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## Newspaper Coverage of Animal Abuse

Lara Jasmine Imbrock  
*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF ANIMAL ABUSE

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Communication

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Lara Jasmine Imbrock

November 2003

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**THESIS ACCEPTANCE**

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

**COMMITTEE**

**Name** Hugh Reddy **Department** Communication

**Name** Lynn K. Harlan **Department** Mkt + Mgmt.

**Chairperson Name** David John Hall **Department** Communication

**Date** November 24, 2003

**Abstract**

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF ANIMAL ABUSE

Lara Jasmine Imbrock, MA

University of Nebraska at Omaha, November 2003

Advisor: Dr. Deborah Smith-Howell

The abuse of animals is an important social issue. Animals play a vital role in society, serving as companions and service animals for people. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to evaluate Midwest newspaper coverage of animal abuse in 1993, 1998, and 2002. The theories of social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming were used to examine the effects of media coverage of animal abuse. Results showed that animal abuse has received increased coverage over the years.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Rationale**

An approximately one-year-old, male Australian shepherd mix was reportedly tied to the bumper of a white or cream colored Toyota pick-up truck as it drove on Dowd Road. The driver was an adult male in his late teens to early twenties. An adult male wearing a beige hunting jacket was riding in the back of the truck. The dog, named "Raspberry," suffered cuts, bruises, broken teeth, and a nose burn. He was treated at the Loomis Basin Veterinary Hospital and is currently recovering under the care of Placer County Animal Services staff, who report that he is shy but eager for human companionship (HSUS offers reward in Placer County, Calif. dog dragging case, 2002).

The story mentioned above is a vivid example of animal abuse. We read about it in newspapers and magazines and see it on television. What do we actually know about animal abuse? There is no national database to track the number of cases of animal abuse that have occurred in the United States. No studies have been conducted to examine how people learn about animal abuse. This thesis examined the media's depiction of animal abuse. Animals, especially pets, play an important role in the lives of many Americans. Animal abuse is an important social problem. In 2000, the Humane Society of the United States compiled its first report of high-profile cases of animal cruelty on a national level. From January 2001 through December 2001, there were 1677 cases of animal abuse in the report. The report is based on information obtained



from a variety of documented sources, including media reports, reports from local humane societies, and other animal welfare organizations. Nine hundred thirty-nine of the cases involved intentional cruelty towards animals, and 738 involved extreme animal neglect. Some of the cases involved animal fighting and animal hoarding. The Humane Society of the United States defines abuse or intentional cruelty as, “when a person knowingly deprives an animal of food, water, shelter, socialization, or veterinary care or maliciously tortures, maims, mutilates, or kills an animal” (The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) First Strike™ Campaign 2001 Report of Animal Cruelty Cases, 2001).

In thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia, there are laws that make animal cruelty a felony (Janovsky, 2002). People have strong reactions in response to cases of animal abuse. In the case of a dog named Sun Bear who was starved by his owner, Ann Chyunoweth, HSUS Counsel to Investigative Services, said:

It is hard to imagine the slow, intense suffering of this poor dog who was left without food or water for weeks on end. Every day Sun Bear waited in vain for his owner to return and such abandonment can be as cruel and as criminal as directly inflicted animal abuse. We have an obligation to the animals in our homes and Mr. Wilmer violated that contract in the worst way (HSUS offers reward to capture suspect in West Virginia dog starving case, 2002).

Another case involved the death of two cats in Maryland that were shot to death by their owner’s landlord. Maryland prosecuted him on felony animal cruelty

charges. Frederick County Circuit Court Judge Mary Ann Stepler acquitted the man, saying, “I don’t like what he did, but it’s not a crime under Maryland law” (Janovsky, 2002). She did convict the landlord on two counts of malicious destruction of property, which are misdemeanor charges. Wayne Pacelle, a senior vice president at the Humane Society of the United States, said in response to the ruling:

In order to finally resolve that shooting an animal without justification is cruel, by any reasonable definition of the word, the current law will have to be changed to reflect what seems to be an obvious point to anyone who believes animals should be protected from senseless violence. Otherwise a dangerous precedent could be set—one that could put even more animals at risk (Janovsky, 2002).

The public knows about social issues, such as animal abuse, through the media’s depiction of them. Currently no studies have been conducted on the depiction of animal abuse. Therefore, this thesis was an exploratory study to understand the depiction of animal abuse via the mass media.

People understand social issues through the media’s depiction of them. Media are meaningful forces which people use to learn about issues of social importance. The media has the ability to inform the public about animal abuse cases that have occurred in the community. Through the media, individuals are exposed to cases of animal abuse that they may not otherwise have known about. Although there are not any studies on animal abuse and the media, there are many studies that look at media images and social issues. Three main

theoretical concepts that enable us to understand the role of mass media and social issues are social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming. These theoretical concepts are vitally important to understanding the media's portrayal of animal abuse.

First, in order to understand the significance of animal abuse as a social issue, the various roles that animals have in society were examined. Animals fill various roles in society including serving as companions, service animals, and therapy animals for people. Each of these roles is important, whether the animal is a companion or is used for therapy.

Pets are primarily companions for people. Sixty-two percent of all households in the United States (63.4 million) own a pet, compared to 56 percent in 1988, the first year that the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association pet owner survey was conducted. The survey revealed that forty-seven percent of all U.S. households own more than one pet. It was estimated that each of these households would spend an average of \$460 on their pets in 2001. For 2002, estimated expenditures for the United States pet industry were \$29.5 billion, and expenditures were projected to increase to \$31 billion in 2003 (Pet industry facts, 2001). According to U.S. News and World Report:

Laser toy mice, mini Santa suits, and gourmet organic snacks are stocking-stuffer heaven for owners of the more than 58 million pets who live in over half of all U.S. households. These trendy items and others are sales nirvana for an increasing crop of pet superstores. Animal lovers will spend \$5 billion on their furry, scaly, and feathered

companions this holiday season—almost a quarter of the industry’s sales kitty (Brophy-Marcus & Mallory, 1997, p.57).

Pets are also allowed to stay in some hotels with their owners.

“Welcoming a guest’s pet is a way of projecting an image,” says Roger Cline, worldwide director for the hospitality consulting services at Arthur Andersen.

“It says, ‘There is nothing you could possibly ask for that we could refuse. Tell us what you want and so it shall be.’ If that means pandering to animals, so be it” (Gubernick & Levine, 1995, p. 139).

According to the American Animal Hospital Association’s National Pet Owner Survey:

When it comes to their furry friends, pet owners have no fear of commitment. The majority of pet owners say they’re willing to sacrifice everything for their pets: A full 74 percent of those surveyed say that they would be willing to go into debt in order to provide for their animal’s well-being. And of those who have a will, 27 percent have included provisions for their pets. Believe it or not, these results are not surprising to us says Dr. Michael Thomas, AAHA president. For years we have known about the growing importance that people place on their pets. For most people, a pet is a full-fledged member of the family who plays a critical role in today’s society (Gardyn, 2001, p. 16).

Some pets serve as therapy animals. These animals are used in a variety of settings, including hospitals and rehabilitation centers. Some people who are born with disabilities, or who are now afflicted with them due to an accident or

illness, are rehabilitated with the help of animals. Dr. Karen Allen, an assistant professor of medicine at the State University of New York in Buffalo, studied sixty men and women who were caring for a spouse who was suffering from a traumatic brain injury. She found that caregivers with dogs had significantly reduced blood pressure and heart rate levels compared with those who did not have pets. “It’s the presence of someone who you’re really attached to, who you know is always on your side,” Allen explains. “Dogs are great—they’re never evaluative, they just love you no matter what” (Gorrell, 2001, p. 16).

Murphy, a yellow Labrador retriever, worked with Madison, a 4-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who took her first steps walking towards him. Carol Harrington, a physical therapist at Meriter Hospital, explained the motivating influence that Murphy had on Madison and other patients:

Murphy can get people to do things they don’t feel they’re able to, but they do them without even realizing it because their focus is on the dog. Many patients push past their pain and keep exercising—by brushing the dog, walking with her, or throwing her a ball to retrieve—because they want to keep Murphy happy (Peterson, 1999, p. 44).

Results of a study that Herrald, Tomaka, and Medina conducted examined the effects of pet ownership and potential mediating and moderating variables on completion of a twelve week cardiac rehabilitation program. They found that pet owners (96.5%) were significantly more likely to complete cardiac rehabilitation compared with non-owners (79.2%) (Herrald, Tomaka, & Medina, 2002, p. 1107).

In addition to serving as companions, animals can also be beneficial to people's physical well-being. There are numerous health benefits of pet ownership. The following information was obtained from the "Health benefits of pet ownership" fact sheet on the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association website. Pets help reduce stress. "Walking with a pet helps soothe nerves and offers instant relaxation. Studies conducted worldwide have shown that the impact of a stressful situation is lesser on pet owners, especially males, than on those who do not own a pet" (Josephine M. Wills, Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition, United Kingdom). Pets help to prevent heart disease. "Because pets provide people with faithful companionship, research shows they may also provide their owners with greater psychological stability, thus a measure of protection from heart disease" (National Institute of Health Technology Assessment Workshop: Health Benefits of Pets). Pets help to lower health care costs. "People with pets actually make fewer doctor visits, especially for non-serious medical conditions" (National Institute of Health Technology Assessment Workshop: Health Benefits of Pets). Pets help to fight depression. "Pets help fight depression and loneliness, promoting an interest in life. When seniors face adversity or trauma, affection from pets takes on great meaning. Their bonding behavior can foster a sense of security" (Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship).

Pets are also used as service animals. Rachel Joy-Taub Miner conducted a study that examined the unique relationship between blind people and their dog guides. Her results showed that blind people who had guide dogs

experienced increased confidence, increased independence, changed public interaction, and additional responsibilities or inconveniences. One participant in her study said:

In getting a dog guide and you know working through the training process with the dog, I just really gained a great confidence that I could be safe. I could be safe, and I could travel safely wherever I wanted to go. And the initial effect is it allowed me to have choices that I never thought were possible.

Another participant said:

It's also meant a lot of interaction with the general public... Whenever we go anywhere people are always commenting on how beautiful the dogs are and what breed is that... For the most part I enjoy it... I'd say 90 percent of the time I enjoy it, about 10 percent of the time it's a pain in the neck, it's intrusive.

Yet another person in the study stated:

It's hard to think about going and getting a new dog and establishing a new relationship and teaching the new dog how to go where we go.

Back and forth to work, to the dentist, and whatever... The one sad thing about dogs is that they don't last forever. You know, and it makes it sort of difficult (Miner, 2001, p. 185).

Dan Shaw, a visually impaired man who resisted the idea of having a guide dog because of its limited lifespan, now has a miniature horse to aid him. The average lifespan of a miniature horse is thirty to forty years. The nonprofit

Guide Horse Foundation was founded in 2000, with a mission of providing the visually impaired with a trained guide horse (and a companion) for free, with all costs and travel expenses funded by tax-deductible donations (Peterson, 2003, p. 74). Dan Shaw, a forty-seven year old man from Maine, was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa at the age of seventeen. This condition caused him to eventually lose his sight. Shaw was the first person to receive a horse through this program; a miniature horse named Cuddles, that serves as his guide horse, and Nevada, another miniature horse to keep Cuddles company when she isn't working. "My life has opened up with this little horse," Shaw said. When they're not taking long walks in the woods or fishing at his pond, Dan and Cuddles often visit schools, or make presentations to civic groups to raise money for the Guide Horse Foundation. "Dan keeps himself pretty busy and is always out helping somebody," said Ann, who no longer worries about her husband. "Cuddles has brought us a lot of joy" (Peterson, 2003, p. 75). There are now many other blind people on a waiting list to receive guide horses.

The preceding instances have illustrated the variety of roles that animals have in society, including serving as people's companions, service animals, and therapy animals. Animals play an important role in society whether they are companions or therapy animals for people in rehabilitation hospitals and nursing homes. The abuse of these significant members of society is an issue well worth examining. Next, the theoretical concepts of social construction of reality, priming, and agenda setting were used to examine how people understand the issues presented by the media.



