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# Multiple Perspectives on Service Animals in Society

**Comments**

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## Multiple Perspectives on Service Animals in Society

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This paper explores alternative strategies for taking service dogs seriously. I argue for multiple analytical perspectives to understand service dog issues (as opposed to overreliance on a single method). Analysts (including journalists, policy-makers, and activists) should reflect on media coverage, socio-economic realities, politics and law, and many other factors. Rather than thinking "either/or" on service dogs in society, we need to move to thinking "both/and," to critical analysis of multiple perspectives.

Journalists and the public often show an overly simplistic fascination that has resulted in a plethora of anecdotal accounts and illustrations. There is a lacuna of work rigorously analyzing service dogs and their roles. In this paper, I suggest that service dog partners,

journalists, policy-makers, and disability activists need to remedy this situation. I suggest four particular areas of inquiry on service animals in society that analysts can address from multiple perspectives: organization, fraud/certification, travel, and inequality.

The author teaches Peace Studies and Political Science at Chapman University, south of Los Angeles. This paper is part of an ongoing project exploring connections between Disability Studies and Peace Studies. (Another part explored connections in coverage of driverless cars, the topic of Blaser, 2017 from which sections of this paper are adapted.) In the larger project, I argue that one connection is the prominence of dogs, the service dog in Disability Studies and the military working dog (MWD) in Peace Studies (e.g. Cruse, 2015). In both cases, detailed analysis by researchers is fruitful.

In the first section of this paper, I explore conceptions of three essential terms of this paper: service dogs, disability, and media. In the second section, I describe two common approaches that underlie reporting on service animals (popular and scholarly). In the third section,

I report quantitative results from a cursory search of five major media outlets and describe a deeper content analysis approach. I then identify five frames that characterize present or potential media coverage of service dogs: compensation for individual deficits, philanthropy, social change, inequality, and global public policy. In the fourth section, I sketch three other perspectives for studying service dogs: law, organizations, and narrative. In the fifth and final section, I suggest four topics for future exploration by scholarly researchers and by the media.

## **Background**

Three subjects are central to this inquiry: the topic of service dogs, conceptualization of disability, and the media. With all three terms, apparently easy simplification may have socially harmful consequences. Although definitional debates are beyond the scope of this paper, I will discuss “service dogs,” “disability,” and “media” as background.

## **Service Dogs**

Uses of the term “service dog” vary greatly by time, place, and other dimensions. Eames and Eames wrote in 2001 about the

contemporary guidelines on “service animals:” “...the use of the word ‘service’ was not well thought out. One wonders why writers of regulations feel they must invent new terms rather than maintain already established language.”

Recent governmental clarifications are more accurately stipulations. A directive from the U.S. Department of Justice, specifies, “service animals are defined as dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities” (2010). They include many working dogs whose service is connected with specific impairments: guide dogs, hearing dogs, and autism dogs, for example.

The directive then distinguishes “service dog” in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) from “assistance animal” under the Fair Housing Act and “service animal” under the Air Carrier Access Act. It also mentions that the regulations have a “new, separate provision about miniature horses that have been individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities” (2010).

Although service dog organizations are more likely to train particular breeds of dogs as service animals, Valparaiso University law professor Rebecca Huss explores possible implications of the ADA that would prohibit breed-specific ordinances, particularly ones that limit or exclude pits bulls as service animals (2015). Canadian provincial ordinances do not distinguish among service animals that may also include monkeys and other species. Most of my analysis that follows refers to “service dogs,” but would likely not be very different if applied to other animals.

Popular interest in the service dog topic was well-captured by Stephen Kuusisto when he wrote:

Nowadays there’s a dog for almost any disability as canines assist wheelchair users retrieve objects, open cupboards, hand money to cashiers or help with balance, just to name a few of their skills. Dogs are trained to detect the onset of seizures or help hearing impaired people detect audible signals. Some dogs assist diabetics by sensing changes in blood sugar. There are dogs to help children with autism and dogs who accompany people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. All these skills reflect the amazing talents of dogs and the pioneering vision of the guide dog movement which started the service dog industry by pairing trained dogs with blind veterans. (2014).

