

Demonizing the Pit Bull:
Breed-Specific Legislation and the Circuit of Communication

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Abstract:

This article explores the impact of media representations and the circuit of communication on pit bull ownership. Despite support from a substantial number of breed advocates and owners, mediated images and news accounts have bolstered the image of the pit bull as superpredator, perpetuating the myth that pit bulls have a “will to kill”. In a move to protect constituents, municipal legislators have begun a push for breed-specific legislation, or legislation which places restrictions on the ownership of specific breeds that have traditionally been known to be “dangerous”, as a tactic for eliminating breed-specific aggression. I argue that legislators should direct their attention instead to negligent and abusive owners of all breeds, not to the owners of particular breeds. Using the findings from interviews with breed-specific legislation supporters and opponents, I present research which suggests that the pit bull breed has been inappropriately targeted for legislation which ultimately affects well-behaved dogs, not irresponsible owners.

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It is at least a half a million times more likely that a Pit Bull will be killed by a human than the other way around (Halip 2009, interview).

Rescuers and shelters alike drown in unwanted pit bulls without adequate resources to support their efforts to foster and place these dogs in forever homes.¹ As a result, the pit bull euthanasia rate in shelters across the United States is estimated at approximately 93 percent on average (Halip 2009, interview).² That means that for every 100 pit bulls that are surrendered to the shelter, only seven will survive, and this survival number includes lost pit bulls that are reclaimed by their owners.³ For homeless pit bulls, their fate is almost always death, and of the total breed population, only one out of every 600 pit bulls born ever gets a loving home (Bark Ark Bully Rescue 2009). Some shelters report that as much as 60 to 70 percent of their capacity is occupied by pit bulls or dogs resembling the physical characteristics of pit bulls. Now, many shelters have determined that pit bulls are not worthy of help even though they are one of the breeds most in need of help and shelter (Winograd 2007). Author Nathan Winograd (*Redemption* 2007, Almaden Books) calls the push for pit bull bans and euthanasia “mass killing”, a “witch hunt”.

Misinformation and fear tactics circulate through the media and communities about this particular breed, portraying pit bulls as snarling, vicious cannibals.⁴ In addition to the caricature of dog-aggressiveness, they are portrayed as being a high risk for “snapping” and attacking humans – even their owners. But any pit bull advocate or breed connoisseur knows the history of the breed well enough to know that for decades human aggression has been bred out to keep owners safe in the dog fighting “sport” ring and that often owner irresponsibility, not the dog itself, is the culprit. If human aggression isn’t a breed standard or even a norm in the pit bull breed, what other myths contribute to the desecration of a once highly respected breed in the United States?

This article explores the history of and evolution of the pit bull. Then it addresses the question of why pit bulls specifically have been ostracized and singled out by the media and legislatures and labeled as the “super-predator” by examining popular criticisms and concerns about pit bulls. These criticisms and concerns include content from news stories as well as local and municipal ordinances that enact breed-specific legislation which victimizes owners and their dogs based on breed alone, not behavior. To combat these criticisms, accounts from pit bull owners, rescuers, and foster parents support their efforts to advocate for the breed, incur the “responsibility tax”, and detail their abhorrence for irresponsible owners.⁵ Finally, the article concludes with a section on alternatives to breed-specific legislation and the potential ability of supporters to enact change to public opinion through education and support for dangerous dog laws.

Pet Ownership and The ‘Circuit of Communication’

The role of pets in the lives of Americans has continued to increase since the country’s industrialization. In the early twentieth century pets were thought to improve Americans’ moral character. Now pets are a leisure pursuit that makes humans feel better and improves their quality of life (Grier 2006). Dog owners consider their dogs to be actual family members, talking to them, dressing them, feeding them, and treating them as such. America’s political economy includes a multi-billion dollar industry designed to service its pets (Shell 1986). Pet products include vitamin supplements, beautifully decorated beds, studded collars, protective clothing, treadmills, and other “dog furnishings” as Americans shop for their pets as they do themselves (Grier 2006, 397).

Pets, researchers (Shell 1986; see Sebkova 1979; Beck and Katcher 1983; Friedmann et al. 1984; Corson et al. 1971; Kay et al. 1984; Rynearson 1978; Mugford and McComiskey 1957; Arkow 1982) believe, provide enjoyment; companionship; a feeling of safety and protection; health benefits; social opportunities and bonding; exercise; an opportunity to teach responsibility to young children; preparation for parenthood; surrogate children; comfort during a period of bereavement; a therapeutic outlet. Due to the significant role of pets in our lives, responsible pet ownership has become an increasingly important concern for pet advocates, medical professionals, and community officials who believe that irresponsible ownership is a major contributor to pet overpopulation, stray pets, and community dilemmas (Selby et al 1979).

Despite awareness of the damage caused by irresponsible ownership, not all breeds receive cherished treatment. The plight of the pit bull breed owes much of its struggle to the powers of mass communication and the process of decoding such communication. The moment of decoding (Chandler 2002; Corner 1983; Hall 1980) is that moment when the consumer of the communication – a news clip, a film, an expose – actively interprets and constructs, not simply receives, the “production”, or message (Corner 1983, 266). Though media productions of pit bulls may often times have factual bases and the desire to deliver unbiased reports, decodings have the potential to result in different meanings than the encoder’s intended meanings due to their propagation to large and diverse audiences (Chandler 2002). Such “aberrant decoding” (Chandler 2002; Eco 1965) results in the construction of negative representations of pit bulls. As for media productions which strive to tarnish the reputation of the breed, their decodings contribute to the development of the malevolent depictions.

Therefore, existing work (Hall 1980; Gray 1995) on the understanding of media’s impact on its recipients tells us that media’s productions bear directly on what ordinary people think

about the pit bull breed. Once these negative representations have been interpreted and constructed in people's minds, they continue through the "circuit of communication" (Chandler 2002; Hall 1980; see Saussure 1974 & 1983), a circuit which semioticians and sociologists (Hall 1980; see Saussure 1974 & 1983) explain starts with production and then moves to circulation, distribution and consumption, and ends with reproduction (see Appendix A Figures 1 and 2). Reproduction further harms the well-being of the breed by perpetuating inaccurate portrayals and misinterpreted decodings. Researchers (Lipsitz 1986; Gray 1995) studying the impact of media representations on marginalized groups assert that the groups are "historically structured by and against dominant (and dominating) discourses" (Gray 1995, 401), always in a position of comparison to the norm. Typically referring to ethnic groups and women, the marginalized group in this circumstance is the pit bull breed; engendering the pit bull breed damages its standard of living and even its survival.

Method

The data for the study emerged in part from qualitative research on ethnographic interviews with members of my local community as well as qualitative research on news stories, publication articles, scientific studies, and local, municipal, and state ordinances and laws. The members of the pit bull and legislative communities include eight pit bull owners, rescuers, fosters, and more generally breed advocates as I refer to them in addition to two legislation advocates.⁶ Three of the breed advocates were interviewed and observed with their pets in their homes or their place of work. The ninth participant, a councilman in Baltimore County, Maryland, proposed a breed-specific ordinance in 2007 (Gardina 2007) which, if passed, would

have placed restrictions on pit bull owners and their pets; this participant is not considered a breed advocate in this article. The tenth participant is the father of a boy who was mauled by a pit bull in the case which spurred the proposed Baltimore County legislation by the councilman; I label this participant a legislation advocate. Though my method for this research began as ethnographic, the opinions of my participants that I uncovered led me to my critiques of the media and its impact on the history of pets and pet ownership in the United States.

The homes and rescues of all the interviewees, as well as the district of the councilman, are located in Maryland, Pennsylvania, or West Virginia. The rescue and home locations were chosen in part because of convenience to the author's home but also because of their county ordinances which allowed for impassioned responses from participants who fear that one day their choice of pet breed may be dictated by the local government. The eight breed advocates represent an infinitesimal segment of advocacy and legislative sources in these locations; the ten participants were chosen because of their willingness to speak with the author and because of time constraints regarding data collection and analysis. Due to the ethnographic nature of the work, these locations were not chosen to compare their data to one another.

The obstacle was determining the most pivotal players in the substantial web of organizations that comprise the pit bull community. To solve this problem, I began to map out my vision of the web. On the bottom rung are the breeders – which include the backyard breeders. These people contribute to the overpopulation of a breed that is already thrown out way too readily by its current owners and contribute to the number of offspring with health problems as a result of careless breeding. From my background research, I have determined the following three broad categories for pit bull owners: (a) responsible, knowledgeable, informed owners (who often also fill advocacy roles for the breed); (b) owners with the potential to be

responsible but who lack understanding of the breed and therefore neglect the duties of their role as owner; and (c) irresponsible owners who enter their dogs into dog fights and/or neglect their dogs intentionally. While a decent slice of pit bull owners fall under the first broad category, an alarming slice does not. The actions and inactions of these irresponsible owners then provide fodder for mass media outlets which in turn connive allegories that are perpetuated through word-of-mouth accounts and other media outlets, resulting in widely distributed misinformation about the breed. The media ride out the wave of their own sensationalism and cover stories as long as possible because such stories help to sell their publications (Lubiano 1992).