Social construction of reality explains how people use messages received from other people and mass media. Agenda setting examines people's perception of issues depending on the importance that is placed on particular issues by mass media. Priming explores the impact on people when coverage of certain issues is repeated frequently. These theoretical constructs are explained in the literature review.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Construction of reality**

It is important to understand how social issues are constructed. Social construction of reality is a theory that “assumes an ongoing correspondence of meaning because people share a common sense about its reality” (Baran & Davis, 2003, p. 245). The media helps construct what reality is for people. Media gives us the details on an issue. The way that the media constructs a story impacts how people will understand it. This theory has been used in studies to examine how people construct reality for a variety of issues, including crime and race.

Researchers have used the concept of social construction of reality to explain issues that were reported by the media, and how the media shaped the public’s reality. The following studies effectively illustrate how the media constructed reality for the public.

Academics have used social construction of reality to explain media and crime. Yanich’s study examined local newscasts’ crime coverage in the markets along the urban-suburban dimensions (Yanich, 2001, p. 221). Lipschultz and Hilt’s study focused on how the resulting coverage of three executions was a social construction of reality that might influence future public opinion (Lipschultz & Hilt, 1999, p. 236 ). Fabianic examined how television crime dramas constructed reality about crime for the public who viewed the dramas (Fabianic, 1997, p. 195).

Social construction of reality has often been used to explain racial issues. The way that the media constructs the reality regarding race affects people's perception of these issues. Binder examined the construction of racial rhetoric and the media's depiction of harm in heavy metal and rap music (Binder, 1993, p. 753). Orbe explored the constructions of reality on MTV's "The Real World" and an analysis of the restrictive coding of black masculinity (Orbe, 1998, p. 32). Hunt studied construction of reality in criminal trials (Hunt, 1997, p. 399).

Researchers have also used social construction of reality to explain issues that concern senior citizens. Ray examined groups of women who live in senior centers and the effects that social influences have on older women's life stories (Ray, 1999, p. 56).

Social issues dealing with human services have also been explained with the social construction of reality theory. Banerjee studied women facing welfare reform under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (Banerjee, 2002, p. 315). Fox examined an AIDS prevention program (Fox, 1999, p. 54).

Environmental sociology issues have used social construction of reality. Burningham analyzed the environmental problem of the noise generated by a new road from a social constructionist perspective (Burningham, 1998, p. 536).

Social construction of reality has been used when studying the issue of global civil society. Comor examined the role of communication in global civil society through the use of theoretical tools and empirical evidence related to the

study of international communication. He found that “through a more focused analysis—concentrating on how new technologies can be used to organize nationally and locally, and on lifestyle changes associated with communications developments—more precise analyses and fruitful strategies for GCS progressives may emerge” (Comor, 2001, p. 389).

Social construction of reality may also explain how newspaper articles shape public perception and knowledge of an issue, such as animal abuse. Social construction of reality is important when looking at a variety of issues, including race, gender, and the environment. The way that issues are constructed influences how people interpret the information that they receive. Media informs people about important issues. Without the media, people would have to rely on first hand experience to learn about social issues, including animal abuse. The public understands the importance of social issues through the ways that they are portrayed. It is appropriate to examine media depiction of animal abuse to understand it as an important social issue.

Agenda setting is also important in understanding how people interpret information that they receive from the media.

### **Agenda Setting**

The agenda setting function is “the media’s capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public’s mind” (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 241). The more times that people hear about a particular issue, the more important the issue might seem. Repeated coverage on particular issues could help people decide which ones are the most important.

Agenda setting is one of the most widely used concepts to explain media's portrayal of issues. A wide range of topics has examined agenda setting, including politics, the environment, and how the impact of media's coverage of issues influenced people's sense of urgency regarding them.

Agenda setting is often used to explain political stories. Watt, Mazza, and Snyder studied agenda setting effects of television news coverage and the effects decay curve. The effects decay curve looked at "predictions for the size of the relationship between declining accumulated television coverage and issue salience" (Watt, Mazza, & Snyder, 1993, p. 408). Oliver conducted an analysis of presidents' and public's agenda on crime (Oliver, 2002, p. 139). Iyengar and Simon examined news coverage of the Gulf crisis and public opinion (Iyengar & Simon, 1993, p. 365).

Environmental issues have often been examined using agenda setting. Ader studied the issue of environmental pollution (Ader, 1995, p. 300). Aidoo examined media coverage of the environment in Ghana (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2001, p. 521).

Agenda setting has also been used to examine the impact that media's coverage of social issues has had on the public. Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan's study examined the attribute agenda setting function of the press and the public's evaluation of a local issue (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002, p. 7). Wanta and Wu looked at interpersonal communication and the agenda setting process (Wanta & Wu, 1992, p. 847). Roberts, Wanta, and Dzwo's study looked at agenda setting and issue salience online (Roberts, Wanta, &

Dzwo, 2002, p. 452). Demers examined whether personal experience in a community increased or decreased newspaper reading (Demers, 1996, p. 304).

Agenda setting was also important when looking at how the media's coverage of issues influenced people's sense of urgency regarding them. Issues included linear and nonlinear models of agenda setting in television, political candidates, and coverage of protest events. Brosius and Kepplinger explored linear and nonlinear models of agenda setting in television (Brosius and Kepplinger, 1992, p. 5). Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis, and Ban's study looked at candidate image attributes. The authors examined the role of attribute salience in the agenda setting process. They conducted two experiments "to investigate how media emphasis on certain political candidates' attributes would influence public perceptions of those politicians" (Kiouisis, Bantimaroudis, & Ban, 1999, p. 414). Results showed that people's impressions of the candidates' personality traits were the same as the media portrayed them. Fan, Brosius, and Kepplinger examined predictions of the public agenda from television coverage (Fan, Brosius, & Kepplinger, 1994, p. 163). Cantor and Omdahl looked at the effects of fictional media depictions of realistic threats on children's emotional responses, expectations, worries, and liking for related activities (Cantor & Omdahl, 1991, p. 384). Strange and Leung examined how anecdotal accounts in news and in fiction could influence judgements of a social problem's urgency, causes, and cures (Strange & Leung, 1999, p. 436). Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, and Augustyn studied description bias in media coverage of protest events in Washington, D.C. (Smith, McCarthy, McPhail, & Augustyn, 2001, p.

1397). Mayer examined consumer issues in the agenda-setting process (Mayer, 1991, p. 21).

The previous studies illustrate how agenda setting can be used to explain a wide variety of issues, including politics and the environment. The number of times that individuals hear about a certain issue affects the importance that they place on the issue. An immense number of articles use agenda setting to examine a wide range of social issues. Agenda setting is important when looking at the issue of animal abuse. The media's repeated coverage of cases of animal abuse makes people aware of the problem. The significance of this issue is reiterated each time that the media covers a story on animal abuse. Agenda setting places an issue on the public's agenda. It is important to see the frequency of animal abuse cases to see how they are put on people's agenda.

Priming is another theory that shows how people understand social issues that are discussed in the media.

### **Priming**

Priming is "the process in which the media attend to some issues and not others and thereby alter the standards by which people evaluate them" (Severin & Tankard, 2001, p. 241). Issues that receive media coverage will be topics that people are aware of, and will be evaluated depending on coverage, whereas issues that do not receive media coverage will not be as familiar to the public. Media decides what issues to emphasize. Issues that are discussed frequently by the media will in turn be issues that people are knowledgeable and familiar

with. Priming is used to evaluate numerous social issues, including politics and perceptions of race.

Priming has often been used to examine political issues. Pan and Kosicki's study looked at priming and media impact on the evaluations of the president's performance (Pan & Kosicki, 1997, p. 3). Miller and Krosnick investigated news media impact on the ingredients of presidential evaluations (Miller & Krosnick, 2000, p. 301).

Racial issues were also examined with this concept. Domke, McCoy, and Torres' study examined news media, racial perceptions, and political cognition (Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999, p. 570). A study by Power, Murphy, and Coover looked at the effect of priming negative stereotypic and positive counterstereotypic portrayals of African Americans and women on interpretations of actual media events (Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996, p. 36). Cowan, Resendez, Marshall, and Quist examined hate speech and constitutional protection and the priming values of equality and freedom (Cowan, Resendez, Marshall, & Quist, 2002, p. 247).

Priming was further used to examine other issues including the effect of labeling staged video and television news bumpers. Slattery and Tiedge's study examined the effect of labeling staged video on credibility of TV news stories (Slattery & Tiedge, 1992, p. 279). Schleuder, White, and Cameron investigated priming effects of television news bumpers and teasers on attention and memory. They used the spreading activation model of information processing to examine the effects of television news previews called bumpers and teasers.



Forty-six undergraduate communication students were divided into two groups of twenty-three people each. One group viewed television and responded to a secondary task, while the other group viewed only the newscasts. Findings showed that:

News stories that were preceded by teasers or by both bumpers and teasers elicited more attention than stories that were not primed by a bumper or a teaser. In addition, the verbal information in news stories primed by bumpers and teasers was remembered better. Viewers did not allocate more attention to news stories that had been introduced with bumpers, and priming seemed to have little effect on visual memory (Schleuder, White, & Cameron, 1993, p. 437).

The previous examples of priming help to illustrate the importance of this concept. Priming is a beneficial concept to use when examining media coverage of animal abuse. The more that animal abuse is attended to by the media, the more the public will be informed on this issue.

Studies that examined social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming all are beneficial in helping understand how the media influences people. These concepts are also beneficial in understanding the issue of animal abuse.

### **Statement of Purpose**

Now that the importance of how mass media shapes public understanding of social issues is understood, the research questions were examined. The purpose of this qualitative content analysis was to understand how animal abuse was reported in newspapers.

The following three research questions were examined:

**RQ1:** How are people who abuse animals portrayed in the print media?

**RQ2:** What types of animal abuse cases do the media report on?

**RQ3:** How are abused animals portrayed in the print media?

A qualitative content analysis of newspaper articles dealing with animal abuse was conducted to examine the three research questions listed above. The examination of newspaper articles allowed for exploration of differences in reporting by a variety of newspapers. Every newspaper reports issues somewhat differently. Altheide explained the roles that news media have:

The major news media are central aspects of popular culture, which has pervaded every major social institution, and, indeed, these institutions have adopted much of the logic and format of these media. It is certainly true today that any serious analysis of American life and culture—and increasingly, much of Western culture—must consider media materials (Altheide, 1996, p. 45).

A qualitative content analysis permits a large number of articles to be examined systematically for similarities among them. Every article is coded and

compared to the other articles to determine categories that are present in the articles.

Content analysis follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation. The aim is to be systematic and analytic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study, including an orientation toward constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (Altheide, 1996, p. 16).

The categories enable all the documents to be reviewed accurately. Qualitative content analysis allows for a variety of themes and meanings to result.

The major emphasis of qualitative document analysis is to capture the meanings, emphasis, and themes of messages and to understand the organization and process of how they are presented (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Qualitative content analysis is effective in providing a systematic method to examine a variety of data using the same coding for each one. Themes and meanings can be determined by analyzing documents.

According to Altheide, there are five stages involved in a qualitative content analysis: (a) documents, (b) protocol development and data collection, (c) data coding and organization, (d) data analysis, and (e) report. Twelve steps

are also involved in a qualitative content analysis. The specific methodology of this thesis is discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

Newspaper articles that mentioned animal abuse were examined. The newspaper articles that were used in this content analysis were all found on Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe. Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe includes a compilation of newspaper articles from around the United States. This analysis looked at newspaper articles in the Midwest region that were found when the words “animal abuse” were used as search words.

The specific time period for the analysis was the years 1993, 1998, and 2002. A total of 216 articles were found during these three years: thirty-eight articles in 1993, eighty-five in 1998, and ninety-three articles in 2002.

### **Procedures**

The following information explains what steps were taken to study the newspaper articles. Information on qualitative document analysis was taken from David Altheide’s book *Qualitative Media Analysis*. These steps provided for systematic gathering of information that was needed to answer the previously mentioned research questions. There are twelve steps in the process of qualitative document analysis (Altheide, 1996, p. 13). The twelve steps are a process that involves five stages: (a) documents, (b) protocol development and data collection, (c) data coding and organization, (d) data analysis, and (e) report (Altheide, 1996, p. 23).

The first step was to pursue a specific problem to be investigated. The problem that was investigated is the depiction of animal abuse in the media.

The second step was to become familiar with the process and context of the information source. Newspaper articles were examined. The articles were from Midwest newspapers.