## Disability

Definitions of “disability” change with context, different in different places and times. The drafters of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognized this when they inserted in the Preamble: “Recognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (Paragraph e). Most authors of scholarly articles about service dogs or related topics assume a traditional medical/deficit conception of disability with breakdowns by impairment: particularly blindness, mobility impairments, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but also epilepsy, intellectual disability, and others.

Many activists, policy-makers, and scholars (and increasingly journalists) posit disability as a near universal condition since more and more people are acquiring disabilities (World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011; O’Brien, 2005). Temporary or permanent disability is

a frequent consequence of living longer and such common human activities as war and sports.

## **Media**

Information about service dogs is spread through many different sources: television, radio, magazines, newspapers, and others. I focus on major newspapers partly because information is easily available. From an initial cursory look, information from non-print sources is generally similar. I provide the most detail on information from five outlets with high circulation: the *Los Angeles Times*, *Toronto Star*, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*. I take a more cursory examination of other sources including trade publications, the BBC, National Public Radio, and the disability press.

## **Overlapping Controversies**

The approaches to studying evolving roles of service animals described below illuminate important political and social controversies. Ignoring those controversies has an unfortunate conservative effect: perpetuating practices that pose barriers to access by disabled people.

The examples described below both contain assumptions which may prove to be warranted (or not) following systematic analysis of content.

### **Individual Aid or Social Rights**

Media, the public, and policy-makers couch many disability issues as charity. One prominent example is the frequently publicized image of a service dog compensating for individual deficits. But increasingly organizations, media, and a disability rights movement promote a more active image of disabled people participating in collective action, enabled by service animals. Both images are possible and coexist in many accounts. Arguably, the images will co-exist in more accounts with time, as charity conceptions of disability recede from journalists and policy-makers. Systematic analysis of content should indicate whether this is in fact the case or just a dream.

### **The Context of Inequality**

Inequality is explicit in charity models, with donors having resources that recipients lack. Journalists and policy-makers' gradual shift away from charity models may create an image of equal

opportunity, although great inequalities remain, with stable employment, housing, and family life common prerequisites for service dog partnership. Issues of inequality are particularly noticeable in two areas of great public interest.

**Certification.** Many policy-makers, journalists, and writers focus on the “fake” service dog, and possible schemes for certification (e.g. Buhai, 2016). In contrast, one of the principles behind the Americans with Disabilities Act was that no distinction would be made between self-trained service dogs and ones whose owners have paid for certification (sometimes an avenue for fraud or for the disabled person who may pay hundreds of dollars for travel and questionable “recertification”). Some jurisdictions, including Hawaii and Canada distinguish between certified and non-certified service dogs which has consequences for travel.

**Travel barriers.** Although in principle everyone has the right to travel, some people will do it much more often than others. While service animals can make this more likely for some disabled people, it comes at a cost. For example, quarantine and vaccination restrictions

will be prohibitive for some, but not all, travelers. Even where access laws apply to transportation and lodging, without legal representation, many service dog owners do not have a remedy.

### **Content Analysis**

The topics discussed above could easily be cast as testable propositions. The presumptions can be borne out (or not) through a cursory examination of the quantity of news coverage in selected newspapers combined with systematic analysis of press content.

#### **Quantity of Coverage: May 1, 2014 to May 1, 2017**

Although there was some coverage as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, serious media attention to the service dog has increased markedly, but unevenly. One reflection of this is the results in Table 1 which represent the vast bulk of the coverage in the five outlets. For all of the outlets, the Los Angeles Times, Toronto Star, USA Today, Washington Post, and The Guardian (London), results are from the LexisNexis database. The results are “hits” (news stories) for the search term “service dogs.”

#### **Table 1**

## Frequencies

Newspaper	Number of Articles 2014-2017
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	5
<i>Toronto Star</i>	44
<i>USA Today</i>	19
<i>Washington Post</i>	175 [est.]
<i>The Guardian (London)</i>	12

Source: Lexis site for Chapman University, “Hits” for May 1, 2014 to May 1, 2017 accessed May 9, 2017

With any such cursory content analysis, problems are soon apparent. The estimated number of *Washington Post* stories, for instance, excluded duplicates from online or regional editions as well as the many blog posts included in Lexis. The author extrapolated from counts on one of the 23 pages of Lexis results. Even with such a crude method, however, the much greater coverage in the *Washington Post*

than other sources is apparent. My guess is that this was due to the political significance of the service dog issue.

