

Enterprise Article on Puppy Mills in North Carolina

Student Name

Department

Faculty Advisor:

Abstract:

There is a high demand in this country for pure-bred puppies, despite the ongoing crisis of abandoned and unwanted dogs at animal shelters. In order to meet this demand and maximize profits, many breeders employ unethical and inhumane standards of care which are poorly regulated on a national level. (Montgomery, 455) Media coverage and activist efforts have resulted in public pressure, and many states are passing stronger regulations. North Carolina is not one of these states. While legislation has been proposed many times, it has faced intense opposition that caused it to fail. State and local media coverage has been incomplete. It has failed to paint a complete portrait of what the problem is, why the problem continues, who is involved in the problem, and the ongoing battle for legislation. More in-depth, investigative journalism is needed to bring the issue into the forefront and educate the public about the issue. The proposed project will focus on face-to-face interviews with experts and in-depth analysis of the financial interests of those involved in the breeding industry in North Carolina. To ensure accessibility on multi-media platforms, and to make the final article as marketable as possible, the project will include photographs, video, and audio. The resulting article and multimedia presentation will describe the research findings, detailing the financial and other interests of those resisting stronger regulation of the dog breeding industry.

Description of Research:

Modern journalism faces a crisis. Whether it be fake news, biased reporting, the “death” of the newspaper, or corporate consolidation of smaller local media organizations, the result is that journalists are often not dedicating the proper time and investigation at a local level that is necessary to tell the full picture. For my senior seminar, I am going to produce such a piece on an under-reported issue in North Carolina—puppy mills.

While the term “puppy mill” has no standard or legal definition in North Carolina, a 1984 court case in Minnesota, *Avenson v. Zegart*, classified the term as “a dog breeding operation in which the health of the dogs is disregarded in order to maintain a low overhead and maximize profits.” Dogs that are owned by such breeders are subjected to horrendous conditions and this definition has been widely accepted by many states and animal rights organizations across the United States to be used as the basis for policy making. (*Puppy Mills Now and Then*) In recent years, the internet has allowed unregulated sales of puppies to flourish, slipping through a loophole in the Animal Welfare Act. (Coppola, 2-3) While that loophole was officially closed in 2013, the U.S. Department of Agriculture only inspects self-registered breeders for “mere survival standards.” Thus, by the time the federal government presses charges, the situation is already dire. (Montgomery, 455-61)

This year, North Carolina came under national scrutiny when an article by the *Rolling Stone* detailed a 2016 puppy mill bust in Cabarrus County, where over 100 animals were seized.

(Solotaroff) What the story failed to mention, was that North Carolina has become a refuge for individuals operating such facilities due to very limiting legal definitions of animal cruelty. (Montgomery, 451)

While various North Carolina media outlets have reported on several failed legislative bills over the years and on the many puppy mill busts, a comprehensive in-depth investigative piece has yet to be published. I plan on tackling such an article throughout the Fall 2017 semester on several fronts where I see gaps in the coverage. This will be done by conducting interviews, consolidating research and reporting, and digging into public records.

Part of my focus for the article will be on the history and current status of the legislative actions within the North Carolina state government. This area of research will require traveling to Raleigh to conduct interviews with the lawmakers and lobbyists involved. I have already conducted a phone interview with Erica Geppi, the North Carolina State Director of the Humane Society of the United States. She has offered her help in connecting me with other advocates as well as a more in-depth, filmed interview. I have also been in contact with Representative Jason Saine, who proposed House Bill 179- Dog Breeding Standards and Law Enforcement Tools. He has agreed to meet with me for an interview and also offered to introduce me to other representatives who sponsored the bill. I have also reached out to Representative Bill Rabon, who has opposed such measures in the past, and hope to get an interview with him. (Binker)

My research will include digging into the public records on campaign financing and funding in groups involved in the debate; the Humane Society and the American Kennel Club. (2016 PAC) Additionally, I will be looking into the North Carolina Pork Council. In my initial interview with Erica Geppi, she spoke about their strong opposition, due to a fear of a “slippery slope” of animal welfare standards. Ideally, this research will include speaking directly to these organizations and/ or their lobbyists. All of the organizations have a presence in Raleigh.

Most of the existing reporting has used information provided by the Humane Society of the United States, which is not independent research. The Humane Society faces fierce criticism from those who have opposed animal cruelty legislation in North Carolina, and the criticisms have not been checked by local reporters. (Boudin) I will look into such claims and the basis for the information provided by the Humane Society to ensure an unbiased investigation. To this end, I have reached out to the NC Agricultural Department (Animal Welfare Section) and plan to include meeting with their representative on my trip to Raleigh.

I have also been in contact with Cabarrus Animal Hospital administrator Heather Siefel and veterinarian Dr. Robinson, both of whom were involved in the 2016 puppy mill bust. They have agreed to help organize face-to-face meetings and interviews with many of the people who worked on the bust. Additionally, I would meet many of the dogs rescued from the mill, 12 of whom were adopted by the staff at the clinic.

On a local level, I have already made a great deal of headway. Kim Brophy, an applied ecologist and certified dog behavior consultant, has agreed to allow me to observe and film her work rehabilitating a puppy mill rescue at her business, The Dog Door. I have also been speaking to Sergeant Robinson, an animal control officer with Buncombe County Sheriff's Department, who have given insight into the local regulations that help him do his work. Additionally, I have been in contact with Brother Wolf founder, Denise Bitz, who has offered her expertise on the matter.

Methodology:

I will conduct and record interviews using equipment rented from the media lab at UNCA as well as my own digital recorder. Throughout the semester, I will produce and submit a series of smaller written articles to my advisor, Michael Gouge, that I will eventually combine to form my final complete investigative piece. I will also be making this information as accessible as possible by creating multimedia content in the form of photographs, video, and audio reporting.

Time Period:

Date	Objective
Sept. 18- 30	Finish interviews in Asheville area (including, but not limited to: Denise Bitz, Hendersonville Pet Shop, Asheville Humane Society)
Oct. 1- 15	Travel to Cabarrus County. Conduct interviews with those involved in the 2016 bust.
Oct.16-31	Travel to Raleigh. Conduct interviews over a two-day period. Compile information, submit public records request as necessary.
Nov. 6 th	Submit application and abstract for Undergraduate Research Symposium
Nov. 1-19	Follow up interviews as necessary. Record training at Dog Door. Work on audio/ video presentations
Nov. 20- Dec. 3	Finalize project. Submit for peer and advisor review.
December 5 th	Present at Fall Symposium. Submit article for publication.

Budget:

Expense	Amount	Details
Travel (Cabarrus County)	\$166.92	State Mileage (53.5 cents per mile) for 312 miles: Home (100 High Valley Estates Drive) to Cabarrus County and back
Travel (Raliegh, NC)	\$278.20	520 Miles round trip to Raleigh.
Stay (Raliegh, NC)	\$149	Airbnb property (Titled- "House of Joy"): \$46 per night: Oct. 19 th - 21 st +\$41 in fees \$16 taxes
TOTAL:	\$594.12	Hopefully, I will make up the difference with a fuel efficient vehicle!

Publication Outlet:

In addition to presenting at the Undergraduate Research Symposium in December, I will be routinely publishing articles in the Blue Banner. I also plan to submit the final product to other news outlets (such a Blue Ridge Public Radio, The Citizen- Times Asheville, and the Mountain Express).

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