The third step was to become familiar with several examples of relevant documents, noting particularly the format. A unit of analysis (e.g., each article) was selected. Newspaper articles that discussed animal abuse were examined.

The fourth step was to list several items or categories (variables) to guide data collection and draft a protocol (data collection sheet). The variables were the type of animal abuse and the perpetrator of animal abuse. The categories were: medium, title, date, length, section, people, animals, types of animal abuse, and focus. Medium was the name of the newspaper. Title was the headline of the story. Date was the month, day, and year that the article appeared in the newspaper. Length was the number of words the story contained. Section was where the story appeared in the newspaper including the page number. The people category was divided into the following subcategories: named male, unnamed male, named female, unnamed female, unknown, age, address, occupation, mitigating circumstances, and criminal charges. Focus was the type of story, either factual or editorial. Each article was also examined for the people who were mentioned, the type of animal abuse, the type of animals, the focus, and newspaper demographics.

The fifth step was to test the protocol by collecting data from several documents. The two documents that were used to test the protocol were “Dog

dealer charged with violations” and “Humane society seizes 31 frail dogs.” See Appendix A for testing of the protocol.

The sixth step was to revise the protocol and select several additional cases to further refine the protocol. The same categories were used for two additional newspaper stories. See Appendix A for testing of the protocol. The two documents that were used to test the protocol were “Animal shelter’s founder devoted to ending animal abuse; ‘education is the key’ to ending the abuse, she asserts” and “Man found innocent in dog death.”

The seventh step was to arrive at a sampling rationale and strategy. Newspaper articles dealing with animal abuse were evaluated. Newspapers were selected as documents to be analyzed because the information was already written down, therefore eliminating any errors that might have occurred if information were transcribed from a newscast. The stories appeared in a Midwestern newspaper. The Midwest was selected because Nebraska is included in the region and if the entire United States were included, the number of articles would have exceeded a number that was practical for purposes of this study. Stories from ten years ago, five years ago, and one year ago were used. The time periods of ten years, five years, and one year were selected to allow for a large enough number of articles to be examined without being too inclusive or exclusive. Using these three years also allowed for the examination of any changes in the number or types of animal abuse cases covered. The time parameters on Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe allowed for the retrieval of articles within a specific time period including one year, two years, five years,

ten years, or all available dates. Two years worth of articles would have resulted in 199 documents, whereas five years would have provided 476 articles. Ten years resulted in 733 animal abuse articles. This study examined the 216 articles found in Midwestern newspapers in 1993, 1998, and 2002. The Midwest region included nine states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Articles appeared in sixteen newspapers, the Associated Press, and Copley News Services. Theoretical sampling was used to evaluate the newspaper stories.

The eighth step was to collect the data, using preset codes, if appropriate, and many descriptive examples. The data from the original documents was kept, but also entered in a computer-text-word processing format for easier search-find and text coding. The articles that were examined were already in this form because they were obtained from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe. Midpoint analysis: About halfway to two thirds through the sample, the data was examined to permit emergence, refinement, or collapsing of additional categories. Appropriate adjustments to other data were made. Data collection was completed. The categories were not changed. The 216 articles were saved on a disk and a hard copy of each one was also printed.

The ninth step was to perform data analysis, including conceptual refinement and data coding. Notes and data were read repeatedly and thoroughly. Data analysis was performed, including conceptual refinement and data coding. Each article was coded using the coding sheet.



The tenth step was to compare and contrast “extremes” and “key differences” within each category or item. Textual notes were made. Brief summaries or an overview of data for each category (variable) were written. “Extremes” and “key differences” within each category were compared and contrasted.

The eleventh step was to combine the brief summaries with an example of the typical case as well as the extremes. This was illustrated with materials from the protocol(s) for each case. Surprises and curiosities about these cases and other materials in the data were noted. Brief summaries were combined with an example of the typical case as well as the extremes. Materials from the protocols were used to illustrate each case.

The twelfth and final step was to integrate the findings with the interpretations and key concepts in another draft. The findings with the interpretations and key concepts were integrated and put into another draft.

By following the twelve steps of qualitative document analysis that were just described, the newspaper stories that dealt with animal abuse were accurately analyzed. This systematic process allowed the results to be as accurate as possible.

These twelve steps were used to evaluate media portrayal of animal abuse in Midwest newspaper articles. Results of the analysis are discussed in the third chapter.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Results**

Animal abuse is an important social issue that has received increased media coverage over the years. Results of this study were used to address three research questions. The first research question is: How are people who abuse animals portrayed in the print media? The second research question is: What types of animal abuse cases do the media report on? The third research question is: How are abused animals portrayed in the print media? The effect of agenda setting, priming, and social construction of reality were considered to determine the impact of stories being reported more than once. Before addressing the research questions, an overall description of the articles that were examined is detailed.

One hundred eighty-nine of the original 216 articles were used to answer the three research questions. Twenty-seven articles were eliminated because they did not fit the parameters of the study. The phrase “animal abuse” was found in the twenty-seven articles, but they were not used because the main focus of the story was not on animal abuse or the article was not from a Midwestern newspaper. Examples include stories that dealt with a PETA campaign and a humane society fundraiser. Thirty-four articles from 1993, seventy-five articles from 1998, and eighty articles from 2002 were analyzed.

### **Animal Abuse articles**

1993	34 articles
1998	75 articles
2002	80 articles

An overview of the population of the cities and newspapers that the articles appeared in, as well as the length of the articles is given because it is important to know where the newspaper articles appeared and the extent of attention given to the issue.

#### **Population of cities**

The population of the cities varied. Census 2000 population counts were used to determine the number of residents in each city. See Appendix B for populations of the cities. The number of people who were likely to read the newspaper depended on the size of the city. For example, more individuals would be likely to read the *Chicago Daily Herald* than the *Telegraph Herald*, a Dubuque, Iowa newspaper. The newspapers that the animal abuse articles appeared in are discussed.

Cases of animal abuse were reported in nine states, with one to ten cities per state reporting abuse. Indiana, Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska each had one city that reported cases of animal abuse, while Missouri reported abuse in ten cities. See Table 1 for a list of the newspapers and the number of articles.

**Table 1****Newspapers and number of articles**

Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Kansas	Minnesota	Missouri	Nebraska	Ohio	Wisconsin
<i>Chicago Daily Herald</i> : 6	<i>South Bend Tribune</i> : 29	<i>Telegraph Herald</i> : 1	<i>Topeka Capital-Journal</i> : 1	<i>Star Tribune</i> : 4	<i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i> : 28	<i>Omaha World-Herald</i> : 3	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i> : 14	<i>Capital Times</i> : 20
<i>Chicago Sun Times</i> : 2		A.P.: 4	A.P.: 1		A.P.: 18		<i>Dayton Daily News</i> : 2	<i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i> : 20
<i>The Pantagraph</i> :							<i>Plain Dealer</i> : 5	<i>Wisconsin State Journal</i> : 21
<i>The State Journal-Register</i> : 2							A.P.: 5	
A.P.: 1								
<i>Copley News Service</i> : 1								

The length of the newspaper articles was examined. The length of the newspaper articles varied, ranging from thirty-three words to 1903 words. The majority of the stories were short. Articles were divided into three categories according to length. Stories with fewer than five hundred words were short articles. Articles that contained five hundred to 999 words were medium articles. Long stories had one thousand or more words. See Table 2 for a breakdown of article lengths.

**Table 2****Length of newspaper articles**

	Short: under 500 words	Medium: 500-999 words	Long: 1000 words & over
1993	21	10	3
1998	61	11	3
2002	60	19	1

### **Editorial or Factual**

Articles were also described as an editorial or factual. An article was considered an editorial if written by a newspaper editor or a member of the general public to express an opinion regarding animal abuse. Articles were labeled factual if the story consisted of facts and not the author's opinion. Three (8.82%) of the stories in 1993 were editorials. Thirty-one (91.17%) articles were factual. In 1998, ten (13.33%) stories were editorials and sixty-five (86.66%) articles were factual. Four (5%) articles were editorials in 2002 and seventy-six (95%) stories were factual. Now that the demographics of the newspaper articles in this study are known, the first research question is presented.

### **Suspected animal abusers RQ1: How are people who abuse animals portrayed in the print media?**

The purpose of this question was to develop a depiction of the image of who an animal abuser is. People who abuse animals were described matter of factly and with few details. They were described with little imagery. The analysis determined that people were usually not the focus of the articles.

### **Abuser Profile**

To gather this information, the articles were coded for the suspected abuser's name, gender, age, address, and occupation. It is difficult to generalize about who abuses animals from the newspaper articles that were analyzed. The descriptions of the abusers were very factual, with little use of adjectives. The only difference in the articles was the amount of personal information provided

about the suspected abuser. Both men and women abuse animals; however, the majority of the abusers were males. Males were the suspected abusers in ninety-five cases. Ages of the abusers ranged from fourteen years to seventy-two years. Mention of mitigating circumstances and criminal charges were also noted. A portrayal of the characteristics of suspected abusers follows.

Figure 1 provides descriptions of the suspected abusers. The analysis from the three years was combined into one graph because the frequency remained consistent throughout the years. The analysis found that the majority of the suspected abusers were named males whose ages were provided in the articles. The addresses of suspected abusers were not given in most of the stories. The occupations of suspected abusers were usually provided only if the abusers' jobs involved animals or if the abusers were prominent members of their communities. This made it appear that people whose occupations involved the care of animals abused animals more frequently than average people.

Eighty-three (43.91%) articles over the three-year period involved a named male. In 1993, fourteen (41.17%) of the articles involved a named male. Named males were suspected abusers in thirty-one (41.33%) articles in 1998. In 2002, thirty-eight (47.5%) stories involved a named male.

Unnamed males were the suspected abusers in twelve (6.34%) articles over the three-year time period. Three (8.82%) articles in 1993 involved unnamed males. In 1998, four (5.33%) stories involved unnamed males. Suspected abusers were unnamed males in five (6.25%) articles in 2002.

Named females were the suspected abusers in twenty-five (13.22%) of the articles over the three years studied. Seven (20.58%) articles in 1993 involved named females. Eleven (14.66%) stories involved named females in 1998. In 2002, named females were the suspected abusers in seven (8.75%) articles.

Four (2.11%) articles involved unnamed females in the three years that were analyzed. An unnamed female was the suspected abuser in one (2.94%) article in 1993. Two (2.66%) articles in 1998 included an unnamed female, and one (1.25%) article in 2002 involved an unnamed female.

Ten (5.29%) of the articles involved both a named male and a named female in the three years studied. In 1993, suspected abusers in one (2.94%) article were a named male and a named female. Four (5.33%) stories in 1998 included a named male and a named female. Five (6.25%) articles in 2002 involved a named male and a named female.

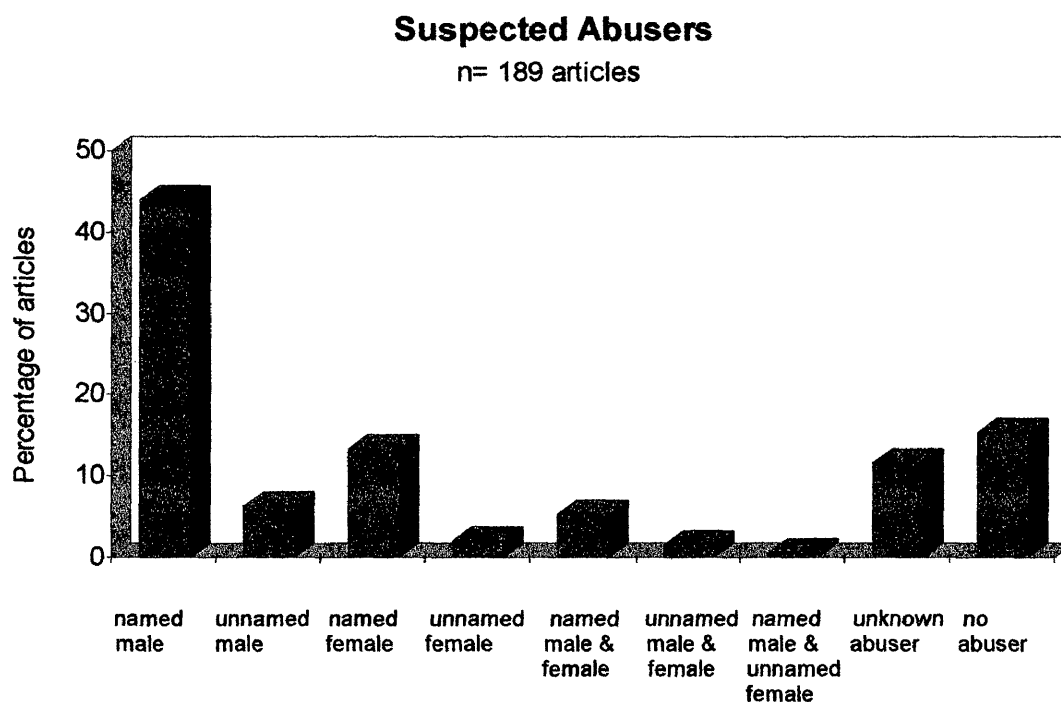
An unnamed male and an unnamed female were the suspected abusers in three (1.58%) of the articles during the three-year time period. No stories in 1993 involved an unnamed male and an unnamed female. Two (2.66%) articles in 1998 included an unnamed male and an unnamed female. An unnamed male and unnamed female were the suspected abusers in one (1.25%) story in 2002.