Then, the news coverage of attacks by supposed pit bulls and the breed's fabricated anatomical abilities, such as locking jaws, are so rampant that legislators receive pressure from their constituents who push them to do something to protect the community from these purported beasts. One actual attack on a person or other companion animal in a community by a pit bull or pit bull-looking animal is the last straw; in response, legislators propose breed-specific ordinances which place restrictions on owners and their dogs according to breed, not behavior. In places where the breed restrictions affect outdoor exercise and annual registration, the effects of breed-specific legislation may be mild compared to places where breed ordinances aren't simply restrictions but in fact total bans. In either situation, owners without the resources to pay the increased registration fees, build or purchase outdoor exercise facilities, or move to save their pet will inevitably drop their dog at the local shelter so that it can have a "better life", completely unaware that at most shelters – which usually stay at capacity, if not over – the pit bull breed occupies the majority of shelter capacity and are put to sleep either the day they arrive or within 24 hours.

Because of the extremely high and indeterminable number of pit bulls that are euthanized on a daily basis because of this long chain of related events, rescues attempt to save as many dogs as possible with the little help and money they have. These rescues and advocacy organizations also work to educate owners, potential owners, breeders, and citizens about the complexities of breed ownership and its dire situation in the United States today. With so many players, I had to really think about who I wanted to reach out to and speak with about such an important and specific issue in the limited amount of time I had. I speculated that the best place to start would be with breed advocates comprised of rescuers, fosters, and owners, thinking that I could get a bigger picture from their stories and perspectives.

Researcher Subjectivity

Most of the research I gathered from my participants came from interviews, where I suspected that they viewed the opportunity to contribute to my research as another way to advocate for the breed. For the father of the boy who was mauled in Baltimore County, I understood his contributions to perhaps represent to him an advocacy action for greater understanding about dog breeds and their various abilities to impact human life.

Beginning my initial contact with my participants, I used the ownership of my own pet to create a feeling of kinship. When I meet people with dogs, I know that I immediately feel drawn to them, so I thought that bond would work to my advantage for this research.

Researching a breed of dog that has been victimized in the past and even in the present by dog fighters, neglectful owners, and abusive owners was a huge challenge for me. Dog fighting is a part of the breed's history, but it wasn't a subject I was too excited to read about. Listening

to stories of rescued pit bulls with their bodies burned, cut, scarred, and damaged tried my intention to remain an objective researcher – which was perhaps a ridiculous goal from the start. But listening to stories about how resilient the breed is, how much they still want to find the joy in life after so much abuse, made listening to the traumatic stories endurable. As one pit bull foster says, “It’d be a good lesson for us to carry with us, to forgive and move on. Because I don’t think many people would have the capacity to move on after something like that. I try to take that. I think you can learn a lot from dogs” (Bates 2009, interview).

Participants

My participants consisted of ten people who are passionate about the breed. Eight of these people are proactively passionate, working in their spare time to save, rescue, rehabilitate, educate about, adopt out, and often own the breed. My ninth participant, Councilman Vincent Gardina, is passionately opposed to the breed and intends to propose another pit bull-specific ordinance as soon as constituent support is high enough – likely when someone is killed by a pit bull, he speculates. My tenth participant, who wishes to remain anonymous, loves dogs and has a background in dog training but also posits that not all dogs have the same physical abilities and that legislation should be in place to regulate owners of the breed. This participant, a constituent of Councilman Gardina’s, was selected as a participant because he is the father of the boy who was mauled in the unprecedented Baltimore County, Maryland case of a pit bull badly injuring a human.

The eight participants who support the breed I call breed advocates because they actively strive, individually, to better the lives of the breed. Among the eight breed advocates are two

founders of their own educational organizations to promote knowledge and support of the breed; another is a president of a similar organization. Two more are founders of pit bull rescues that they operate with help from other advocates.⁷ Two more are foster parents of rescue pits that await the determination of their forever homes. And finally, the last of the eight advocate participants works as a veterinary technician who plans to attend veterinary school to become a veterinarian. The contributions of Councilman Gardina comprise only a small sliver of my research findings in this article. The perspective of his constituent, my anonymous participant, provides a look into the mind of a dog lover who is also a legislation advocate. Appendix B provides more information about each participant and his relation to the pit bull community.

I classified the eight breed advocates into categories so as to better frame the contributors for this study. Beyond this point, labels indicating the type of player are used to identify the participant, such as pit bull “foster parent” or “rescuer”, but the labels are not meant to make comparisons or conclusions as a whole about individuals who fall under the label. Instead, the accounts of rescuers are primarily used to explain the concept of the responsibility tax and the continuing damage to the breed that results from irresponsible owners; the accounts of educators are used to position breed-specific legislation as a less-than-perfect solution to the repercussions of irresponsible owners and community safety; and the account of the anonymous constituent is used to offer the perspective of a dog lover and owner whose feelings about dog ownership has been greatly affected as a result of the dog attack on his son.

The questions I asked all participants alike began with a background in the familiarity of the individual with dogs growing up and into adult life. From there I asked about experience with pit bulls specifically, the way in which the participant was first introduced to the breed and her initial impressions of the breed, and family reactions to the participant owning the breed. I

was interested in common myths the participants have heard about the breed as well as what they knew about the breed's history. For each participant, I tailored the next questions to address the organization or rescue upon which the participant spends most of her time. Then there I transitioned into questions regarding the participant's opinions on the soundness of breed-specific legislation and possible alternatives.

What I was most surprised about, when collecting contacts, was the sheer number of people who were interested in speaking with me, a researcher, about the breed. And in addition to the enthusiasm, many contacts had specific ideas of how my research should be conducted and what its most important elements should be. All of this feedback was extremely helpful as I began to shape my interview questions and struggled over the path of research that would lead me to the results I have here.

Findings

Finding the Pit Bull:

The Evolution of the Bull-and-Terrier

The oldest records of dog ownership, from Mesopotamia and Egypt, indicate that distinct breeds of domesticated dogs date back to 3000 B.C. (Allen 1920). Today, 106.4 million American households own 62.9 million dogs (American Pet Association 2009). Dogs comprise such a solid place in American culture that, according to a 1987 study by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, 99 percent of pet owners admitted to talking about their pets and four out of ten celebrate their pet's birthday or keep pictures of their pet in their wallets. A 1999 study

found that nine out of ten pet owners include their pets in holiday celebrations and over half prepare special meals and take off days from work to care for their sick pets (Winograd 2007).

One particular breed, though, has been portrayed as problematic, harmful, and dangerous: the Pit Bull. This breed, more than most others, receives attention of any sort in the mass media. Rarely is the coverage positive, and only then the coverage comes as a result of a vicious attack, a dog fighting ring, or a violent crime during which the dog was victimized, as in the instance of the Michael Vick case.⁸ Yet any pit bull owner will tell you how wonderful the breed is, how sweet and affectionate it is, but how an owner's misunderstanding and poor ownership that leads to problems. This strong benevolence pales in comparison to the deep hatred rampant in media outlets which tarnishes the perception of the breed and spoils it for loving and responsible owners and potential owners. Before I can understand why this breed has been chosen as the target for news media's barbs and legislator's pens, I must first understand the history of the breed itself.

What exactly is a pit bull? Settling on a working definition is a very important place to start, not only because it lays a foundation upon which to begin the history of the breed but also because the difficulty of such a determination process underscores the impossible feat that breed-specific legislation hopes to accomplish; legislation which bans or restricts pit bulls in communities is often implemented based on supposed visual breed identification of the dog in question.

Knowing what qualifies as a pit bull, therefore, is critical to protecting your dog against breed-specific legislation. There actually exists so little consensus on the breed's characteristics that "Find the Pitbull" [*sic*] games flourish online on breed advocacy sites. These games are designed to point out to breed-specific legislation advocates, legislators, and law enforcement

officials that there are over twenty breeds commonly incorrectly identified as pit bulls (Find the Pit Bull 2009).

Some advocates say that *pit bull* is the nickname for the American Pit Bull Terrier solely, as this breed has both *pit* and *bull* in its name. Others consider *pit bull* to stand for some combination of breeds and mixes, including the American Pit Bull Terrier, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and the American Staffordshire Terrier use *pit bull* as an umbrella term, a classification, for short-haired, stocky-looking dogs (Pit Bull Licensing 2009; Swift 1987; Reynolds 2005; Capp 2004).

The ancestry of all dogs referred to as *pit bull* can be traced back to the bull-and-terrier breed, a breed developed in England in the early nineteenth century to fulfill a need. Not fast enough or strong enough for the bull-baiting and dog-fighting rings, the bulldog was crossed with a game terrier to produce the bull-and-terrier (Capp 2004; Swift 1987; Colby 1936).

The *bull* in *pit bull* originated from a task of the bull-and-terrier: bull-baiting. This English sport drew spectators who watched on as the butcher released his bull-and-terrier onto the bull for slaughter. The little dog fastened itself onto the bovine's nose as the butcher slipped in to strike the bull on its head (Swift 1987). It was thought that torturing the bull before slaughter would make its meat more tender. Such a widely held belief that butchers who refused to bait their bulls could face fines, the practice was outlawed in 1835 by the English Parliament (Capp 2004). Once bull baiting was removed as a legal option for entertainment, "gentlemen sportsmen" began placing bull-and-terrier dogs against each other, founding the new favorite underground blood sport, dog fighting (Swift 1987, 83). Held in fighting *pits*, the bull-and-terrier came to be called the *pit bull*, and the modern pit bull, bred for dog fighting, was unveiled.

