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N Owning the Problem: Media Portrayals of Overweight Dogs and the Shared Determinants of the Health of Human and Companion Animal Populations

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Source: [Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of The Interactions of People & Animals](#), Volume 25, Number 1, March 2012, pp. 35-48(14)

Publisher: [Berg Publishers](#)

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Abstract:

Weight-related health problems have become a common topic in Western mass media. News coverage has also extended to overweight pets, particularly since 2003 when the US National Academy of Sciences announced that obesity was also afflicting co-habiting companion animals in record numbers. To characterize and track views in popular circulation on causes, consequences, and responsibilities vis-à-vis weight gain and obesity, in pets as well as in people, this study examines portrayals of overweight dogs that appeared from 2000 through 2009 in British, American, and Australian mass media. The ethnographic content analysis drew inspiration from the literature in population health, animal-human relationships, communication framing, and the active nature of texts in cosmopolitan societies. Three main types of media articles about overweight dogs appeared during this period: 1) reports emphasizing facts and figures; 2) stories emphasizing personal prescriptions for dog owners, and 3) societal critiques. To help ordinary people make sense of canine obesity, media articles often highlight that dogs share the lifestyle of their human companion or owner, yet the implications of shared social and physical environments is rarely considered when it comes to solutions. Instead, media coverage exhorts people who share their lives with overweight dogs to “own the problem” and, with resolve, to normalize their dog's physical condition by imposing dietary, exercise, and relationship changes, thereby individualizing culpability rather than linking it to broader systemic issues.

Keywords: [COMPANION ANIMALS](#); [MEDIA](#); [NARRATIVE ANALYSIS](#); [OBESITY](#); [PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING](#)

Document Type: Research article

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175303712X13240472427230>

Publication date: 2012-03-01

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