One (0.52%) article from the three years studied involved a named male and an unnamed female. There were no articles in 1993 or 1998 that involved a named male and an unnamed female as the suspected abusers. Suspected abusers in one (1.25%) 2002 story were a named male and an unnamed female.

Abusers were unknown in twenty-two (11.64%) of the articles over the three-year period. The abuser's identity was not revealed. In 1993, three (8.82%) articles had unknown abusers. Twelve (16%) stories in 1998 involved unknown abusers. In 2002, seven (8.75%) stories included unknown abusers.

Twenty-nine (15.34%) articles during the three years studied did not involve an abuser. These stories dealt primarily with animal cruelty laws and did not mention a specific abuser. There were no abusers in five (14.70%) of the 1993 articles. Nine (12%) articles in 1998 did not involve abusers. In 2002, fifteen (18.75%) articles did not include abusers.

**Figure 1**



In ninety-eight (51.85%) articles of the one hundred eighty-nine articles studied over the three-year time period, the age of the suspected abuser was



provided. Nine (26.47%) articles in 1993 contained the suspected abuser's age. In 1998, forty-two (56%) articles included the age of the abuser. Forty-seven (58.75%) of the 2002 articles contained the abuser's age. The ages ranged from fourteen to seventy-two years in the three years studied.

Thirty-seven (19.57%) of the articles during the three years contained the suspected abuser's address. The abuser's address was mentioned in four (11.76%) of the 1993 articles. Twenty (26.66%) stories in 1998 contained the abuser's address. In 2002, addresses were provided in thirteen (16.25%) articles.

The occupation of the suspected abuser was named in twenty-nine (15.34%) articles over the three years examined. Occupations were provided if the abuser's job involved the welfare of animals or if he/she had an important role in the community. In 1993, the suspected abuser's occupation was listed in thirteen (38.23%) articles. Eight of the articles involved dog dealers, one article involved a veterinary technician, and four articles involved farmers. Five (6.66%) articles in 1998 contained the suspected abuser's occupation. One story involved a student. A veterinarian was the suspected abuser in two articles. A special deputy sheriff was mentioned in one article. One story involved a kennel operator. The occupation of the suspected abuser was provided in eleven (13.75%) of the 2002 articles. Six stories involved dog breeders. A superintendent of a fish hatchery was mentioned in two articles. Former pet store owners were mentioned in one story. A councilman was the suspected abuser in one article. An Animal Protective League Executive

Director was the focus of one story. The occupations of the other suspected abusers were not provided, which could have made it appear to the reader that many animal abusers are people who should know about the proper care and treatment of animals.

There were mitigating circumstances mentioned in thirty-seven (19.57%) of the articles during the three-year time period. Mitigating means to become milder or less severe. Articles that involved mitigating circumstances explained why the abuse occurred. Some examples included owners who were physically or mentally ill and unable to properly care for their animals. By mentioning these mitigating circumstances, the stories more thoroughly informed the reader about why the abuse occurred. Seven (20.58%) articles in 1993 involved mitigating circumstances. In 1998, mitigating circumstances occurred in fifteen (20%) stories. Fifteen (18.75%) articles in 2002 involved mitigating circumstances. The following example illustrated that not all animal abusers inflict abuse intentionally:

A woman's sentence for keeping 138 animals in unsanitary conditions includes spending four years of probation without pets and house plants. The terms for Lynn Dumke, 50, accompanied a six-month jail sentence Tuesday by Judge Robert Hawley who said she had violated conditions of probation on previous convictions for similar offenses. Police who investigated her Menasha home March 24 said they found cats with eye infections because of unsanitary conditions. Four of the home's five dogs were in such poor conditions they had to be killed. Unless she

cooperates with counseling for obsessive-compulsive disorder, he said, her probation agent can keep her in jail for 10 months. A psychologist testified that she doesn't realize what she is doing is wrong (Woman ordered to avoid pets, plants, *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 14, 1998, p. 3B).

This example illustrated that this abuser did not try to intentionally inflict harm on her pets. Note that the article mentioned the woman's obsessive-compulsive disorder to explain the circumstances that surrounded the case.

One hundred twenty-four (65.60%) stories over the three years mentioned criminal charges; sixteen (47.05%) articles in 1993, fifty (66.66%) in 1998, and fifty-eight (72.50%) in 2002. The criminal charges were not divided into felonies or misdemeanors because the laws differ from state to state, and state laws regarding animal cruelty have changed from the year 1993 to the present. Currently, animal cruelty is a felony in seven of the nine states in the study including Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. Animal cruelty is a misdemeanor in Kansas and Ohio, and a bill is pending in Kansas to make animal abuse a felony.

The previous article illustrated how people who abuse animals are portrayed in the print media. They were portrayed factually with few descriptive adjectives, and were usually not the focus of the articles. Little detail was given about the abuser unless he/she worked with animals or the case was sensational. The results of the second research question follow.

**Types of animal abuse RQ2: What types of animal abuse cases do the media report on?**

Cases involving cruel mistreatment, significant acts of neglect, and unjustified killing of animals were reported by the media. These cases were illustrated by descriptions of the animal abuse that occurred. The media reported primarily on cases of cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect of animals. In this study the articles were divided into three different categories of abuse: cruel mistreatment, significant acts of neglect, and unjustified killing. The number of cases that involved each type of abuse varied each year so the three years are described separately.

Cruel mistreatment of animals is defined as, “acts that inflict unnecessary pain and suffering on animals” (Livingston, 2001, p. 33). Cruel mistreatment includes torturing, mutilation, and maiming. Significant acts of neglect is defined as, “failure to provide adequate food, water, and shelter” (Livingston, 2001, p. 34). Unjustified killing is defined as, “unjustified or malicious killing of certain animals” (Livingston, 2001, p. 34).

Cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect both received approximately the same amount of coverage. Over the three-year period there were sixty-three (33.33%) cases of cruel mistreatment and sixty-one (32.27%) articles that involved significant acts of neglect. Forty-five (23.80%) articles dealt with unjustified killing of animals. Four (2.11%) stories included both cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect of animals. The type of abuse was not specified in two (1.05%) articles. No abuse occurred in fourteen (7.4%)

of the stories. The breakdown is given in separate graphs for each year, because the reporting on the various types of abuse was not consistent among the years. See figures 2, 3, and 4 for the types of animal abuse cases in 1993, 1998, and 2002. The following examples illustrate the types of abuse that occurred in 1993, 1998, and 2002.