As dogs of immigrants from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland arrived in what was to become the United States so too did their fighting culture (Reynolds 2005). Where these immigrants settled, dog fighting became popular on American soil. Soon the American Pit Bull Terrier developed a reputation for being a premiere fighting dog. More breeding occurred to produce the strongest, fastest, most aggressive and most agile dogs for the fighting pits, with gameness at the top of the long list of desirable traits. Fighting enthusiasts explain *gameness* as “unflagging courage and determination not to quit, even in the face of extreme pain and injury” (Capp 2004, 11). While this gameness is often thought to apply to the fighting ring only, it can also apply to the sheer determination of a pit bull to complete a task, such as pulling thousands of pounds of weight in contemporary weight-pulling contests (Capp 2004). Soundness, a trait that should accompany gameness, indicates the behavior of the dog toward humans, meaning it must be absolutely one hundred percent reliable with humans or else it may face euthanasia; because the necessity of dog fighters to be in the ring with their dogs while they fought was great, over time they bred out the human-aggressive pit bulls, resulting in a breed with “an almost ridiculously amiable disposition” (Swift 1987, 76). Dogfighters do not tolerate human aggression.

John Colby, the son of a dog fancier and one of the first pit bull breed fanciers, dedicated his life to chasing his interest in pit bulls (Colby 1936). In the early 1900s, he openly advertised the breed for sale, contributing to their popularity because of his position in the breed world (Capp 2004). In addition to its ability to withstand pain in the pit, the soundness of the evolving breed made it a family dog as well. The pit bull became a respected breed, valued for its gameness in the ring by dogfighters and for its soundness in the home by families.

A few of the best known pit bulls in twentieth century U.S. history include former President Theodore Roosevelt's pit bull as he served in the White House, the dog on R.C.A. products that was owned by Thomas Edison, *The Little Rascals'* pet Pete, and Stubby, America's first war dog, which served eighteen months on the front lines in WWI and miraculously saved his regime from several surprise gas attacks (Capp 2004; Reynolds 2005). In the early and middle twentieth century, it is evident that pit bulls held the hearts of many Americans. The later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries paint a different picture of the breed's shifting esteem.

“Canine Racism”⁹:

The Spread of Pit Bull Hysteria

The pit bull emerged as the “mean breed” in the public eye by the 1970s. An epithet previously given to Dobermans, dog fighting – still rampant from its early days – forced the attention of law enforcement and the media to pit bulls, a breed directly associated with the crime. As police located dog fighting rings and the illegal activities that go with them, the media honed in on the growing subculture of drugs, gambling, and dog fighting. Media's sinister portrayals of the breed, such as its “killer instinct” and its “will to kill” (Delise 2007, 96; Swift 1987, 76) only ignited greater interest in the people who were attracted to the dogs because of the respect and intimidation they believed they would deliver. Despite the responsibility of media to uncover criminal and abusive behavior that should have been exposed and prosecuted, the perpetuation of sensationalized accounts that linked pit bulls to criminal activity through the circuit of communication fed the frenzy of irresponsible owners and did nothing but result in the

invalid belief by “marginally informed people”, as one advocate editorializes, that the breed was monstrous (Delise 2007; Lefkowitz 2009, interview; see Appendix A Figure 1).¹⁰

Erroneous pit bull anatomical references spurred a myriad myths, according to my participants, some of which asserted that the breed have locking jaws, their bites pack 5,000 pounds per square inch, their brains explode, their skulls are too small for their brains, they “turn” (on their owners, no matter how sweet they seem), and they have a thirst for blood (Harwelik 2009, interview; Sullivan 2009, interview; Meyer 2009, interview; Bates 2009, interview; Blackmer 2009, interview; Swift 1987). Many of these myths, however, are unoriginal to the exploitation of the pit bull breed specifically; instead they have been applied to the “vicious breed du jour” for decades (Sullivan 2009, interview). But because of the emotional reactions by the public to the media reports, the antagonistic, editorialistic accounts continued to proliferate; by 1986, there were over 350 pit bull articles in print media in the United States (Delise 2007).

In addition to the contribution of the breed’s desirability among criminals as a result of media coverage on fighting rings, demonizing it conversely resulted in the aversion and phobia of potentially viable owners. The messages communicated came back around in their circuit to result in a reproduction of the fear that had been building due to pit bull ownership as it related to criminal activity. For the viable owners who do decide to commit to the responsibility of owning a pit bull, frequently they still must confront displeasure and reluctance, sometimes even fear, from their friends and family members upon welcoming a pit bull into their home. More so than owners of other breeds, the responsibility tax begins immediately as pit bull owners must take the extra time to reassure and sooth the worries of their loved ones – sometimes through appeals

to intellect using research and scientific studies on the behavior of the breed so as to “prove” the amiable disposition of their new pets.

The breed gained even more public notoriety during the “crack years” of the 1980s as news stories on dog fighting rings, criminal activities, and even dog bites riddled the emerging 24-hour news programming. ‘Pit bull attacks’ coverage in the 1980s, just as it had in the 1970s, thrived on falsehoods and politicized reporting. One headline which appeared in the *Northeast Times*, a Philadelphia local paper, stated in its headline that “Pit bulls attack Wisconsin grandmother” despite the article’s body explaining that only one of the three dogs that attacked was a pit bull and the other two were large mixed breed dogs (Prokop 2008). Mislabeling, as in this instance, was a common tendency among media outlets to enable the epidemic. According to a report by the American Veterinary Medical Association, a dog's tendency to bite typically depends on at least five factors: heredity, early experience, later socialization and training, medical and behavioral health, and victim behavior (California Allows Cities 2006; Beaver et al. 2001). However, with little to no knowledge of or attention to factors which have been recognized for centuries as having the potential to contribute to canine aggression, this and other media reports singled out the pit bull breed to stand as different than the rest, as a breed with malicious intent toward humans instead of a breed reacting as would any other breed to mistreatment and abuse. Author Nathan Winograd argues in his book, *Redemption* (2007, Almaden Books), that “There is no breed of dog in America more abused, maligned, and misrepresented than the American Pit Bull Terrier” (Winograd 2007).

In 1987, two high-profile magazines published stories perpetuating the misinformation about and subsequent covetousness of pit bulls by irresponsible owners. *Rolling Stone* magazine printed “A Boy and His Dog in Hell” (Sager 1987), a graphic expose on teenagers, inner city

gangs, violence, and the accompanying abuse of pit bulls (Delise 2007). Treated as extensions of their owners' egos, pit bulls were subjected to brutality and vicious deaths when they lost in arranged street fights against other pit bulls, symbolic of the machismo image the owners hoped to uphold (Delise 2007). This kind of message in a nationally circulated publication drew even more attention to the breed, increasing its hatred as well as its intrigue.

The second magazine, *Sports Illustrated*, published a piece on pit bulls in July of 1987 entitled "The Pit Bull: Friend and Killer" (Huber 1987; Swift 1987). The cover art, which read "Beware of this Dog" in large text, showed a ferocious looking pit bull with dark fur that bared its teeth and glared up and into the camera. The corresponding article began: "America has a four-legged problem called the American pit bull terrier" (Swift 1987, 76), setting up the twelve-page story that would bolster the breed's bad name. A few sentences after the pointed introduction, the author attempted to legitimate his sources with quotes from a trainer who also breeds and owns pit bulls; "'They're athletes. They're wrestlers. They're dead game,' says Captain Arthur Haggerty... 'They will literally fight till they're dead. If you found that quality in a boxer or a football player, you'd say it was admirable. Will to win. That's what a pit bull has.'" (Swift 1987, 76).

After establishing the gameness of the breed as a whole, the author began to outline pit bull attacks that, in 1987, had made headlines; five individual attacks were documented on the first page of the article alone. The article then continued by linking breed ownership with criminal activity, citing narcotics raids where pit bulls were used as guard dogs and motorcycle gangs that used their pit bulls' dog houses as drug hideouts. Because of this connection, Budd Johnson, an inspector for the U.S. Marshals Service, concluded that pit bull populations were mushrooming across the country (Swift 1987).

Dr. Franklin Loew, dean of Tufts Veterinary School as of the publication of the 1987 *Sports Illustrated* article from this 1987 *Sports Illustrated* piece, confirmed this perception of criminal association, asserting that "People whose insecurities are such that they need macho reinforcement feel a need for this type of animal... and they are available because of the overflow from illegal dogfights," which has helped to make pit bulls the dog of choice for "drug dealers and street punks" across the country (Swift 1987, 80).