The author did not record results for related search terms such as “assistance dogs” or “guide dogs.” However, conducting searches using equivalent search terms yielded similar results to the “service dogs” search. *The Guardian* (London) was an exception; the search term “assistance dog” yielded more hits (23 for 2014-2017, and 87 for “guide dog”) presumably because of London customary usages of the terms.

### **Themes from Detailed Coding of a Selection from Major Newspapers**

In depth attention to press coverage may reveal more about media coverage, and more about service dog issues as well. Beginning in fall of 2014, Beth Haller, Chelsea Temple Jones, Sarai Urzua, and I coded 101 news stories from a sample created by Haller of major stories in Lexis on service dogs after 2010 (when the US Department of Justice created the guidelines mentioned above.) It is our hope that such focused inquiry will ultimately shed light on alternative “frames” through which media analysts (and as a result, their readers) perceive service dogs.

## Frames

Journalists and policy-makers' themes are evident in the "frames" in Figure 1 below. Systematic content analysis can show the presence or absence of each frame in media stories. The concept of "news frames" (drawing on writings of Goffman, Snow, Graber, and many others, and explored in Haller, 2010) is useful in analyzing media coverage on service dogs. I suggest that five "frames" are especially important: Individual limitation, philanthropy, social change, comparative policy, and inequality. They overlap, and journalists might use them in the same story as depicted in Figure 1. Ultimately, a table may represent results from thematic content analysis, but here I will just describe the themes.

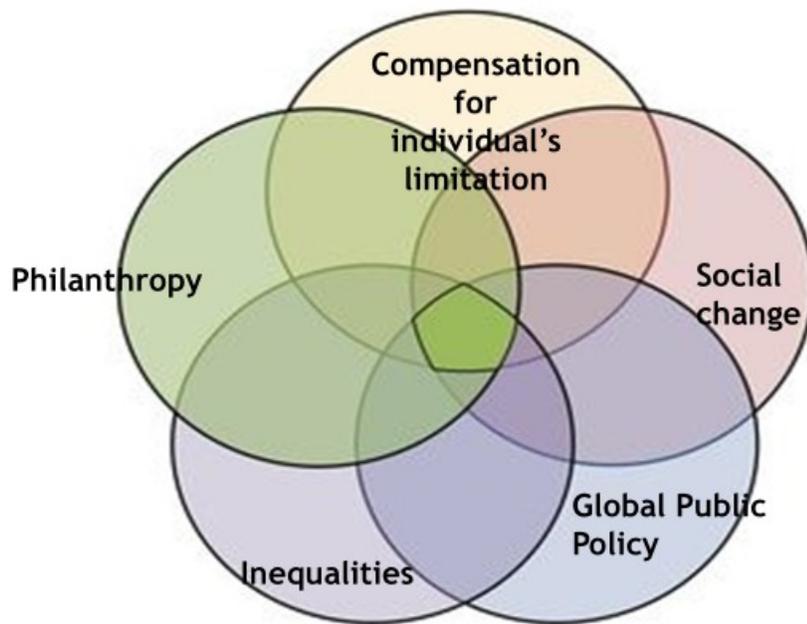


Figure 1

Frames in coverage of service dogs

**Compensation for individual deficits.** Often couched as “human interest,” a common story is of the disabled individual whose limitations are compensated for by a service dog’s presence. This perspective is echoed in, indeed even in some cases caused by, the therapeutic emphasis in academic literature (e.g. Hall, *et. al.*, 2017).