**Figure 2**

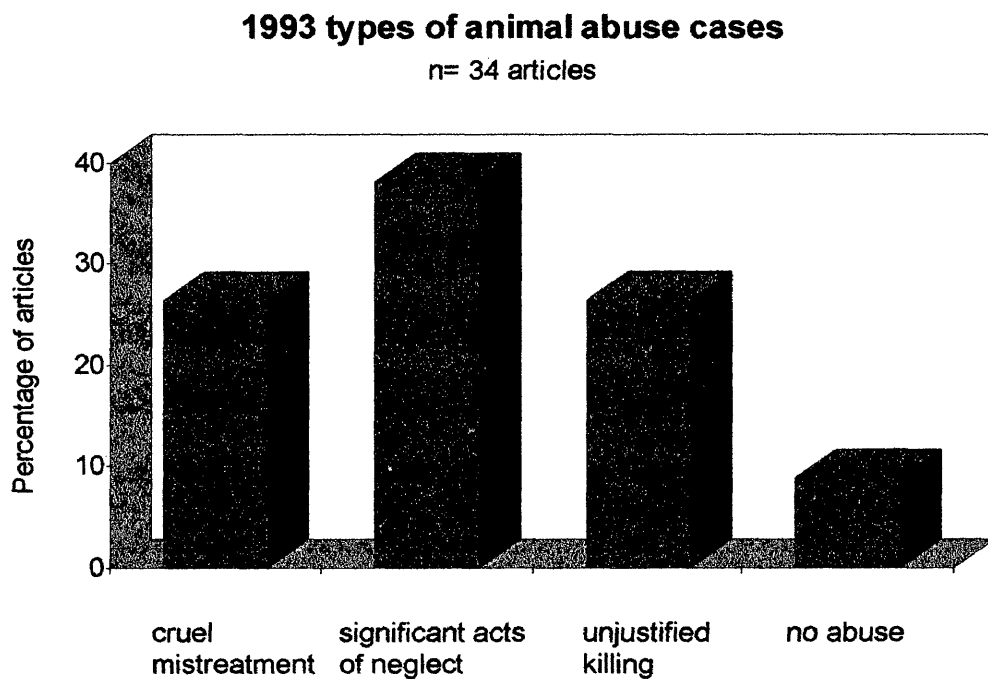


Figure 3

## 1998 types of animal abuse cases

n= 75 articles

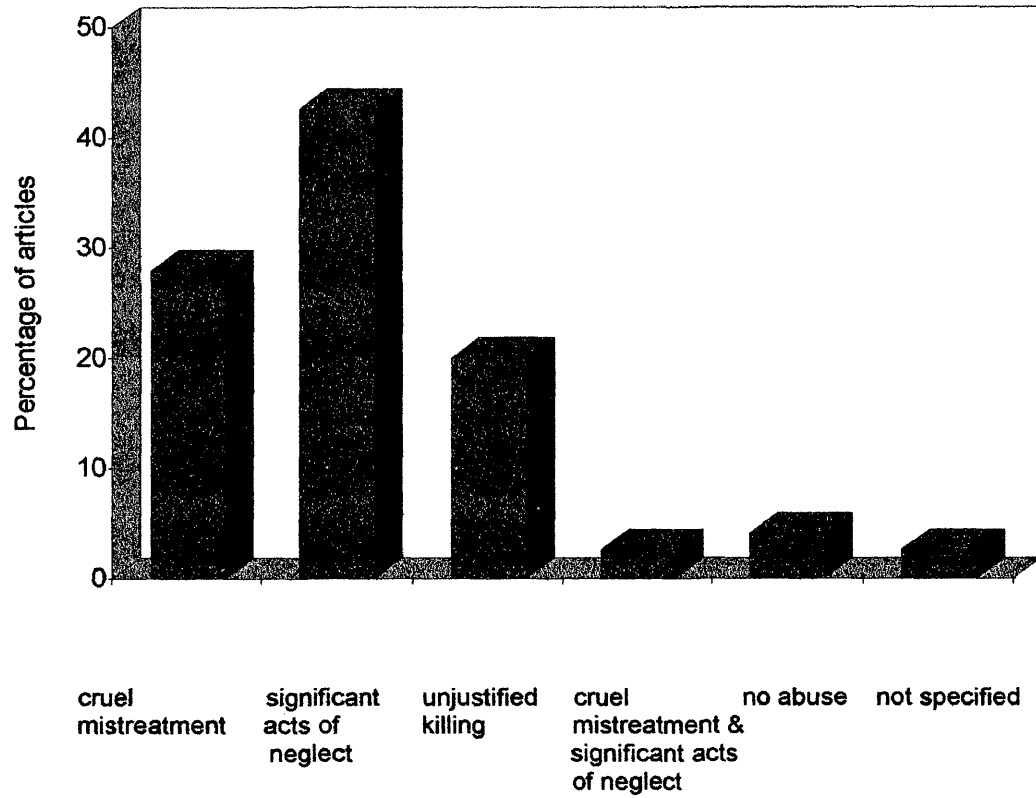
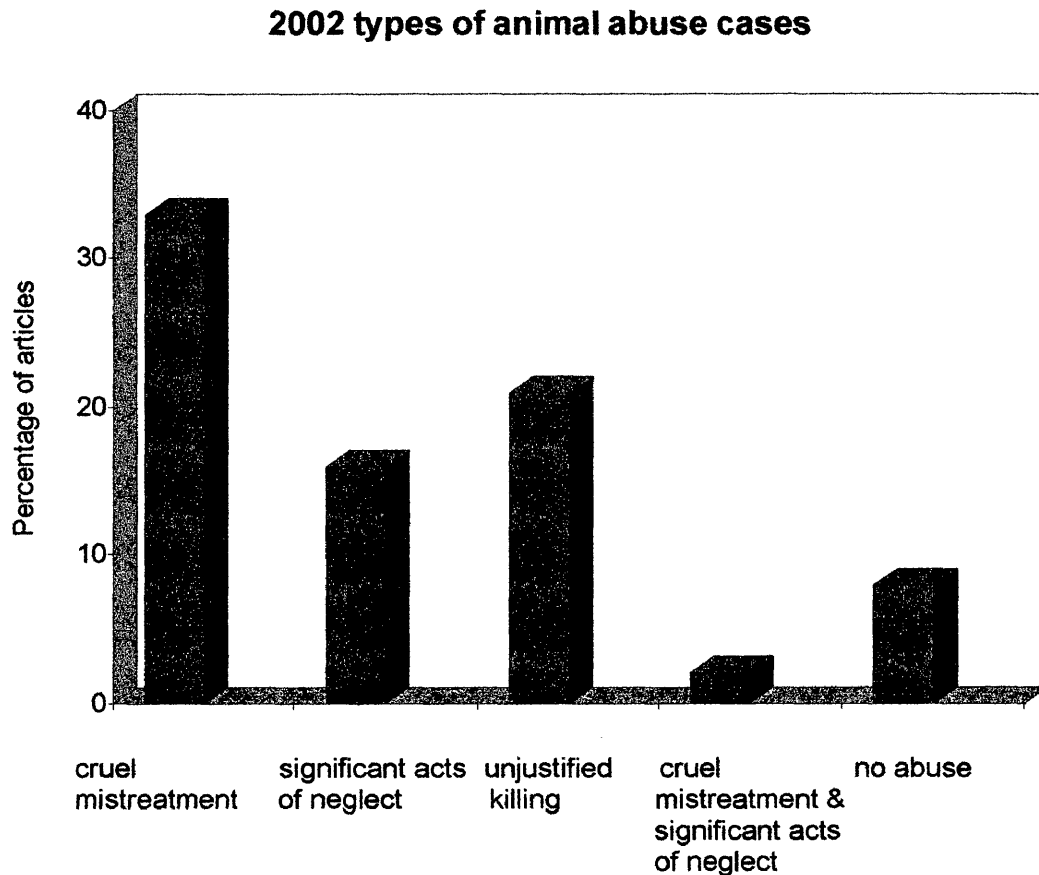


Figure 4



Cruel mistreatment of animals accounted for sixty-three (33.33%) of the articles during the three years studied. In 1993, nine (26.47%) of the articles involved cruel mistreatment of animals. In 1998, twenty-one (28%) of the articles involved cruel mistreatment. Thirty-three (41.25%) of the articles in 2002 involved cruel mistreatment.

A typical example of cruel mistreatment involved a dog that was thrown off of a bridge into a creek in Columbus Ohio:

Capital Area Humane Society workers rescued a dog thrown into Alum Creek last night from a bridge on E. Broad Street at Nelson Road. It was

the second time this week a dog has been rescued from that area, and Humane Society officials speculated the animal in the earlier incident also was dropped from the bridge. The dog last night had a chain saw attached to its neck. It was kept from drowning when it came to rest on a slip of land at the side of the creek, said Gerri Bain, Humane Society executive director. The tan, collie-German shepherd mix is about 3 months old, rescuers said. It was taken from the creek bank cold and shivering but apparently without injury and was treated at the society's shelter near Hilliard. 'We are offering a \$250 reward for information leading to the culprit,' Bain said. The Bexley Police Department asked for the society's help about 8:20 p.m. The dog was positioned so that it had to be rescued from the water by boat, Bain said ("Dog rescued after being tossed in creek," *Columbus Dispatch*, June 26, 1993).

Notice that the description and condition of the dog were given in great detail. The article even mentioned that there was a reward offered for information leading to the person who harmed the dog.

Significant acts of neglect were found in sixty-one (32.27%) of the cases over the three year period. Thirteen (38.23%) of the 1993 articles concerned significant acts of neglect. Thirty-two (42.66%) stories in 1998 involved significant acts of neglect. Sixteen (20%) stories in 2002 dealt with significant acts of neglect. An example typical of this type of abuse dealt with a couple, Donald and Delores Ralph, who had dogs, ponies, and sheep taken from their



home after Humane Society officials alleged that the animals were being starved and neglected:

More than 30 dogs, many emaciated and some blind, were seized last week from a rural Mazomanie home by Dane County Humane Society officials, who allege they were being starved and neglected. Three ponies and two sheep also were taken Dec. 17 from the Donald and Delores Ralph home, 6167 Reuter Road in the town of Mazomanie. Two plastic-wrapped beagle carcasses were found in a freezer in the garage, being stored alongside the couple's frozen food. Tests are being conducted to learn how the dogs died, said Humane Society's spokeswoman Mary Paul Long. In all, 31 dogs from the Ralph home are being housed at the Humane Society, Long said. The matter has been turned over to the Dane County district attorney's office, which will decide sometime after Christmas whether to file charges. Although the Ralphs previously bred beagles, none of the dogs taken was a puppy, Long said. According to a complaint filed for a search warrant, a man working at the Ralph home Dec. 13 described several skinny, lice-ridden beagles being kept in filthy pens on the property. Humane officer Sue DiBlasio checked the property Dec. 15 and Dec. 16 and found many of the dogs being kept in cramped kennels and pens, most of them thin or emaciated. Many had large patches of missing hair, open sores, and were so weak they had trouble standing. The Ralphs were not home during all three visits by officials. They could not be reached for

comment Thursday. Dog food was nowhere to be found in any of the buildings on the property, and water was also scarce, according to the complaint. Inside the garage, the complaint states, beagles were housed in three or four portable dog carriers, a practice that was forbidden after an animal abuse case against the Ralphs in 1990, the complaint states. The Ralphs' dogs were taken away during that case but later returned to them, Long said. The three ponies were very thin, and had back, hip and rib bones showing through their long winter coats, the complaint states. There was no hay outside for the ponies and the hay being kept inside was of poor quality, Long said. The ponies and two sheep found nearby are now being housed elsewhere, Long said. The Ralphs had accepted free dog food from DiBlasio for about a year. In July, Delores Ralph told DiBlasio the animals were in good condition and no longer needed the free food, the complaint states. The animals looked bad then, DiBlasio noted, and their condition has worsened, according to the complaint. While some of the beagles are blind and will never regain their sights, Long said, others will recover. They are very very affectionate and very willing to please, Long said. Adoptions are not being discussed because the animals still belong to the Ralphs. They have five working days from the time they were notified of the seizure to pay the expense for housing the animals or risk having them declared as stray, Long said. A letter was sent to the Ralphs last Friday. Asked whether the Humane Society would fight to prevent the dogs from

returning to the Ralphs, Long said, Absolutely (Humane society seizes 31 frail dogs, *Wisconsin State Journal*, December 24, 1993, p. 1C).

Notice that the conditions of the animals and the conditions that they lived in were described in great detail. In cases of neglect, vivid descriptions of the animals were typical. Details about the animals' bodies and their states of neglect were given. The story also stated that the owners had previously been dog breeders.

Unjustified killing was the result in forty-five (23.80%) articles over the three years studied. Nine (26.47%) of the articles in 1993 involved unjustified killing. Fifteen (20%) of the 1998 articles dealt with unjustified killing.

Unjustified killing was the result in twenty-one (26.25%) of the 2002 articles. A case that illustrated unjustified killing of an animal involved a man who shot and killed a dog and sold it as meat:

A 72-year-old man accused of cruelly killing a dog and selling it for meat was being investigated for suspected record-keeping violations regarding his license to raise dogs for research, federal authorities said Thursday. Dr. Jerry Diemer of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regulatory Animal Enforcement Division in Minneapolis said he requested the records probe of Ervin Stebane's Circle S Ranch in mid-April. A federal investigator arrived Tuesday, the day Stebane was arrested on animal cruelty charges, Diemer said. Diemer declined to elaborate on the federal probe. Stebane was charged Wednesday in Calumet County Circuit Court with intentionally treating an animal in a

cruel manner resulting in the animal's unjustifiable death. He also was charged with a misdemeanor- intentionally maintaining a place used for the shooting of an animal that is tied. District Attorney Kenneth Kratz said Stebane shot a dog in the head, disemboweled the animal and sold it to an Asian-American couple for \$50 as meat. Stebane has a federal license to sell dogs to research laboratories, pet stores or individuals. Stebane is required to keep documents showing where he acquired the animals and where they go, Diemer said. Violations carry fines up to \$2,500 and licenses can be suspended, he said. The last federal inspection of Stebane's operation was March 17, Diemer said. He wouldn't disclose the findings. But Kratz said USDA inspections found no substantial evidence of mistreatment. Police found 149 dogs at Stebane's ranch and all were removed by Wednesday night, Kratz said. Some 17 humane societies offered to help care for the animals (Feds had eye on man accused of dog cruelty, *Capital Times*, May 28, 1993, p. 5B).

Note that the description of the abuse inflicted on the animal was extremely vivid. The person accused of the abuse was also described. Again, in this case, the abuser's occupation as a dog dealer was mentioned. Abusers who committed unjustified killing were often described in more detail than those who committed different types of animal abuse.

Fourteen (7.40%) articles, over the three years studied, were not included in the three main categories of animal abuse. In 1993, three (8.82%)

articles did not involve any type of abuse. One story discussed an animal sanctuary. Another article explored the connection between animal abuse and child abuse. A third article was an animal cruelty poll. Three (4%) articles in 1998 did not involve any type of abuse. Two of the stories discussed animal abuse laws and one dealt with an animal shelter's founder. Eight (10%) of the stories in 2002 did not involve acts of animal abuse. Seven of these stories dealt with animal abuse laws, and one article discussed how the numbers of cases of animal abuse being handled by the Humane Society had increased.

Cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect were found in four (2.11%) of the articles during the three years studied. Two (2.66%) articles in 1998 involved both cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect. In 2002, two (2.50%) articles included cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect. A story that exemplified both cruel mistreatment and significant acts of neglect involved two men whose dirty house contained fifty dead dogs and approximately 235 dogs, cats, and birds. They were charged with nineteen counts of animal abuse. "Chris Summers, 37, and Reed Evans, 47, also were charged Tuesday with one count of failure to properly dispose of a dead animal. The 19 abuse counts represent each breed of animal that was found in the house" (2 men are facing 19 charges of animal abuse; officials found carcasses of 50 dogs at rural home, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 27, 1998, p. B3). This article clearly illustrated that some of the animals were dead and others were living in unsanitary conditions. The abusers' names, ages, and criminal charges against them were also mentioned.

In 1998, two (2.66%) articles did not give specific information about the type of abuse that occurred. These articles dealt with a veterinarian who had her license revoked.

The majority of the stories involved either cruel mistreatment or significant acts of neglect. Since the majority of the articles involved cruel mistreatment or significant acts of neglect we know that most cases did not involve unjustified killing. The previous examples illustrated how typical cases of each type of abuse were reported. Now that the types of animal abuse cases the media report on have been examined, the third research question is discussed.

**Abused Animals RQ3: How are abused animals portrayed in the print media?**

The purpose of this research question was to determine what types of animals were abused and to determine their condition. Animals were portrayed factually with details to describe the abuse that they endured. Articles were also divided into categories for the species of animals and their condition. The majority of the abused animals were dogs and cats over the three-year period. Horses, goats, pigs, chickens, rats, and a wide variety of other animals were also abused. The conditions of the animals varied. The majority of the articles involved dead or malnourished animals. The three years are discussed separately to examine the animals that were abused because the percentage breakdown of the type of animals abused in each year differed.