A belief in the pit bull advocacy community, both among my participants as well as among advocacy groups and authors, is that this 1987 article caused the switch in the vicious dog phenomenon from Dobermans to pit bulls as a result of its mass coverage of the ferociousness of the breed and of its use in illegal dog fighting rings and other criminal activities (Blackmer 2009, interview; Bates 2009, interview; Lefkowitz 2009, interview, Delise 2007). Twenty-one long and catastrophic years passed before *Sports Illustrated* publicly recognized its undeniable contribution to the frenzied circuit in a 2008 piece that revisited the breed, published twenty months after the discovery of the Michael Vick kennel operation. The piece conceded that some readers and critics associate the 1987 article and cover art with the "apex" of the pit bull "hysteria", stating that "...The cover cemented the dogs' badass cred, and as rappers affected the gangster ethos, pit bulls became cool. Suddenly, any thug or wannabe thug knew what kind of dog to own. Many of these people didn't know how to train or socialize or control the dogs, and the cycle fed itself" (Gorant 2008, 74). Though brief, this acknowledgement made room for coverage on the Michael Vick case and the subsequent attention it brought to the abuse and exploitation of the breed. Commenting on Vick's plea agreement, Stephen Zawistowski, a certified applied animal behaviorist and an executive vice president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), is quoted in the article as saying: "That was the

landmark moment—when he [Vick] not only gave the dogs the money but referred to it as restitution... That's when these dogs went from weapons to victims” (Gorant 2008, 75). It seems to have taken a devastating case and the prosecution of a celebrity to bring the ongoing issue of dog fighting to the forefront once again.

Between 1987 and 2008, the media coverage sanctioning the breed as dog- and human-aggressive remained constant, and potential owners struggled to overcome the negative press; they hoped to break the circuit of communication. Are these dogs “loaded handguns,” as some critics call them, they wondered (Swift 1987, 77). Dr. Loew, from the 1987 *Sports Illustrated* piece, was quoted as saying he believes that the breed is the victim of “‘canine racism’... ‘The pit bull does seem to respond more than other dogs to people trying to bring out aggressiveness. But everything I know professionally tells me that this is not a dog problem, but a problem of dog ownership’” (77).

Punishing The Deed, Not the Breed:

Breed-Specific Legislation and the Outlawing of Pit Bulls

Regardless of who the irresponsible pit bulls owners are or what breed they own, I have concluded that the source of the problem lies in the fact that these owners continue to neglectfully abuse their dogs – abuse that causes health problems not only for the abused dogs but also wellbeing problems for the dogs of responsible owners. Meanwhile, municipal and state laws do not sufficiently acknowledge treatment by irresponsible owners alone in order to then address it. These laws do, however, acknowledge the pets of these irresponsible owners, supposed vicious and crazed, jaw-locking pit bulls who accomplish physical feats – allowing for

a genetic make-up unique to the entire dog species (Delise 2007). With the media's focus on unusual attacks and the worst cases – that can be attributed to the pit bull breed as a default instead of as a fact – its exaggerations help to shape negative impressions of the breed among owners, potential owners, community members, and even law-makers. But instead of basing their ordinances on scientific data and testing, politicians instead usher in what they call Breed-Specific Legislation (or BSL as it is often referred and will be from now on in this article).

Though not the precedent, the earliest, most notable example of this kind of legislation which targeted pit bulls specifically in the United States occurred in 1989 in Denver, Colorado (Delise 2007; Winograd 2007). Issuing the claim that “Pit bull attacks are like shark attacks” as evidence for the introduction and passage of breed-specific legislation, the city of Denver held a roundtable meeting during which a dog expert came in to discuss the aggression tendencies of over 100 breeds of dogs. He explained that all breeds can display the same types of aggression to the same stimuli. In response, a councilperson countered that people do not run away from small-breed dogs but that they will run from pit bulls, implying that therefore the dogs are more aggressive and more dangerous. Other politicians operated under the assumption that pit bulls have lower levels of “fighting inhibition,” thereby contributing to their tendency to attack without aggravation (Delise 2007, 103). Using such poorly informed declarations and false for banning the breed, Denver politicians – and those following – perpetuated the propaganda associated with the breed.

The Denver ban made it illegal to own a pit bull in 1989. Or, as author Karen Delise critiques, “And as of 1989, Denver had passed a law making it illegal for a dog to be born a Pit Bull [*sic*]” (2007, 102). With zero regard for the length of time the owner has lived in Denver and with no grandfather clause in place, the city government can come to the owner's house, take

the pit bull, and destroy it (Winograd 2007). Instead of fixing the “problem” of “dangerous” pit bulls by targeting irresponsible owners, such legislation leads criminals to choose another breed to fulfill their needs (AKC Talking Points 2009; Winograd 2007). Meanwhile, responsible owners whose dogs were never involved in any public safety incidents will have their behaved and loved pets forcefully taken from them.

During the early and mid 1990s, more politicians and their municipalities affected breed bans, sometimes in response to a particular incident, to sooth constituents’ concerns. After Denver came BSL (breed-specific legislation) in Miami, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Toledo, and dozens of others. By the late 1990s, more than 200 additional cities and communities jumped on the bandwagon, enacting legislation that would affect any dog with physical characteristics even resembling those of the jumble that comprise the pit bull designation (Delise 2007).

While some states have passed state-wide legislation which prohibits BSL, such as New York, many more allow for it. Looking like there is no end in sight, the list of municipalities and states in which BSL is enforced has become longer, not shorter. In addition to legislation regarding pit bulls, BSL has a history of affecting at least 26 other breeds of dogs. The standards for determining these breed restrictions, as for those pertaining to pit bulls, have no basis; some breeds with no documented cases of attacks in those communities were banned, while others were banned as a precautionary measure (Delise 2007). A criticism of BSL is that its proposing politicians create and attempt to create legislation based not in necessity or truth but instead in a desire to quell the fears of their constituents, even if those fears are based on inaccuracies.

In Prince Georges County, Maryland, a ban on pit bull ownership has been in effect since 1997. In accordance with Prince George’s County Code (Section 3-185.01), pit bulls are illegal

and must be removed from the county (Pit Bulls 1996). The ban's grandfather clause in this municipality allows for pit bulls of residents in 1997 to renew their pets' registration annually but does not allow room for forgetfulness or misplacement; if a resident loses his pit bull registration, no substitute will be provided (Pit Bull Licensing 2009). And yet today – twelve years after the birth of the code, when most grandfathered pit bulls have passed away – residents of the county continue to seek out pit bulls for ownership. To rescue groups, complete disregard for and blasé reactions to pit bull ordinances automatically raise a red flag; so too does an interest in the cost to “buy” pit bulls from rescues. As one rescuer says, “I write back that she's not for sale. ‘Thank you very much. Goodbye.’... They don't have a good plan for my pit bull” (Meyer 2009, interview).

Adrienne Lefkowitz, breed advocate and president of Maryland Dog Federation, performed a study on the lost-and-found web services of a Prince George's County shelter. For a specific period of time, between 25 and 42 percent of the stray dogs on the website could be classified as “banned breeds”, Lefkowitz calculated (Lefkowitz 2009, interview). Considering that the Prince George's County BSL was enacted in 1997 and this report was completed a decade later, uncovering the fact that a significant portion of adoptable dogs were still of banned breeds indicates that pit bulls are still prevalent in the county – and are living there unregistered. One rescuer familiar with the county's ownership speculates that there are probably hundreds, maybe thousands, of pit bulls in PG County and that BSL doesn't work (Meyer 2009, interview). Instead, it seems to drive irresponsible, abusive owners into hiding with their pit bulls in BSL areas and to exploit other breeds that are yet to be targeted by BSL. “Once you outlaw the pit bulls, only the outlaws will own pit bulls” is the colloquial saying, paraphrased, among the pit bull community (Sullivan 2009, interview; Meyer 2009, interview).

A councilman in another county in Maryland, Baltimore County, hopes to implement BSL as soon as he raises enough support from his constituents. Councilman Vincent Gardina of District 5, Baltimore County, proposed ordinance guidelines for his county in 2007 called Bill 70-07, which would require inspection of all pit bull owners' homes; an annual \$100 dog tax in addition to regular licensing provisions; very specific outdoor exercise limitations; a sign displayed stating "beware of dog"; and a \$1,000 fine threat if any of these guidelines are improperly met or neglected.¹¹ An interview with Councilman Gardina revealed his motivating factors in proposing these stronger controls on owners of pit bulls specifically: a tragic 2007 pit bull mauling of two young boys and incidents in which unsecured dogs attacked animals and other pets (2009).

Unlike Councilman Gardina and some of his fellow legislators, a representative from Animal Control for Baltimore County states that it opposes Councilman Gardina's or anyone else's breed-specific legislation. Instead, a two-tiered "dangerous dog" code, which the Animal Control bureau has implemented, has allowed it to address *potentially* dangerous dogs as well as dogs that have demonstrated their danger to humans and other pets. Since 1998, there have only been 72 dogs declared dangerous in Baltimore County, of which 15 were seized as a result of a dog-fighting ring bust. Animal Control and the Health Department consider this two-tiered system very accommodating and "extremely effective" – much more so than BSL (Vigilance 2007, unpublished; Lefkowitz 2009, interview). Dr. Pierre Vigilance, Baltimore County's health officer, has been quoted in local papers asserting that "any dog can bite... The Baltimore County Department of Health is not in favor of breed-specific legislation as it may only serve to unfairly label certain breeds as 'dangerous' ... Preventing bites by levying serious monetary penalties

against irresponsible owners may have them pay more attention to how they raise or train their dogs” (Administrator 2007; Lefkowitz 2009, interview).