**Philanthropy.** Another common theme, philanthropy, is reflected in the individuals and organizations that are major parts of the service dog industry. Expenses for raising and training a service dog are estimated to be \$20,000 in some sources, as much as \$50,000, and commonly a \$30,000 figure is used, usually in media accounts based on figures from a service dog provider. Buhai uses a \$40,000 figure (2016). Organizations inherently face conflicting demands and constituencies leading the BBC's Peter White to bemoan "dog-oriented" organizations rather than "people-oriented" organizations (Wilkinson, 2009, p. 135).

The thoughts of Syracuse University professor and creative writer Stephen Kuusisto about guide dog schools offer a nuanced view of worthwhile partnership in disability rights advocacy with the harsh realities of "capitalism with the gloves off" (2015).

**Social Change.** Consistent with greater attention to disabled peoples' participation in society, at best journalists and readers depict the service dog as enabling disabled persons' full participation in society. One example is reporters' stories about service dog partners' access to

public accommodations. Conflicts in bureaucratic agencies, legislatures, and courts at all levels consistently draw press coverage.

Eames and Eames acknowledged this: “For those partnered with assistance dogs a common experience is the need to advocate for the presence of the canine assistant in situations where access is denied or attempted to be denied” (2001). News photos of advocacy marches in Washington, D.C. and plaintiffs in access lawsuits against ride-sharing companies Uber and Lyft are examples.

**Comparative Policy.** Although the local angle persists in many stories, at its best news will portray comparative and international dimensions. Journalists mentioned “Assistance Dogs International” in 338 English-language stories on Lexis (but almost all from the US); journalists mention the “International Association of Assistance Dog Partners” in just 48. (This search covered all English language stories between May 24, 2007 and May 24, 2017). The predominance of U.S. coverage is partly a reflection of Lexis’ criteria (and language limitation in the search). Mainly, however, it reflects the present reality that where

one finds “service dogs” reflects inequalities within and between countries.

**Inequalities.** The other side of coverage of organizational philanthropy is inequality, even starker among disabled people who obtained dogs from private commercial sources. The major subsidies that philanthropic organizations provide leave major expenses for housing, transportation, veterinary bills, and other matters. Although some service dog programs do not levy an initial charge, others may charge \$6,500 or \$20,000, with the explanation that this is far from the full cost of raising and training a service dog.

### **Other Perspectives**

News content in major press sources can offer rich insight into service dog issues. News content can be particularly insightful when people (among them journalists, scholars, the general public, and activists) combine those insights with other perspectives. I briefly describe three other perspectives: focus on law; focus on organizations; and focus on narrative.

## Laws and Cases

Service dogs have been at the core of major legal controversies in the United States and Canada (such as the recent *Fry v. Napoleon School District* in the United States Supreme court); Other prominent legal controversies include the issues mentioned earlier of “fake” service dogs (Buhai, 2016) and breed-specific legislation (Huss, 2016 a). Huss (2016b) and Bane (2017) adopt different law-based approaches in exploring the issue of service dogs in U.S. school classrooms. The issue of service dogs in housing was litigated in the U.S. cases of *Overlook Mutual Homes v. Spencer* (666 F.Supp. 2d 850) 2009 [Southern District of Ohio, Western Division] and other cases.

## Social Movements and Organizations

Service dogs are at the forefront of many depictions of the disability rights movement, particularly in the United States (see e.g. the previously mentioned illustrations in Pelka, 2012, front cover) and elsewhere. Eames and Eames expressed the hope that the “International Association of Assistance Dog Partners” (founded 2003)

would be at the vanguard of an emerging social movement through its *Partners' Forum*: "From the beginning, this newsletter was viewed as the core element in the organization's drive to provide a voice for disabled people partnered with canine assistants" (2001). That voice is evident more in some areas and at some times than others. Potentially analysts can explain why.

Politics and social change are missing from many accounts of service dogs, however. This is no doubt due in part to the persistence of a deficit view, in which the focus is on an individual "client." However, a counter-pressure is evident when earlier in the same article Eames and Eames write that: "For those partnered with assistance dogs a common experience is the need to advocate for the presence of the canine assistant in situations where access is denied or attempted to be denied" (2001).

## **Narrative**

Some of the most perceptive writings about service animals are narratives (e.g. Michalko, 1999). The concerns discussed in this paper

result partly from the author’s experiences, first in a 1997 “Canine Companions for Independence” training, and later with “Paws with a Cause” (partnered with service dog Ollie since 2016).

