilitate a fighting dog through proper training. It isn’t how to raise a dog; it is how to train a dog.
Pit Bull Paparazzi

Pit Bull Paparazzi, the malicious news seekers, all for the ratings do not want to write a story that do not involve another breed because those stories do not sell. The Pit Bull Paparazzi have created public slant on Pit Bulls that created fear. Debunking the Pit Bulls is no different than discriminating. Just because there have been a few bad Pit Bulls this does not mean “all Pit Bulls” are bad. This is the same as saying “all Catholic Priests” molest boys because the media has exposed a few Catholic Priests as molesters or that “all Muslims” are bad because of 911.

An organization called Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, FAIR, is a national media watch group that offers criticisms of well documentation on the unfairness of media bias and censorship since 1986. This group also publishes a magazine called “Extra.” Lee and Solomon are associated with this organization and have published several books; one, “Unreliable Sources: A Guide to Detecting Bias in News Media” When it comes to providing the news Lee and Solomon gives an account how stories are revised. “Specialization is necessary in our complex society. However, with specialization comes the ability to ‘pass the moral buck.’” No one person is completely responsible for any decision” (Cohen, J., & Richardson, J. (2002). To understand how news rooms do their stories the two needed to learn more about reporters by observation on the final copy. Editors are the ones that supply the headlines to a story and often the headlines are give a vague picture of the story being told. Many readers do not read the full story and only the headline. This creates a different point of view of what the story is really about. For those that read the full story will learn that the headline is often misleading to what the story is about “If the
final story is a gross distortion of truth, “the editor can say they were just working with the reporter’s copy, and the reporter can say they have no control over how the editor alters their copy. However, reporters have another way to pass the moral buck (Cohen, J., & Richardson, J. (2002). Many editors do not have knowledge about the subject being reported and this is the same for some reporters.

How did our once beloved dog go from being a war hero, to being a Nanny dog, being on television to the number one hated dog? During the 1970s, there was a growing concern about the cruel practice of dog fighting that the public became aware of this lead to drawing the attention of law enforcement, and to the media. During this time, a young boy in California was been killed by a dog. Three different newspapers reported this and each had reported a different breed or version of what happened. In one article the media reported that the dog locked his jaws on the child’s neck. It is a myth that Pit Bulls “lock their jaws.” Reporting such false information without knowing anything about a Pit Bulls anatomy created a misconception about the dog. People just assumed this myth for many years along with many other myths about the APBT. However, during this time there were no computers or much information about this breed as we know today. Still, the media continues to provide misconception about the Pit Bulls to keep the public in fear of these dogs. After all, this type of news sells and brings the rating up. Keeping the public reading and in fear is the bottom line.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are approximately 4.5 million people that have been bitten each year by dogs. During 1979 – 1998, approximately 300 people were killed; of the 300 people killed 76 were from Pit Bulls and the other 224 from other
Impact Media has on Pit Bulls

breeds. According to Dolce, “The data are shocking, but considering there are an estimated 72 million dogs in the U.S., people are "five times more likely to be killed by a cow" (Nok-Noi Ricker, 2010). The media reports these stats to the public that causes people to become hysterical and afraid of the reports. In the year 2000 United States had 4.3 Murders per 100,000 people, ranking the state as having the 26th highest rate for Murder. United Status’s 70.3 reported Forced Rapes per 100,000 people, ranked the state 1st highest.

For the media to expose criminal behavior that involves with animal cruelty and dog-fighting should be encouraged to make the public aware of such criminal activities. However, to expose the Pit Bull of their super power abilities increased the popularity of these dogs to drug dealers, potential dog-fighters, and criminal owners. This breed of dogs attracts the younger generation in which many train the dogs to be human aggressive. The younger generation breeds the APBT to serve for their purpose and entertainment. Any breed can be trained to be human aggressive however; APBT are extremely athletic dogs that love to please their owners. The dogs are easily trainable. The dogs are known to be gladiator dogs. Without understanding, proper training, neglect, and abuse the dogs are a recipe for disaster. The American Pit Bulls do not generally like to fight and are extremely loyal and loveable dogs. Is the media partially responsible for portraying the dogs as man eating killers and creating public fear? The American Pit Bull Terrier is the number one most abused dog that deserves a second chance that was once the most loyal dog. It is man that has created the problem and man has to learn to accept our canine’s anatomy that dogs are pack animals and that some dogs do not like other dogs just as humans do not like other humans.
Stigma of Pit Bulls brought on by the media

The sociological experience of owning a Pit Bull has to do with defending their dogs’ rights. For instance, one scenario in Alabama, a Pit Bull guardian has an ordinance that states Pit Bulls as dangerous dog, and if one owns a Pit Bull they must contain special housing, and muzzle their dog in public. This guardian has been harassed by animal control, and by a police officer about one of her dogs that looks more like a Pit Bull than the other dog because that dog looks more like a mutt. She would obey the ordinance and walk the dog with a leash while other dogs in her area were unleashed. She felt discriminated because animal control wouldn’t pick up the other dogs because of their breed. In other cases, because the media’s impact of portraying Pit Bulls as vicious dogs often the guardians try protecting their dog’s breed by providing different facts about the dog or even lie about the breed of dog they have rather than providing proper information about the American Pit Bull Terriers as being a menace to the society. Even the guardians can damage the APBT reputation as well because the guardians feel forced to do so.

A questionnaire given on Facebook asked non-Pit Bull owners, if they base their opinions about Pit Bulls as vicious and a menace because of the Medias influence? Some responses were “No, not really. I had a friend who had a Pit. I would dog sit for her. He was a huge dog but insisted he was a lap dog. One of the most loving dogs I have seen. And he got along great with my two dogs.” While another response were “Been attacked two times by Pit Bulls, don't like them never will. I love dogs and I have a dog walking business. I won't go near the killers!” Others based their opinion with the media and saw the media as the experts, and would not take
any information from someone that had firsthand knowledge about the dogs since these people had American Pit Bulls Terriers. For those that are devoted and responsible about the breed would know the history and behavior of this breed verses someone that has the breed but lacks the responsibility of training the dogs.

Reversing the stereotype image

The media has the ability of being part of the solution instead of being some of the problem too. What can be done to solve problem? Through powerful persuasion, the media can change the dogs’ image by covering positive news towards these dogs and stop focusing the negative aspect of the dogs. The society has learned to accept the Doberman, German Sheppard, Rottweiler, and other dangerous dogs. Just because there have been an incidents of dog bites and several attacks that have cause death this doesn’t mean that this entire breed is vicious.

Without acquiring the all facts and information at hand and only learn bits and pieces through the media to get the full picture about the subject the reader or viewer should be asking is the media coaching people to hate; to be abusive by projecting a negative side about Pit Bulls without fully researching why there may be many occurrences of these dogs attacking dogs and people especially children. With the continual negative stories this has caused damaging influence against these dogs. This negativity often leads to the dog’s death, to being abused; to being used in dog-fights all because the media plays a big part providing unconstructive information about Pit Bulls. The media misleads, misinforms the public about the dogs because when the writer writes his or her story the audience becomes more fearful of these dogs.
Wouldn’t it be easier to stop creating fear that creates a more hostile and less socialized animal because the laws seek to lessen the opportunities for normal social interactions between dogs, humans and other animals?
References


Figure Captions

Figure 1. Bull dog used for dog-fighting

Figure 2. The killing of 3,500 pit bulls - 


Figure 3. Denver, Colorado ideal solution on Breed Specific Legislation is to euthanasia 3,500 dogs by trying to eliminate the breed.
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