The attack of the ten-year-old boy by a pit bull in Baltimore County spurred the BSL proposal by Baltimore County Councilman Gardina. The father of the boy, my anonymous participant, has a different perspective on breed-specific legislation. During our interview, he explains that a neighbor down the street owned a pit bull and that the attack on his son and another boy was the result of a series of incidences that had nothing to do with the dog itself or with the dog’s breed but instead with the “neglectful failure” on the part of the owner (Anonymous 2009, interview). The owner was charged with reckless endangerment and was sentenced to two years of probation in 2007 (Pit Bull Owner 2008).

The attack on the boy was the worst attack ever recorded by a pit bull in Baltimore County; he spent seventeen days in the hospital, recovering. Mortified when he realized that there was no legislation in place to protect his family from the irresponsibility of the owner, the boy’s father supported the Councilman’s initiative to propose BSL for the county (Anonymous interview, 2009). As a result of his son’s tragedy, he now supports legislation that regulates breeds accordingly, based not on their inclination to but their ability to cause physical damage.

Despite the logic this constituent presented in our interview about the ability of some breeds to injure humans surpassing the ability of other breeds, why should a few incidences of violence caused by pit bulls result in the banishment of the entire breed – or really any large breed, if one uses his reasoning. In fact, purporting that pit bulls are not suitable pets evokes similar feelings to that of the Denver ban: extremism. I respect the constituent’s feelings as his family has been drastically impacted by the negligence of an owner of a pit bull, but a more

feasible owner- and dog-friendly solution to such a problem would be harsher penalties for the root of the problem – irresponsible owners – and not expulsion of the breed itself.

The combination of legislation proposals based on “truths”, word-of-mouth parables, and media accounts of the potential damage pit bulls can cause in addition to misplaced blame make it difficult to believe otherwise about this breed. However, the records speak to a relatively low incidence of dangerous dogs in the county and even in the nation. Using Baltimore County as an example, of the 180,000 dogs in Baltimore County, 30 percent are estimated to fall under the catchall term *pit bull* – which includes pit bull mixes – or about 50,000 dogs. In the last ten years, 72 dogs – *dogs*, not pit bulls, but just dogs in general – have had dangerous animal charges brought against them in the county, which averages seven dogs per year. Even if every dangerous dog, all 72 of them, were counted as a pit bull, that still averages out to less than one-thousandth of one percent (0.001 percent) of pit bulls in the county deemed dangerous (Lefkowitz 2009, interview).

Providing a similar perspective on the danger of pit bulls, a national study by the United States Center for Disease Control affirms that American Pit Bull Terriers and predominantly pit bull mixed breeds account for 0.89 percent of all recorded dog bites in the United States (Reynolds 2005). A special report conducted by the publication *Vet Med Today*, which collected data from The Humane Society of the United States and media reports, concluded in 2001 that while fatal attacks on humans by dogs appears to be a breed-specific problem – thus causing the rampant spread of BSL – other breeds may in fact bite and fatally attack more frequently than do pit bulls (Sachs et al. 2000). Pit bull bites are reported at a significantly higher rate than bites by other breeds because visual identification and social stigma often pin the blame on the pit bull breed; therefore, the 0.89 percent of all recorded pit bull bites should in fact be much lower.

Because of the challenges associated with attempting to determine a dog's breed by sight, particularly for animal control officers in communities with BSL, the special report asserts that "enforcement of breed-specific ordinances raises constitutional and practical issues. Fatal attacks represent a small proportion of dog bite injuries to humans and, therefore, should not be the primary factor driving public policy concerning dangerous dogs. Many practical alternatives to breed-specific ordinances exist and hold promise for prevention of dog bites" (Sachs et al. 2000).

One of the biggest factors which contributes to the misconception that pit bulls are aggressive is the lack of breed awareness that leads to misidentification. Dog foster Gary explains this occurrence:

Many attacks by non-pit bulls are wrongly blamed on them. And for every attack attributed to a pit bull (often incorrectly), there are dozens of well balanced pit bulls who don't attack, aren't high profile [in contrast to Michael Vick's dogs] and are, therefore, mostly ignored. And often the history of the pit bull who [sic] attacked is not known or reported. What is sadly almost always left out of the story is that often the pit is the biggest victim of all. That is one of the major things to come out of the Michael Vick travesty. For the first time in a very high profile case, the public saw the pits as victims and felt sympathy for them (Whitten 2009, interview).

Based on my research, my opinion is that banning pit bulls – or any breed, for that matter – is an extreme solution for occasional bites and injuries. According to *Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and The No Kill Revolution in America* (Winograd 2007, Almaden Books), the extremely significant majority of dog bites occur within the home and by many breeds who

often bite a family member after provocation – a much different cause than the “epidemic of free roaming Pit Bulls [*sic*] attacking unknown children or the elderly” typical image we are used to seeing (143). As a result, breed bans will not stop the majority of these types of bites. In fact, dog bite statistics are not really statistics and therefore do not give a good idea of the dogs that bite, says the Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interactions report published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Often these statistics will show that large, popular breeds bite more than other breeds, which makes sense because popular breeds comprise a larger percentage of the total dog population and will therefore result in a greater number of bites (Beaver et al. 2001). Small dogs, too, can cause serious bites but may not be reported as frequently due to their size. In addition, it is not possible to adequately report breed bite rates because dog breeds are often not known or are comprised of a mix of breeds but go reported as purebred (*ibid*). For these reasons, declares the task force, BSL is an inappropriate and ineffective approach to protecting public safety (Beaver et al. 2001; California Allows Cities 2006).

Opponents to BSL, such as the nationally recognized American Kennel Club (AKC) and other organizations that have formed to deliberately oppose such narrow legislation, encourage residents and politicians alike to first understand the background of breed-specific legislation before developing an opinion about it. The position statement entitled “Opposing Breed-Specific Legislation” for the American Kennel Club explains the usual triggers for BSL:

Breed-specific dangerous dog legislation is usually proposed in response to a specific attack by a dangerous animal or wave of irresponsible dog ownership in a community. Proponents of such legislation are trying to find a way to protect

members of their community, and have latched onto the idea of breed-specific legislation as a quick and easy solution to animal control problems. The first step towards defeating a proposed breed-specific law is finding out as much information as possible about the proposal (AKC Talking Points 2009).

This information includes questions regarding the why, who, what, and when about proposed breed-specific legislation. Calling such legislation a “stop-gap” measure that places restrictions on the owners of some breeds instead of holding all dog owners accountable for their behavior, the AKC encourages the focus to be on “deeds, not breeds” for future ordinances (AKC Talking Points 2009).

Exploration into the effectiveness of ordinances that have been in place for years uncovers their inability to address problem owners and their dogs (not the other way around). In the case of the Prince George’s County ordinance, after the ten-year tenure of a ban that made pit bull ownership illegal, the number of pit bulls has not been reduced; the number of reported dog bites has not been reduced; and the increased costs associated with the collection, seizure, and euthanasia of animals has detracted from pet support efforts such as low-cost spay/neuter programs which would benefit the county’s dog population as a whole, asserts Adrienne Lefkowitz, president of the Maryland Dog Federation (Lefkowitz 2009, interview).

So why breed bans in the first place? And why are they becoming more popular even when research shows their ineffectiveness? An advocate and educator of the breed, Mary Harwelik founded The Real Pit Bull, an organization that began as a simple website to help inform the public about the pit bull breed but has grown to include information and resources for helping with pit bull issues experienced by owners, shelters, and rescues. Mary calls breed bans

“a knee-jerk reaction” to an emotionally loaded problem, a reaction to a problem that isn’t understood in the first place (Harwelik 2009, interview). There is no way a truly knowledgeable dog person, she says, would ever support breed-specific legislation because “people who are educated on the issues know that banning a breed of dog or dogs that look a certain way just isn’t an effective way of dealing with dog attacks” (Harwelik 2009, interview). However, politicians continue to address the “pit bull problem” with proposals for legislation that targets the breed, not the owners. But if review of the effects (or lack thereof) of breed bans from ten or more years ago reveals the ineffective and detrimental nature of these bans on the breed and their owners, my deduction is that the breed is not the problem or the bans would have helped over a ten-year span.