One particular recent focus is with a 2017 PAWS publication accompanying their 2016 annual report. My worry was less with the writer’s potential portrayal of a pitiful disabled person aided by charity, than with portrayal as a “supercrip” in a draft passage: “Art didn’t let his disability slow him down. His positive attitude and perseverance kept him active and independent.” In the final redraft, that sentence precedes my reference to the social changes that foster activity. I make a similar point in a later paragraph:

Sometimes the larger—and often unexpected—benefit of having an Assistance Dog is the bridge it provides to the community. This is true for Art as he explained, ‘OLLIE’s help enables me to be a more active participant in the community.’ He allows Art to connect more easily with students and faculty members. Art added, “Not only are PAWS Dogs assisting individuals like me; their presence is also transforming society. OLLIE has made two decades of a good life with a disability even better. (PAWS with a Cause, 2017, p.3)

(Appropriately, the first paragraph also depicts a service dog team—Ollie and me.) The accompanying photo shows Ollie in my office, a photo of an active (though calm) service dog and an active (though calm) disabled person (PAWS, 2017, p.3).

### **Suggestions**

Service dogs in society will continue to be very important, particularly as a reflection of a growing disability rights movement. Scholars, policy-makers, and journalists can valuably publicize them in several ways. To reduce their roles to overcoming individual deficits will obscure important controversies that need attention. As mentioned in the introduction, a good start for analysts in taking service dogs seriously will include analysis of four areas.

### **Organizations**

Since their founding, “Assistance Dogs International” (1987) and the “International Association of Assistance Dog Partners”(2003) have sought to provide consistent standards for ADI affiliates. These include, for example, Canine Companions for Independence, PAWS with a Cause,

and Canine Assistants in the United States and National Service Dogs and Pacific Assistance Dog Society in Canada. Other affiliates are throughout the world, but primarily in Europe. In practice, participation from much of the world has been minimal, owing largely to economic curbs, discussed below. Through media analysis, and through thorough description of organizations, analysts can better evaluate and appraise the role of service dog organizations.

### **Fraud/Certification**

Although analysts have not documented the extent of service dog fraud well, the perception of service dog fraud is a frequent topic in media accounts. In the United States, several states have designed plans for certification as a result. Several service dog organizations charge for certification, some of them significantly. Stephen Kuusisto and others have called attention to the advantages and disadvantages created by certification schemes. On the other hand, consistent with philanthropic principles, some leading organizations represent certification as very important. Analysts can probe who is helped, and who is hurt, by

alternative certification schemes: which owners, organizations, businesses, and animals.

## **Travel**

One of the advantages of certification programs is the imposition of fewer disability barriers in travel. However, many barriers remain in travel (especially international, but also intra-national) and they may be insurmountable for dog partners. Analysts can assess the often-anecdotal coverage of service dogs and travel. This can profitably involve content analysis, legal analysis, attention to organizations and narratives.

## **Economic Curbs**

Service dog partners confront great “economic curbs” before being paired, later in a service dog’s feeding and health, especially when travelling. Service dog organizations may defray some of the initial costs. However, expected employment of the service dog owner, housing, transportation, and exercise for a service dog come at a significant cost of time and money. Analysts can make some the economic barriers

more apparent, and one can hope that policy-makers will eventually address them.

The discussion above suggests that consideration of alternative futures and comparative analysis are vital in all four suggested areas. Potentially a nuanced, multimethod approach to service dog issues can yield cumulative, policy-relevant knowledge that will benefit the disability community and many overlapping communities as well.

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Toronto Star

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Washington Post

The Guardian (London)

Organizations (Selected)

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Assistance Dogs International

<https://www.assistancedogsinternational.org/>

Canine Companions International [www.cci.org](http://www.cci.org)

Canine Service Teams <http://caninesupportteams.org/index.html>

Canine Assistants <http://www.canineassistants.org/>

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners [www.iaadp.org](http://www.iaadp.org)

PAWS with a Cause <https://www.pawswithacause.org/>