In 1993, most of the animal abuse cases involved dogs. Seventeen (50%) of the articles dealt with cases of animal abuse that involved only dogs. A typical article that dealt with the abuse of a dog involved a dog that was drug behind its owner's car:

A 22-year-old man accused of dragging his golden retriever behind his car was sentenced to 50 days in jail, fined \$700 and placed on probation for two years for animal cruelty. Michael Thomsen of Marathon was also ordered by Circuit Judge Ann Walsh Bradley to perform 100 hours of community service. The dog was found curled up in the man's garage in May by a deputy sheriff who had gone to his home with a 19-year-old woman to pick up her belongings. The woman said Thomsen hit the dog because it had killed some pheasants he was raising, chained it behind his car and drove away. Thomsen, who pleaded no contest to animal cruelty, told police he thought the dog was dead when he started dragging it (Jail sentence for animal cruelty, *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 16, 1993, p. 3B).

The description of the dog and what was done to it was described. The abuser's sentence was also mentioned. This article was typical because it was factual and gave details about both the animal and the abuser.

Five (14.70%) stories in 1993 dealt only with the abuse of cats. A typical case of abuse concerned a kitten that was mutilated by a man:

Before he is placed on probation for a year, Martin Reeves will spend 45 days in the Franklin County Jail for mutilating his wife's 8-week-old

kitten and killing it. Reeves, 26, of 7348 Chaparral Rd. was sentenced yesterday to 90 days in jail for animal cruelty and ordered to seek counseling. Municipal Judge Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr. suspended 45 days, meaning Reeves still had to serve 11 days. Reeves has been in jail since Dec. 19 when Judge Thomas Martin set bond for his release at \$10,000. Reeves pleaded guilty Jan. 11 to a misdemeanor charge of animal cruelty. The judge dismissed a misdemeanor charge of domestic violence by threat. His wife, Sally Reeves, said her husband tortured and beat the kitten to death. Mr. Reeves, who has filed for divorce, denied torturing the cat and said he killed it partly because he has a cat phobia. Mrs. Reeves said she came home from work on Dec. 14 and heard the kitten mewling loudly. She found the cat upstairs in the bathroom next to a tub filled with water. She noticed that the cat had an injured paw and asked her husband what happened. An argument ensued, and Mr. Reeves pulled the kitten out of her arms and slammed it against the wall, killing it. Mrs. Reeves took the cat to veterinarian Thomas E. Ritchie for a necropsy. Ritchie's report said the 2 ½- pound gray tabby was dead, wet and badly bruised when Mrs. Reeves brought it in. It had a broken jaw and split skull, and several of the foot pads on the kitten's paws were missing. There was a 2-inch cut on the right foot between the toes and ankle. The skin around some of the foot pads and some of the claws was torn loose as well, said the necropsy. Mrs. Reeves also found pieces of the cat's paw in the oven, Assistant City



Attorney Jim Sika said. Mr. Reeves denied torturing the cat and told Pfeiffer he was badly bitten by a stray cat when he was 7 and had to have rabies shots that he said were very painful. On the day the kitten died, he was holding the cat on his shoulder and the cat jumped off, injuring its foot, Mr. Reeves said. He tried to help it but it bit him, so he threw it outside. Later, he said, he tried to bathe the cat's wounds in the bathtub but was interrupted by his wife's return. Then she started saying, 'You fat s.o.b.' over and over again, and I threw the cat against the wall and that's all there was to it, Mr. Reeves said. I did not torture that cat. His attorney, Donald Rathbun, said Mrs. Reeves wants to harm her husband's reputation after a turbulent marriage. Mrs. Reeves was angry Pfeiffer did not keep her husband in jail for the maximum 90 days, but Pfeiffer said if he had not suspended part of the sentence, he could not have placed Mr. Reeves on probation and compelled him to seek counseling (Man sentenced for torturing, killing kitten, *Columbus Dispatch*, January 22, 1993, p. 7B).

Note that the injuries inflicted on the animal were described in great detail. The incident leading up to the abuse of the kitten was also provided. Also note that the article was very vivid in the description of the brutal treatment of the kitten, and that the abuser was described in an unflattering manner. Some other articles that involved the abuse of cats provided the same type of details.

Horses were specifically mentioned in seven (20.58%) of the articles in 1993. An article that dealt with the abuse of horses involved a couple whose horses were taken from them because the horses' living conditions were filthy, and their hooves were so overgrown that some of them could no longer stand:

If wishes were horses, Charlie Ebert would ride hers back to her friend Rita Sperle's rural Stoughton farm. It was Sperle's farm from which Ebert's three horses- two stallions and one brood mare and 19 others were seized in a Feb. 11 raid by the Dane County Humane Society. Authorities charged the horses were kept in filthy, manure-filled stalls, and said that in some cases, the horses' hooves were so poorly maintained the animals could no longer stand. But Ebert claims the problems were exaggerated, and despite the allegations of mistreatment, says her horses were better off with Sperle than they are in the county's custody. Last week, the dispute came to a head as Ebert, her husband Dennis, and Sperle fought Humane Society officer Sue DiBlasio to return one of the Ebert's horses to Sperle's farm. The Eberts, who live in Amberg, about 20 miles northeast of Crivitz, say they've been trying for months to get their horses back from the county, but have faced a number of obstacles, beginning almost as soon as the horses were seized. One horse, the mare, died of colic before the Eberts could get it back from the county, while two others are still being boarded at farms in Dane County. They claim DiBlasio is a bully with a badge and too much arbitrary authority who doesn't understand horses- or their

owners. DiBlasio dismisses the Eberts' accusations as inaccurate, and suggests the Eberts' defense of Sperle may be motivated by family ties or money-charges the Eberts deny. She says she tried for almost six years to get Sperle to take better care of the horses she was boarding and seized the animals only as a last resort. 'The stall conditions were the worst I've ever seen in my life,' she said. Doors were falling off the stalls because they were so packed with manure, DiBlasio said, and one of the Ebert's horses was standing in 12 inches of wet, mucky manure. The county is boarding all of the horses at a cost of up to \$180 a month per horse, plus veterinary costs. Sperle and the horses' owners are paying some of the costs. The total cost to county taxpayers is not yet known. Sperle, whose animal mistreatment case is pending in Dane County Circuit Court, declined to comment on the conditions at her barn or the Eberts' run-in with local authorities. However, a veterinarian asked by Sperle to come out to the farm and look at four or five stalls said he had determined they were adequate for stabling horses. When the Eberts tried to get their horse returned to Sperle's farm last week, they weren't alone. Also on hand were the same veterinarian who had been called by Sperle, DiBlasio and another humane officer, two sheriffs' deputies, who had been called in to assist DiBlasio, and Dane County Board Chairman Michael Blaska and Supervisor Lyman Anderson, whom the Eberts had asked to witness DiBlasio's inspection of the farm. Blaska and Anderson, both farmers, said they were appalled

at DiBlasio's treatment of the Eberts during the inspection. Anderson got into a heated argument with the humane society officer. Blaska said DiBlasio wouldn't answer the Eberts' question whether the horse would be released to them, and said DiBlasio told him she wouldn't discuss the case in the midst of this three-ring circus. She was just terrible, just horrible, Blaska said of DiBlasio. I was not very pleased with her performance at all. DiBlasio said the presence of so many bystanders made it difficult for her to carry out the inspection, which was necessary before any horses could be boarded at the stable. DiBlasio eventually decided that the Eberts could board their horse at Sperle's ranch. But the Eberts say DiBlasio delayed her decision to release the horses to them for months, and hold her responsible for the death of their mare while it was in county custody. They claim she lied about the cause of the horse's death- which authorities claimed was due to neglect by Sperle- and actually delayed treatment of the animal at the University of Wisconsin Veterinary School. DiBlasio denies both accusations, and says it's not uncommon to wait a while before admitting a horse with colic to a veterinary emergency room because of the high costs that accompany such treatment. The Eberts say their faith in Sperle remains unshaken- although their confidence in the animal-protection end of the Humane Society is badly eroded. DiBlasio, meanwhile, insists she's only been doing her job- trying to protect animals from terrible

conditions (Seizure of horses fought, *Capital Times*, April 19, 1993, p. 1A).

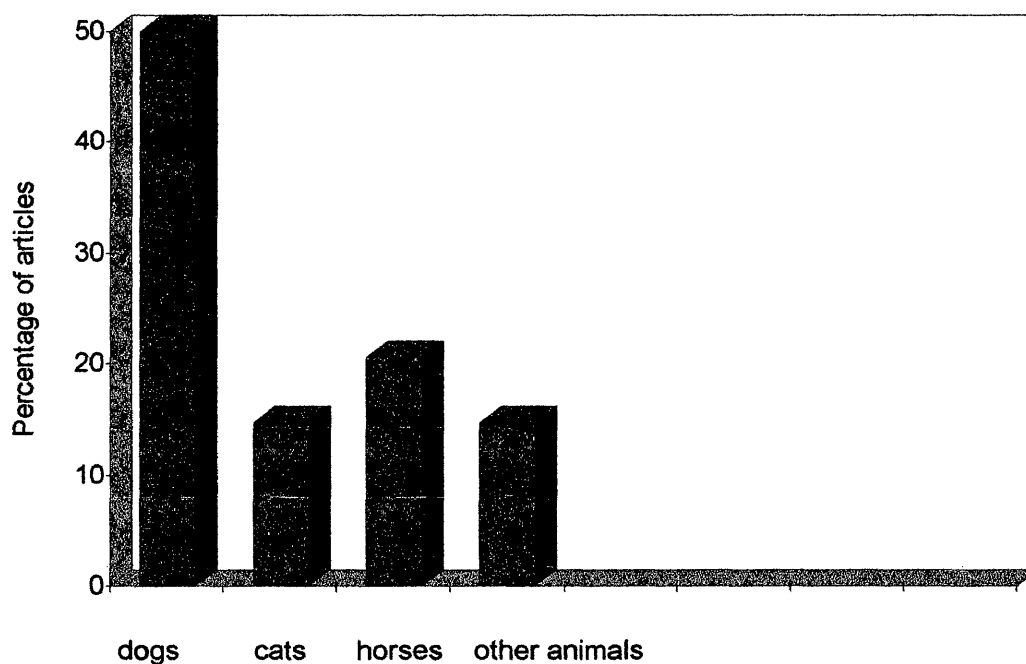
Note that the condition of the horses was described in great detail as well as the terrible conditions that they lived in. Details about the horses' owners and the humane society officer were also given.

Five (14.70%) stories in 1993 involved other animals. These included the abuse of cows, rabbits, and goats. See Figure 5 for 1993 abused animals.

**Figure 5**

**1993 abused animals**

n= 34 articles

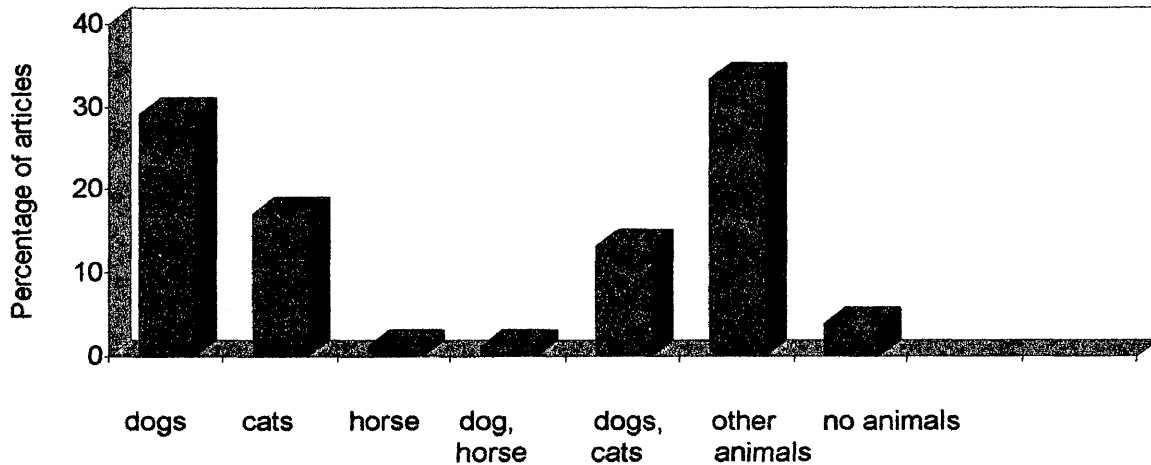


The conditions of the animals in the 1993 articles varied. In four (11.76%) of the articles the condition of the animal was not applicable because the stories involved animal abuse laws or an animal cruelty poll and not the

abuse of a particular animal. Six (17.64%) of the articles dealt with emaciated animals. Animals were slaughtered in seven (20.58%) of the stories. One (2.94%) article dealt with previously abandoned animals that were available for adoption. Theft of pets was the focus of one (2.94%) story. Animals in need of medical care were the focus of one (2.94%) article. A dog was thrown off of a bridge in one (2.94%) story. Horse racing injuries were the focus of two (5.88%) stories. In one (2.94%) story, animals were never let outside to relieve themselves. In four (11.76%) articles, horses' hooves were overgrown. A kitten was forced to inhale marijuana smoke in two (5.88%) articles. Three (8.82%) stories involved the mutilation or death of animals. Heat stress was the focus of one (2.94%) article.