Another advocacy group, B-More Pit Bull, has a ten-member Board of Directors, members, and several volunteers based in Baltimore County, Maryland. In the Fall of 2007, a group of owners and lovers of the breed came together to combat 70-07, the proposed ban in Baltimore County by Councilman Gardina. This group formed an anti-BSL discussion group, used social networking tools to bring advocates together, held a rally, and testified in front of the Baltimore County Council. Once the bill was defeated, the group decided to continue fighting for their breed – only now they fight proactively instead of reactively. Rather than wait for the next attack to happen, says the founder and president Erin Sullivan, they decided that they ought to reach out to dog owners who have the potential to be good and responsible owners but who may need some training themselves to reach that point. Interrupting the flow of the negative circuit of communication with their interpretation of the breed, Erin’s group is working to start a circuit of sorts with information from their perspective by publishing training materials on their website and promoting healthy pet ownership at local events. Yet despite the educational focus

of the group, Erin isn't blinded by the difficulties of moving the responsibility to the owner; "You can try to 'educate' people, but people are resistant to that. So the easy solution is to just ban the dogs" (Sullivan 2009, interview). BSL, she says, "doesn't address the underlying problem, which is not specific breeds of dog, but irresponsible dog ownership" (ibid). Mary Harwelik, founder of The Real Pit Bull, agrees: "The issue of irresponsible ownership and dog attacks is not a simple one to solve because it is a societal issue that has nothing to do with a breed of dog and everything to do with personal responsibility and the way humans view dogs" (Harwelik 2009, interview).

"Don't Bully My Breed!"¹²:

Alternatives to BSL

In the 1987 *Sports Illustrated* article, the certified applied animal behaviorist and executive vice president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Stephen Zawistowski, is quoted as saying: "A pit bull is like a Porsche. It's a finely tuned, highly muscled athlete... And just like you wouldn't give a Porsche to a 16-year-old, you don't want just anyone to own a pit bull. It should be someone who has experience with dogs and is willing to spend the time, because with training and proper socialization you will get the most out of them as pets" (Gorant 2008, 73). Likening the breed's bad rap to teens driving Porsches – "accidents waiting to happen" – too many dogs were and continue to be irresponsibly bred, often by backyard breeders, and put in situations which force aggression and lead to the dog's extreme psychological damage (Gorant 2008, 73).¹³ When the wrong person gains possession of a dog, regardless of breed, the victim is the dog, not the person.

The most notorious class of irresponsible owners is dog fighters. Gary says:

These people work hard to pervert the dog away from its inherent nature, making it unnaturally aggressive. Any time a fighting dog is discovered, the sensational nature of the story makes it big news and gives the breed a bad reputation. The same thing could happen to virtually any breed if it is singled out by dog fighters. For example, with enough time and effort poodles could be perverted from their inherent nature and made to fight and would start to get a bad reputation. Fortunately for poodles, they are not as strong and tough as pit bulls, so people don't target them for fighting. If a dog has been forced to become aggressive, of course there is an increased probability that it will attack a person or another dog, which will be sensational, attract a lot of attention and make news (Whitten 2009, interview).

The breed has an immense amount of support from advocacy and educational organizations interested in publicizing its true nature and eradicating negative stereotypes that have been prevalent for so long. And aside from the astronomical amount of such propaganda circulated through the media and communities about the innate behavior of pit bulls, there are simply too many dogs that are visually mistaken for pit bulls to effectively employ already problematic breed-specific legislation. The ideal modification to the circuit of communication discussed so far is that negative productions may exist and be distributed but that advocacy groups would highlight the misrepresentations, replace them with their own interpretations, and find a way to produce and distribute these new views (see Appendix A Figure 2). For instance, these advocacy organizations work hard to introduce alternatives to BSL that would target the

true culprit, irresponsible owners. Such legislation is so critical because any difficulties that arise in relation to the breed will be deemed the owner's fault, not the dog's; it's time now to implement fair bills.

Currently monetary penalties are associated with violations of breed-specific legislation. In Prince George's County, MD, a \$50 annual fee must be paid by the owner to register his pit bull. Violations of the ownership bill can result in fines up to \$1,000 or an imprisonment sentence not to exceed six months. The exact same penalties apply to owners of pit bulls in this county that cause injury to or kill a person or another domestic animal (Pit Bulls 1996). Therefore, if an owner in Prince George's County does not follow the bill and in fact does not follow the bill so severely that his incompetence results in death of a person or an animal, he still only faces, at most and only potentially, a \$1,000 fine or a few months in jail.

Obviously such penalties do little to no good to eradicate the problem of irresponsible ownership. One rescuer speculates that most of the population that would potentially receive such a charge would not have the money to pay for the fine if the time came and continue to own irresponsibly. "There are cases after cases after cases where you have individuals who have been convicted of animal cruelty, animal neglect, dog fighting... maybe they'll get some fines, maybe they'll spend a few days in jail, or whatever, or they'll have to do some community service, but believe it or not in many of those cases these folks are still allowed to have animals" (DiStefano 2009, interview).

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), best known and frequently criticized for its controversial campaigns and for the large number of animals it euthanizes, supports breed-specific legislation as one effort to combat the animal overpopulation problem. Pit bulls in particular, PETA states, "stand out as the most abused of all dog breeds" and

therefore should be singled out and banned because of their reckless and negligent owners (PETA's Position 2009). PETA's stance, it seems, is not to prosecute the negligent owners but instead to revictimize the dogs. But if all municipalities followed this recommendation and banned the breed, where would the breed be welcome to live and thrive? PETA argues, too, for the execution of all pit bulls that end up in shelters and would therefore have the potential to find sanctuary from abusive or neglectful owners (Winograd 2007).

Some states offer half-hearted compromises. The state of California, for instance, has ratified a bill which calls for mandatory spay/neuter programs for dangerous breeds. Though still breed-specific, some advocates argue that such a bill is heading in the right direction and that such legislation should be enacted for all breeds – at least until all owners can be responsible owners that spay and neuter their pets willingly (Mesch 2006).

If the goal of politicians who actually propose dangerous dog legislation is in fact to offer communities better protection from dogs that are dangerous, then “thoughtful legislation that addresses responsible dog keeping is in order,” states the position statement on dangerous dog and breed-specific legislation for The Human Society of the United States (HSUS) (HSUS Statement 2009). HSUS goes on to state:

Legislation aimed at punishing the owner of the dog rather than punishing the dog is far more effective in reducing the number of dog bites and attacks. Well enforced, non-breed-specific laws offer an effective and fair solution to the problem of dangerous dogs in all communities. Comprehensive ‘dog bite’ legislation, coupled with better consumer education and forced responsible pet keeping efforts, would do far more to protect communities than banning a specific breed (HSUS Statement 2009).

Eighteen states observe the “one-bite rule,” otherwise known as “dog bite” legislation, which protects a dog owner from liability for the first bite injury to a human – as long as the bite was not foreseen by the owner or was not a result of a leash law or other animal control law violation. In the remaining states, the dog owner is liable for the first and following bites (Dog Bite Law 2009).¹⁴ Dog bite legislation – coupled with strongly enforced animal control laws such as leash laws, bigger fines and jail time for people who abuse or neglect their dogs, legal requirements for owners to responsibly and proactively keep their dog and their community safe, and a push for increasing public awareness and education efforts to promote responsible dog ownership – will produce a better system for protecting communities from the negligence of irresponsible owners (AKC Talking Points 2009). Pit Bull Rescue Central (PBRC), a website community “where education meets rescue”, recommends pressing for stronger enforcement of existing dangerous dog laws known generically as vicious dog laws which put restrictions on the ownership of dogs that are *known* to pose a danger to people such as specific confinement stipulations for kennels, muzzle requirements when the dog is *off* the owner’s property, and the purchase of a liability insurance policy (Pit Bull Rescue Central 2009). PBRC also suggests lobbying for protection from untrained and unsupervised dogs of any breed; encouraging local animal rescue and welfare groups to provide responsible dog ownership seminars and safety education; and protecting the rights of all citizens, including non-dog owners, with nuisance orders such as anti-barking and pooper-scooper regulations (Pit Bull Rescue Central 2009).

Though BSL began with pit bulls in the early 1980s, it is not a problem unique to the pit bull breed. In municipalities across the country, BSL affects Rottweilers, Shar Pei’s, Mastiffs, Doberman Pinschers, and Chow Chows – just to name five (Banned Breeds 2009). With no end

in sight, owners, rescuers, and fosters of pit bulls and other targeted breeds agree that they need to act as Ambassadors for their pets.

Maria loves conquering the challenges she faces as a result of people's narrowmindedness. Neighbors, families, people on the street think, "Oh, monsters!" (Meyer 2009, interview). She enjoys assuming the higher level of responsibility expected from her because she wants to change people's minds about the breed. When she walks her dog in her neighborhood, some people recognize her dog's breed:

And to me that's my opportunity to be an Ambassador for the breed and let people come up and pet the dog and... when they start petting the dog, they say, 'Oh, what kind of dog is this? And I say, 'Oh, she's a pit bull.' 'Oh really! I heard these dogs were mean!' And then I can launch into the, 'Well!...' You know, 'Really this is what they are. And the few that you hear about on tv are most likely because of irresponsible owners,' you know, that have caused their dog to behave that way, so you do become an Ambassador for the breed when you own them (Meyer 2009, interview).

Jennifer also enjoys reshaping the conception of the breed through her experiences and personal standards. "You could come walking in my house and she's, she'd let you in... So I think it [a well-behaved pit bull] just impacts people more... I have a specific requirement [for myself] for doing a little bit more to try to change people's minds, and when you have something that looks *that* menacing and [is] so not menacing in temperament, people remember it, you know, big time – they do" (Bates 2009, interview).

Conclusion

The pit bull breed has experienced decades of persecution by neglectful owners, the media, and legislators alike. Mediated images, like that on the cover of the 1987 *Sports Illustrated* publication, paired with fear-mongering stories of actual and supposed pit bull maulings have produced an image of the super-predator that has been circulated through the circuit of communication an uncountable number of times. Though the pit bull breed currently suffers under this label, it is only a matter of time before the media machine and criminals alike decide to move on to another breed to victimize (Winograd 2007).

The question here is: why pit bulls? Drug- and gang-related violence in the 1970s and 1980s linked its criminal underpinnings to the breed. Combined with anecdotes of jaw-locking beasts, the result produced a feared breed, and pits that were well-behaved became the anomaly in the eyes of the public. Responsible pit bull owners found themselves working harder to maintain the good behavior in their dogs that other breed owners took for granted – if they ever achieved it at all.

The poorly cared-for dogs with behavioral problems and inclinations to attack were spotlighted in the media and hyperbolized, bolstering them as representative of the entire breed's demeanor. In some situations, identification of aggressive dogs defaulted to the pit bull breed or was determined based on looks alone. More trouble soon faced the breed.

As they began to receive pressure from worried constituents, local and municipal governments took action. Enacting breed-specific legislation that penalized specific breeds and their owners, these politicians inadvertently continued to persecute the breed. Owners who cared greatly for their dogs and worked to ensure their safety were affected while irresponsible owners

who cared little for their dogs went unnoticed, some even switching to other breeds to avoid the penalties and fees associated with pit bulls. As a result, responsible owners endured strict rules and ostracism because of their love for their dogs while the truly problematic owners continued on to devastate yet another breed.

This article explored the history and evolution of bulls to develop a foundation for my findings. The understanding of the condemnation of pit bulls is imperative to American culture because it impacts an important piece: pet ownership. If dogs are one of America's most beloved animals, the singling out of one breed in particular for destructive attention and treatment must be analyzed further.

The major players in this controversy wrestle to make the biggest impact on the breed. Rescuers and education advocates have the power to overcome the detrimental behavior of backyard breeders, dog fighters, politicians, and irresponsible owners. Alternatives to breed-specific legislation address community safety concerns as well as penalties for owners who do not have the understanding of the breed required to safely own it. Specifically, the responsible owners interviewed for this study acknowledged the responsibility tax they endure as a result of owning the breed of their choice. While some of the participants find it to be a tax that owners of all breeds should face, the strength and ability of the pit bull requires that the breed's owners be especially cognizant and in control of their dog's behavior. The participants conclude that the pit bull breed is not for everyone, that it needs and deserves a certain kind of owner. Just as behavior is not something a dog is "born" with but instead something that develops over time, the solution to this irresponsible owner problem will take much more time consideration and unity to produce positive results.

One of the most important conclusions I have developed from this work is that there is something to learn from pit bulls themselves. Jennifer says it best:

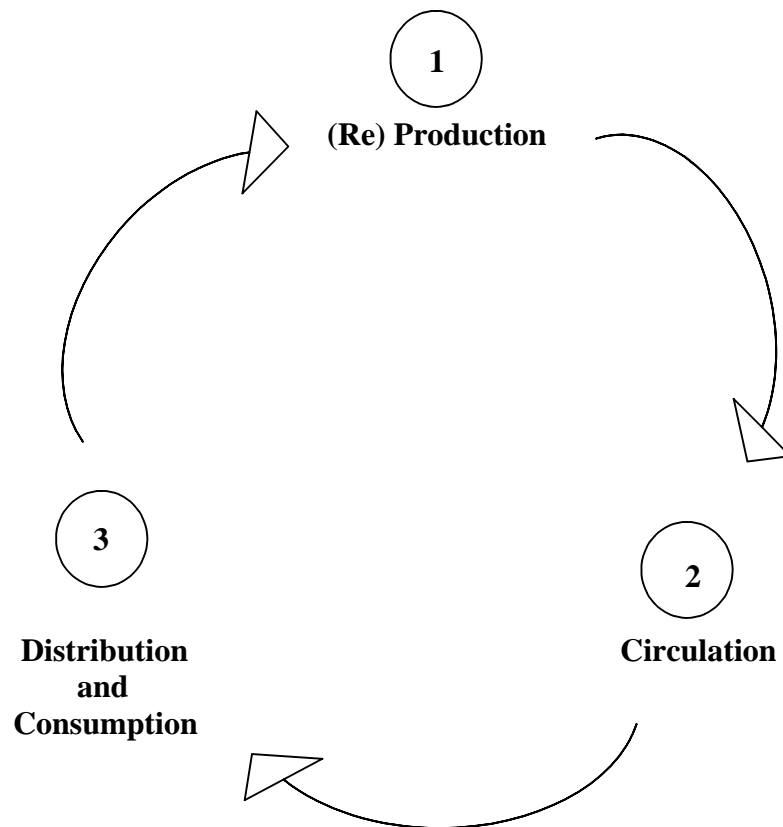
I think there's a greater lesson to be learned here. It's not just about dogs. It's about people being responsible... We always want to not blame ourselves or not look at ourselves for a solution when that's the only thing we need to do – is just look to ourselves, you know, and we'll see that you can't just blame the dog. Dogs are just like a primal, wild animal, essentially. I think it's so ridiculous to think a dog is something that we need to condemn... Look at that face (Bates 2009, interview)!

This small study is impacted by its sample size but is still helpful for beginning to understand the many layers of the irresponsible pit bull owner problem. My lack of knowledge about the pit bull community before beginning this research added an initial challenge to this project as I first had to familiarize myself with the ground upon which I would walk into the research. This narrow but extremely complex and significant topic cries for a more in-depth look. Future research on the irresponsible pit bull owner problem in relation to the circuit of communication with a fuller perspective from politicians, radical animal support groups (like PETA), shelters, private rescues, and even irresponsible owners themselves in addition to more from responsible owners and rescuers would enrich our understanding of this highly controversial yet critical issue in the pet ownership sphere of American culture.

Appendix A

Figure 1

Example of typical circuit of communication regarding the pit bull breed, historically
(Chandler 2002; Hall 1980; see Saussure 1974 & 1983)



(1) PRODUCTION - Dog attacks another dog in neighborhood. Based on visual cues and behavior, officials declare vicious dog a “pit bull”.

(2) CIRCULATION - Article is written about “pit bull” attack when dogs involved only met physical, not genetic, characteristics of pit bull.

(3) DISTRIBUTION & CONSUMPTION - Article appears in local papers. Community residents believe what they read and may even begin to fear neighborhood pit bulls, assuming they are no longer safe in their presence

(1) RePRODUCTION - Legislators propose breed-specific legislation in response to community concerns.

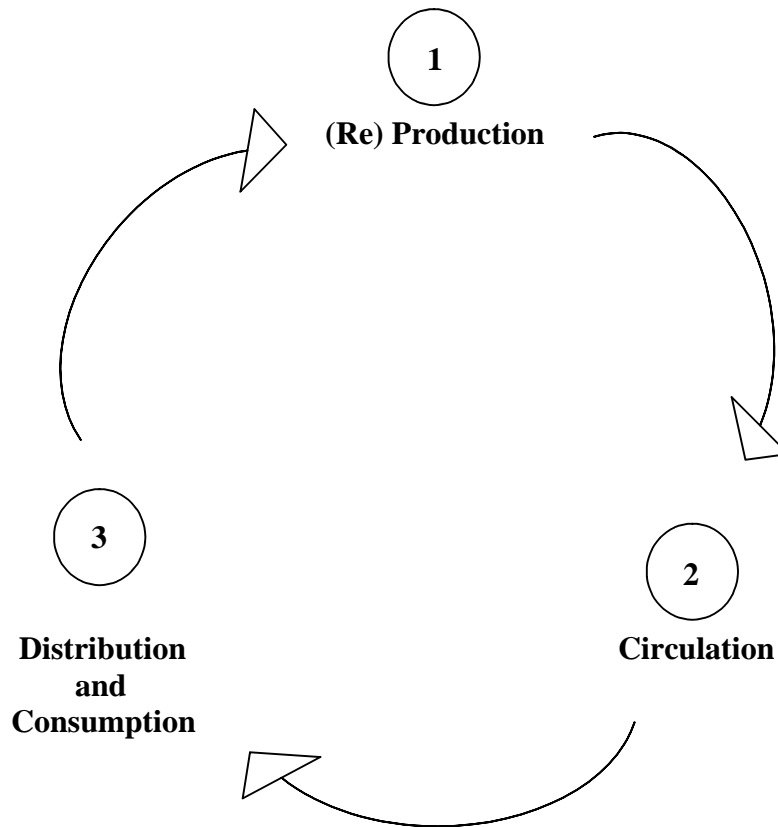
(2) CIRCULATION - New article is written detailing breed-specific legislation

(3) DISTRIBUTION & CONSUMPTION – Residents’ fears are confirmed when they read of local politicians taking legal action to protect communities

(1) RePRODUCTION... (repeat through circuit *ad nauseam*)

Figure 2

Example of potential impact of breed advocates on circuit of communication
(Chandler 2002; Hall 1980; see Saussure 1974 & 1983)



(1) PRODUCTION - Dog attacks another dog in neighborhood. Based on visual cues and behavior, officials declare vicious dog a “pit bull”.