In 1998, most of the articles involved the abuse of dogs or other animals. Twenty-two (29.33%) articles focused on the abuse of only dogs. Thirteen (17.33%) stories involved only cats. One (1.33%) article dealt with the abuse of a horse. A dog and horse were discussed in one (1.33%) article. Dogs and cats were the abused animals in ten (13.33%) articles. Twenty-five (33.33%) articles described other animals. There were no animals discussed in three (4%) stories. See Figure 6 for 1998 abused animals.

**Figure 6**  
**1998 abused animals**  
 n= 75 articles



The conditions of the 1998 abused animals varied. Some of the animals were dead and others were not provided with enough food and water. Twenty-six (34.66%) articles involved dead animals. Eight (10.66%) articles involved cases where some of the animals were malnourished and others were dead. One (1.33%) case involved malnourished animals. Twenty-six (34.66%) stories involved cases of neglect. Animal abandonment was discussed in two (2.66%) stories. One (1.33%) article was about stolen animals and three (4%) stories involved bullfighting. Eight (10.66%) articles did not discuss the condition of the animals.

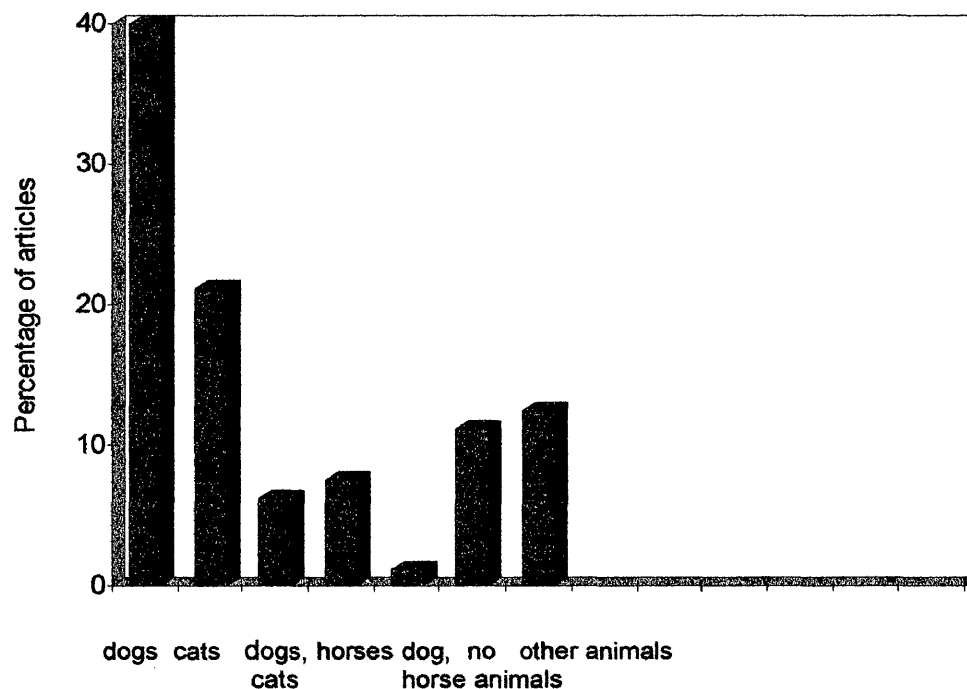
Most of the 2002 articles dealt with the abuse of dogs and cats. Thirty-two (40%) articles involved the abuse of dogs exclusively. Cats were the only abused animals in seventeen (21.25%) of the articles. Five (6.25%) stories dealt with the abuse of both dogs and cats. Horses were abused in six (7.5%) articles. A dog and horse were the focus of one (1.25%) story. Ten (12.5%) stories

involved a variety of other animals. Nine (11.25%) stories did not mention the abuse of animals. These stories dealt with animal abuse laws and not particular cases of animal abuse. See Figure 7 for 2002 abused animals.

**Figure 7**

**2002 abused animals**

n= 80 articles



Conditions of the 2002 animals varied for each of the cases. Some of the animals were dead and others were malnourished. Thirty-nine (48.75%) cases involved dead animals. Four (5%) articles included some animals that were dead and others that were starving. One (1.25%) story involved animals that were starving. Injured animals were the focus of sixteen (20%) articles. Three (3.75%) stories involved animals that were in poor living conditions. A cat was not injured in one (1.25%) article when its owner threw it at a peace



officer. Two (2.50%) articles involved rodeo animals. Hoarded animals were discussed in two (2.50%) stories. Circus animals were the focus of one (1.25%) article. Eleven (13.75%) stories did not include the condition of the animals because they discussed animal abuse laws rather than specific cases of animal abuse. The majority of the articles focused on the abuse of dogs and cats, and most of the animals were either malnourished or dead. The next section focuses on animal abuse cases that appeared in newspapers at least twice.

### **Repeated articles**

We need to take a closer look at the articles that were repeated because we know from social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming that frequency of recurring information is most likely to shape the public's perception on the portrayal of animal abuse by the media. The more frequently that people hear about an issue, the more likely they are to attend to it. The articles that were repeated did differ somewhat from the typical article.

Agenda setting theory explores the influence of the repetition of topics over time. People remember stories that appeared in newspapers at least twice more than stories that were only reported once. The number of articles about animal abuse appearing in newspapers has increased from 1993 to 2002. In 1993, thirty-eight articles dealing with animal abuse appeared in Midwest newspapers. Eighty-five articles on animal abuse were in 1998 newspapers. In 2002, there were ninety-three animal abuse articles in Midwest newspapers. In the three years studied, twenty-nine cases of animal abuse were each reported in newspapers at least twice, for a total of ninety-five articles. The number of

animal abuse cases that appeared in newspapers at least two times has also increased over the years with four stories in 1993, twelve in 1998, and thirteen in 2002.

Animal abuse cases that appeared in newspapers at least twice differed from typical cases of animal abuse that were reported once. There was no trend observed in the length of the articles. Stories were found in all of the categories. They ranged from ninety-seven words to 1175 words. The repeated cases tended to contain more details and descriptive language about the conditions surrounding the abuse. Descriptive language such as the following was found in the articles. “Authorities charged the horses were kept in filthy, manure-filled stalls, and said that in some cases, the horses’ hooves were so poorly maintained the animals could no longer stand” (Seizure of horses fought, *Capital Times*, April 19, 1993, p. 1A). It is interesting to note that most articles that received multiple placements in newspapers involved severe cases of abuse, unusual circumstances, or suspected abusers whose occupations involved the care of animals. Follow-up stories to the initial stories provided more details surrounding the cases.

The majority of the repeated stories involved people whose occupation involved caring for animals. The suspected abuser in most of the repeated articles was a male. Most of the repeated articles also involved unjustified killing.

### **Changes across time**

Crosstabs were run using SPSS to test for any differences that might have occurred between the three years that were studied. Of the twenty-two tests, six (27%), yielded significant results. The major differences were found in the following categories: age of the abuser, mention of occupation, mention of criminal charges, horses, other animals, and significant acts of neglect. 1993 differed from 1998 and 2002 in the number of articles, the length of the articles, the age of the abuser, the type of animal abused, and whether or not criminal charges were mentioned. 1998 differed from 1993 and 2002 in the types of animals abused and the type of abuse.

Specific differences were found in the following instances. The average age of the abuser in 1993 was fifty-one, compared to the average abuser's age in 1998 and 2002 of thirty-seven ( $p < .006$ ). The occupation of the abuser was more likely to be reported in 1993 than in 1998 or 2002 ( $p < .003$ ). Criminal charges were mentioned more in 1998 and 2002 than in 1993 ( $p < .022$ ). Articles about the abuse of horses appeared more frequently in 1993 than in 1998 or 2002 ( $p < .008$ ). The abuse of animals other than dogs, cats, or horses was reported more in 1998 than in 1993 or 2002 ( $p < .017$ ). Significant acts of neglect increased in 1998 and decreased in 2002 ( $p < .010$ ). In 1993, the average age of the abuser was older, the abuser's occupation was more likely to be given, there were a larger number of cases involving horses, and the articles were longer than in 1998 or 2002. Articles involving significant acts of neglect were more frequent in 1998 than in 1993 or 2002.

The crosstabs highlight how coverage of animal abuse has changed in a variety of ways over the past ten years. Of specific interest is that while there were more articles in recent years those articles were shorter in length.

The previous information illustrated the importance of social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming on how people think about the issue of animal abuse. The focus of the articles was on the abuse of the animals rather than on the abuser. Stories that were reported in newspapers at least two times were usually more sensational than articles that appeared only once. The next section discusses conclusions made from this qualitative content analysis.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

#### Summary

This study was conducted out of a concern for the welfare of animals and an interest in media depiction of animal abuse. Animals play an important role in society and benefit people in a variety of ways, including serving as companions or as therapy animals. The research was based on three theories: social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming. These theories can be used to explain the impact of media's coverage of issues on the public. Three research questions were developed using these theories. **RQ1:** How are people who abuse animals portrayed in the print media? **RQ2:** What types of animal abuse cases do the media report on? **RQ3:** How are abused animals portrayed in the print media? Altheide's book, *Qualitative Media Analysis*, was used to guide the steps of the qualitative content analysis. This study was able to provide preliminary descriptors of animal abuse. A close examination of the articles was conducted to answer the three research questions. A number of conclusions were drawn from the results of this qualitative content analysis on media coverage of animal abuse in Midwest newspapers.

Animal abuse is a social issue that has received more media coverage over the years. The number of Midwest newspaper articles covering animal abuse has increased from 1993 to 2002. There was a greater increase in the number of articles from 1993 to 1998 than from 1998 to 2002. In 1993, there were thirty-eight articles on the issue. By 1998, the number of stories that

appeared in Midwest newspapers had risen to eighty-five. In 2002, ninety-three articles on animal abuse were reported. Due to the increased coverage of animal abuse, people may be more aware of this important social issue than they were previously. Since there is no national registry for reporting animal abuse, it is not possible to know for certain whether there are more or fewer cases of animal abuse, or if the print media is just giving more coverage to this issue. The agenda setting function is also important when looking at the increased number of articles on animal abuse appearing in newspapers. The more times that people read about an issue, the more likely they will be to remember it. With increased media coverage, more individuals are aware of the issue and might take steps to get involved to help alleviate animal abuse.

After examining the coverage of animal abuse cases in Midwest newspapers there is a better understanding of what media considers worthy to report. With the majority of articles being short, under 500 words, there were few details beyond the basic facts: species of animals, suspected abusers, and brief descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the abuse. Since many of the articles lacked much detail and descriptive adjectives, they may not have generated as much attention from the newspaper readers as they would have if they had been more vivid.

There was a wide range of news stories on animal abuse covered in newspapers. The majority of the articles on animal abuse dealt with basic news coverage. They were precise and factual. The articles were objectively written, but contained few adjectives describing the animal or the suspected abuser.