(2) CIRCULATION - Article is written about “pit bull” attack when dogs involved only met physical, not genetic, characteristics of pit bull.

(3) DISTRIBUTION & CONSUMPTION – Breed owners and advocates read article and disagree with misrepresentation of breed based on knowledge and experience

(1) RePRODUCTION – Breed owner is motivated to create non-profit organization to educate owners and community residents about pit bull ownership

(2) CIRCULATION – Article is written about local organization striving to better the lives of pit bulls through community education and involvement

(3) DISTRIBUTION & CONSUMPTION – Residents change their opinions about neighborhood pit bulls and begin to open their minds to new ways of thinking

(1) RePRODUCTION... (repeat through circuit)

Appendix B

Pit Bull Breed Advocates & Breed-Specific Legislation Advocates

BREED ADVOCATES

RESCUES

Founders

Maria, Tia's Promise

RESCUE named in 2004, founded earlier

RESCUES primarily pit bulls

OWNS Tia (pit bull, female, 11 years), Tango (pit bull, male, 9 years), Maxie (pit bull, female, 9 years), Phoenix (pit bull, male, 5 years), Taz (pit bull, male, 4.5 years), Kazoo (pit bull, male, 4.5 years)

Rosemary, Faith's Hope

RESCUE founded 2005

RESCUES special-needs dogs regardless of breed

OWNS Gigi (Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, female, 9 years), Sam (Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, male, 8 years), Suki (Chow-Boxer mix, female, 6 years), Asa (Rottie-Shepherd mix, female, 16 months)

FOSTERS four female pit bulls (March 2009)

Fosters

Jennifer, Tia's Promise

FOSTERS since Fall 2003

fosters primarily pit bulls and some other breeds, all from pit bull rescues, including those from Maria's rescue, Tia's Promise

OWNS Chili (pit bull, female, 5 years)

Gary, Homeless Animals Rescue Team (HART)

FOSTERS since mid-2006

fosters dogs in need,¹ regardless of breed

OWNS Dancer (Sheltie mix, female, 8 years)

VETERINARY PRACTITIONER

Veterinary Technician

Melissa, a Maryland veterinary hospital

VET WORK started kennel work in 2001; vet tech since 2004; earned RVT license in 2007

OWNS Lexie (pit bull, female, 5 years)

¹ Note the difference between the classification "special-needs dogs" and "dogs in need". Rosemary's rescue specifically targets dogs with injuries and behavioral problems that require a specialized kind of help. Gary's foster dogs are dogs of any breed which have the greatest need for fostering, regardless of need type.

EDUCATION & ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

Founders

Erin, B-More Pit Bull

FOUNDED Fall 2007

PRESIDENT since 2008 (year of organization incorporation)

MEMBER Working Pit Bull Terrier Club of America

MODERATOR Pitbullforum.com

OWNS Doc (APBT, male, 7 years) and Tucker (pit bull mix, male, 3 years)

FOSTERS Button (APBT, male, 5 months)

Mary, The Real Pit Bull

WEBSITE founded 1997

FOUNDER and Director

CERTIFICATIONS AKC Canine Good Citizen evaluator; professional member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers; Certified Pet Dog Trainer through the Certification Council of Professional Dog Trainers

OWNS Luca (American Staffordshire Terrier, male, 11 years)

President

Adrienne, Maryland Dog Federation

PRESIDENT

AFFILIATIONS volunteered with Fidos For Freedom

OWNS retired therapy dog Zuzu (Kimmar's Zuzu's Petals, CGC: AKC American Staffordshire Terrier, female, 13.5 years) [*In Prince George's County, MD, this dog is considered a "pit bull"*] and Bandit (American Bulldog, male, 7 years), plus two cats

BREED-SPECIFIC LEGISLATION ADVOCATES

POLITICIAN

Councilman

Vincent, District 5, Baltimore County, MD

SERVES in office (19 years, 5 terms)

PROPOSED Bill 70-07 restricting pit bull owners in 2007

OWNS no dogs

CITIZEN

Father of mauled child

Anonymous participant, Baltimore County, MD

Supports breed-specific legislation as proposed by Councilman Gardina

Notes

¹ A forever home is a home where a rescue dog is placed and will hopefully remain for the rest of her life, one that provides her safe shelter and adequate food by a loving owner.

² No major pit bull source or organization has pinpointed a nationwide number of pit bulls that are euthanized each year. Because most shelter systems in the nation operate separately from one another – municipal, private, and non-profit shelter systems do not necessarily commingle – a nationwide number is problematic to determine. In addition, there is no universal way to classify an individual as a “pit bull”. Shelters that make this determination based on looks, not genetics, will immediately falsify the number since so many breeds share physical characteristics with the pit bull description. To further complicate the matter, most shelters do not keep records that break down into the breeds that have been euthanized; instead their records reflect species such as dogs, cats, rabbits, etc (Sullivan 2009, interview).

³ It is estimated that 5 million dogs per year are killed in shelters. Since pit bulls make up between 30 to 50 percent of shelter capacity – and, in some cases, more – and since they are less likely than any other breed to be considered for placement into homes, a conservative approximation that 25 percent of dogs killed are pit bulls equals roughly 1.25 million pit bulls killed in shelters every year (Halip 2009, interview).

⁴ Here and for the entirety of the article the term *pit bull* will stand in to represent a hybrid of popular usages. This author will refer to pit bulls as a *breed*, thought to include American Pit Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers, and Staffordshire Bull Terriers and mixed breed dogs with presumed genes from any of these distinct breeds.

⁵ This author introduces the concept of the responsibility tax, an additional expectation of responsible ownership of pit bulls by other dog owners, non-dog-owning citizens, and legislators due to the widespread misunderstanding and villainization of the breed.

⁶ Fosters are people who take dogs into their homes and care for them, with the understanding that their “adoption” of the homeless pets is temporary and will last only until a permanent, forever home can be located. This person is the intermediary between a rescue or shelter and the forever home.

⁷ Both of these rescues are named after the first pit bull to be rescued by each of these two founders. The founders also rescue other breeds as well, though one focuses primarily on the pit bull breed. See Appendix B for more information on participants.

⁸ The Michael Vick case refers to the April 2007 discovery of and subsequent criminal charges for the elaborate dog fighting complex professional football player Michael Vick owned and developed in Surry County, Virginia. Criminal investigations on the state and federal levels discovered the unlawful interstate dog fighting venture, which had been operating for six years, called Bad Newz Kennels. In July 2007, Vick was charged with financing the complex, participating in dog fights, executing dogs, and handling thousands of dollars from the consequential gambling. Widespread media publicity resulted after the discovery of the compound, bringing attention to the plight of the breed and the severity of the crimes associated with dog fighting.

⁹ See Swift 1987 under “References” for reference information.

¹⁰ *Irresponsible owners* here and throughout this article is an umbrella term comprised of (a) owners with malicious intent for their dog, such as dog fighting, drug guarding, and as an intimidation tool; (b) owners who are not intending to involve their dog in criminal behavior and who recognize human aggression in their pet but do little to combat it in the presence of people who may be harmed as a result; (c) owners who are not intending to involve their dog in criminal behavior and who have the potential to be responsible owners but who do not understand the breed enough to make educated training and care decisions; and (d) owners who are not intending to involve their dog in criminal behavior and who may understand the breed to a degree but do not proactively take the precautions necessary to protect their pet, such as ensuring that their pet will not get loose, that it is always leashed on walks, that it does not demonstrate aggression toward people, etc. *Irresponsible ownership* also includes these types.

¹¹ The outdoor exercise stipulation required that the pit bull be “exercised” in a small locked pen with a cement floor and top or be constantly muzzled when in its own yard or even on a leash. The muzzling portion of this stipulation was amended out before the ordinance was formally proposed; muzzling has been found to be dangerous and cruel, particularly for unattended dogs. Muzzled dogs cannot sniff around to go to the bathroom; they cannot exercise and play adequately with a muzzle; lost muzzled dogs can die of thirst and starvation; and dogs that accidentally get loose from their homes without muzzles will be found and taken to the county authorities, simply because of their visual breed identification (Lefkowitz 2009, interview).

¹² See Hedges under “References” for reference information.

¹³ A *backyard breeder* is a colloquial term for breeders that allow for dogs, regardless of health or breed registry, to procreate. These breeders do not abide by the screening process that purebred breeders use; often the resulting offspring have “faults” such as temperament or genetic problems. A derogatory classification, backyard breeders often sell the puppies to make a profit with disregard to the repercussions for the puppies and the breed.

¹⁴ Important and nuanced exceptions apply to this legislation on a state-by-state basis. For instance, in Minnesota, courts have ruled that liability may be excused if the person bitten provoked the dog or if the person failed to behave peacefully toward the dog. Similarly, exceptions in Pennsylvania and Colorado state that the dog bite law applies only to bites that cause severe injury, not simply minor injury, and even then in Colorado the dog owner is liable for strictly ‘economic losses’, not pain or other suffering. In Maine, the statute only applies to bites which occur off the dog owner’s property (Dog Bite Law 2009).

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