Most of the articles involved dogs and cats that were household pets. Other stories focused on a wide variety of animals: horses, a chimpanzee, an iguana, a turtle, a duck, parakeets, chickens, turkeys, rats, rabbits, goats, pigs, cattle, and elephants. Unusual animal stories also appeared in newspapers, including an article about an iguana that had its tail pulled off and a chimpanzee that was shot to death by a teenager. Although most of the articles were factual, some of them were letters to the editor or editorials written by newspaper editors. By looking at the three years of coverage we see that although the types of animal abuse cases that were reported remained the same, the number of animal abuse cases reported in the media has increased. As discussed in the first chapter, agenda setting helps researchers to understand the impact of messages being repeated to people. Individuals have an increased chance of retaining a message the more frequently that they hear the information. The stories of animal abuse that appeared in newspapers at least twice could be remembered more than stories that only received coverage once. This is the case with the abuse of animals.

Occupations were mentioned when the suspected abusers' professions were related to animals or if the abusers were public figures. Suspected animal abusers who were animal breeders or veterinarians were mentioned more frequently than other occupations. This is an indication that people whose professions involved the care of animals were held to higher standards with regard to the well-being of animals than people who were not in these professions. The occupations of people outside of the animal care field were

infrequently mentioned. One case involved a student who committed animal abuse while on campus. The majority of the suspected abusers' occupations were not mentioned, but those that were mentioned involved the care of animals. This could lead the reader to believe that people in these occupations commit animal abuse more frequently than the general population, but that would probably not be an accurate generalization. When people read numerous articles about cases of animal abuse, such as one that involved a dog breeder who slaughtered a dog and sold it for meat, they might take extra notice of this act of abuse. This particular story appeared in newspapers ten times.

#### **Agenda setting, priming, social construction of reality, and animals**

In the context of this study, we can see that animal abuse is on the media's agenda more now than it had been in the past. The theories of agenda setting, priming, and social construction of reality are relevant when examining media coverage of animal abuse.

Agenda setting is the media's ability to bring an issue to the public's attention by the number of times that they report on the issue. In this study agenda setting was illustrated by the increased frequency of newspaper articles that focused on animal abuse. The statistics for these three years could have been influenced by the repeated coverage of sensational cases of animal abuse. In 1993 there were fewer articles, but several of the cases were reported frequently. The case that involved a dog dealer who shot and killed a dog and sold it to a couple as meat appeared in newspapers ten times. The abuse of horses appeared in more articles in 1993 than in the other two years. The



incident that involved a woman who boarded horses and kept them in filthy stalls and did not maintain their hooves, which resulted in some of the horses being unable to stand, appeared in newspapers four times. These types of cases probably received repeated newspaper coverage because of their sensational nature, which could catch readers' attention and make for interesting reading. When people read about instances of animal abuse like the ones just mentioned, they are likely to think of animal abuse as an extreme or outrageous act. They might think that these are typical cases of animal abuse, and possibly discount some instances of animal abuse as not truly being abuse because they are less severe than the ones reported in newspapers. The occupation of the suspected abuser was provided in more articles in 1993 than in 1998 or 2002. This could indicate that in recent years personal details about of the abuser were not considered as important as the abused animals. In 1998 and 2002 there were more articles but they were shorter than in 1993, which could show that animal abuse has become a more important social issue in the United States than it had been previously. Articles might be shorter in length because some cases of animal abuse that were reported in 1998 and 2002 were not as sensational as some of the 1993 articles. Animal abuse has become a more common news topic, resulting in shorter and more concise articles.

Priming is how people think about an issue. In the context of this study it means that the way that people think about the issue of animal abuse has changed over the years. The previously mentioned 1993 article that involved a dog dealer who killed a dog and sold it for meat accounted for ten of the thirty-

four articles on animal abuse reported in Midwest newspapers that year. These types of articles could lead readers to believe that animal abuse is uncommon and extreme and to not think that issues such as inadequate food or shelter are abuse. In 1998 and 2002 stories about animal abuse appeared in newspapers more frequently than in 1993, and there were more reports of criminal charges. People could interpret these reports of animal abuse as being more common occurrences and ones that could result in criminal charges being filed against the abuser. These stories could emphasize to the readers the possible social repercussions faced by people who are accused or convicted of animal abuse.

Social construction of reality is the public's perception of an issue that has been influenced by media coverage of the issue. In this study social construction of reality can be used to explain the issue of animal abuse. Media has perpetuated the idea that animal abuse is committed by people who work with animals in their professions. The occupations of the abusers were mostly mentioned in articles if they worked with animals, while in reality the occupations of most animal abusers probably do not involve the care of animals. The media has also led the public to believe that animal abuse has become a more important social issue over the years because of their increased coverage of this issue. The types of abuse that were reported on in newspapers have also constructed what constitutes animal abuse for people. The media created this reality for the readers. The interrelation of agenda setting, priming, and social construction of reality were all evident in the examination of the animal abuse articles used in this study.

### **Strengths**

Several factors contributed to the strength of this study. The study was approached from an objective view. Articles were gathered systematically by using Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, which prevented certain articles from being discarded because of possible coder bias. A wide variety of newspapers were included in the study. No studies like this one had been conducted in the past, so previous studies could not be used as models for conducting this content analysis. Since there were no previous studies of the print media coverage of animal abuse, there were no studies to be expanded upon. This allowed for a new model to be used in the evaluation of the animal abuse articles. There were no preconceived ideas as to what the results would be. Results of the study were new and did not have to be compared to the results of previous studies. One person did all coding after reading each story at least twice. The stories were all evaluated using the same coding sheet. The three years of articles were looked at separately in order to determine any similarities or differences that occurred over the years. The results of this study could be beneficial for future studies on coverage of animal abuse in newspapers. These results could also be beneficial in other disciplines including psychology and sociology. The link between animal abuse and violence against humans is an area currently being studied in these fields. For the purpose of this study, this link was not examined.

### **Weaknesses**

This study was complicated by the fact that this was an initial content analysis of the portrayal of animal abuse in newspapers, and thus there was no model to follow. There was no simple way to evaluate the articles. Also, since this was a qualitative content analysis rather than a quantitative content analysis, the results were more analytical rather than numerical. This made it more difficult to arrive at concrete conclusions for this study. The small sample of articles being evaluated could have resulted in different findings than a larger sample might have.

### **Improvements**

Some changes would be made to the study if it were going to be replicated in the future. In some stories it was difficult to differentiate how the animal abuse should be categorized. Every effort was made to categorize the articles objectively. If additional people had coded the stories there might have been increased accuracy.

### **Future Research**

There are many approaches that could be taken for future research. Newspaper articles on animal abuse could be gathered from different regions of the country over a period of years and examined for any differences that might have occurred. Magazine articles on animal abuse could also be gathered over a ten-year time period to determine how the coverage of this social issue has changed and to see what has remained the same. Animal abuse articles in magazines could be examined for their content and rhetoric. Foreign language

newspapers that are published in the United States might be evaluated for their coverage of animal abuse. This type of study could possibly reveal a difference in cultural attitudes towards this issue within our own country. A survey could be conducted among pet owners and those who do not own pets to obtain their reactions to stories of animal abuse. Television coverage of animal abuse cases could be evaluated for the rhetoric that is used during the reporting of these types of stories.

This preliminary qualitative content analysis on the coverage of animal abuse cases in newspapers has shown that the theories of social construction of reality, agenda setting, and priming are beneficial in examining this social issue. Animal abuse has received more coverage over the years, therefore making people more aware of it. The coverage of animal abuse in the media is an issue that would benefit from additional research. The more aware people are of issues, the more likely they are to take action to change them. Further examination of media portrayal of animal abuse in the future would be beneficial. It could inform people on the effect that animal abuse has on society. This study could be useful for humane societies and animal rescue groups hoping to generate more media attention for their causes. Having this knowledge could assist them in positioning their message to gain increased newspaper coverage, with stories of more depth and detail. More detailed coverage could further educate the public on the complex issue of animal abuse.

This initial qualitative content analysis on newspaper coverage of animal abuse has provided a starting point from which additional studies can be expanded in the communication field.

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**Appendix A**  
**Coding Sheet**

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**Story I.D.:**

**Newspaper I.D.:**

**Title:**

**Date:**

**Length:**

**Section:**

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**People**

Named male  
female

Unnamed male

Named female

Unnamed

Unknown

Age

Address

Occupation

Mitigating circumstances

Criminal charges

---

**Animals**

Species

Number

Condition

---

**Types of animal abuse**

Cruel mistreatment  
killing

Significant acts of neglect

Unjustified

---

**Focus**

Editorial

Factual

Appendix A

Coding Sheet

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Story I.D.: /

Newspaper I.D.: Wisconsin State Journal (Madison, WI)

Title: "Dog dealer charged with violations"

Date: 12-30-93

Length: 112 words

Section: Local/Wisconsin Pg. 3B

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People

<u>Named male</u>	<u>Unnamed male</u>	<u>Named female</u>	<u>Unnamed female</u>
X			
<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Occupation</u>
	N/A	no	dog dealer
<u>Mitigating circumstances</u>		<u>Criminal charges</u>	
no		yes	

---

Animals

<u>Species</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Condition</u>
dog	159	Lack of adequate food and veterinary care

---

Types of animal abuse

<u>Cruel mistreatment</u>	<u>Significant acts of neglect</u>	<u>Unjustified killing</u>
	X	

---

Focus

<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Factual</u>
	X

Appendix A

Coding Sheet

---

Story I.D.: 2

Newspaper I.D.: Wisconsin State Journal (Madison, WI)

Title: "Humane society seizes 31 frail dogs"

Date: 12-24-93

Length: 520 words

Section: Local/Wisconsin Pg. 1C

---

People

<u>Named male</u> X	<u>Unnamed male</u>	<u>Named female</u> X	<u>Unnamed female</u>
<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Age</u> N/A	<u>Address</u> yes	<u>Occupation</u> N/A
<u>Mitigating circumstances</u> no		<u>Criminal charges</u> no	

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Animals

<u>Species</u> dogs horses sheep	<u>Number</u> 31 3 2	<u>Condition</u> thin, emaciated
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Types of animal abuse

<u>Cruel mistreatment</u>	<u>Significant acts of neglect</u> X	<u>Unjustified killing</u>
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Focus

<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Factual</u> X
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Appendix A

Coding Sheet

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Story I.D.: 37

Newspaper I.D.: St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Title: "Animal shelter's founder devoted to ending animal abuse;  
Date: 'Education is the key' to ending the abuse, she asserts"

12-17-98

Length: 1143 words

Section: Jefferson County Post; Pg. 4

---

People

Named male

Unnamed male

Named female

Unnamed female

X

Unknown

Age  
N/A

Address  
N/A

Occupation

founder of animal shelter

Mitigating circumstances

no

Criminal charges

no

---

Animals

Species

dog

Number

2

Condition

N/A

---

Types of animal abuse

Cruel mistreatment

Significant acts of neglect

Unjustified killing

None

---

Focus

Editorial

Factual

X

**Appendix A**  
**Coding Sheet**

Story I.D.: 119

Newspaper I.D.: AP: Council Bluffs, IA

Title: "Man found innocent in dog death"

Date: 11-20-02

Length: 174 words

Section: State & Regional

**People**

<u>Named male</u> X	<u>Unnamed male</u>	<u>Named female</u>	<u>Unnamed female</u>
<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Age</u> N/A	<u>Address</u> N/A	<u>Occupation</u> N/A
<u>Mitigating circumstances</u> yes		<u>Criminal charges</u> yes	

**Animals**

<u>Species</u> dog	<u>Number</u> 1	<u>Condition</u> died
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**Types of animal abuse**

<u>Cruel mistreatment</u> X	<u>Significant acts of neglect</u>	<u>Unjustified killing</u>
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**Focus**

<u>Editorial</u>	<u>Factual</u> X
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## Appendix B

### 2000 population of cities

Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Kansas	Minnesota	Missouri	Nebraska	Ohio	Wisconsin
Chicago: 2,896,016	South Bend: 107,789	Iowa City: 62,220	Topeka: 122,377	Minneapolis: 382,618	Kansas City: 441,545	Omaha: 390,007	Columbus: 711,470	Milwaukee: 596,974
Springfield: 111,454		Council Bluffs: 58,268			St. Louis: 348,189		Cleveland: 478,403	Madison: 208,054
Bloomington: 64,808		Dubuque: 57,686			St. Peters: 51,381		Dayton: 166,179	
Bellefonte: 41,410					Liberty: 26,232			
					Clayton: 12,825			
					Fenton: less than 5,000			
					Hillsboro: less than 5,000			
					Pineville: less than 5,000			
					Tuscumbia: less than 5,000			
					West Plains: less than 5,000			