

The Social Construction of the K-9 Ballistic Vest Phenomenon

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The impact of news stories and the concentration of media attention in an area can create a public perception that didn't previously exist. For example, there are numerous cases of the media's involvement in criminal justice issues that have created a new public perception (Surette, 1992; Barak, 1994; Thompson, 2000; Fox & Van Sickel, 2001). This creation of public perception by the media can also be referred to as social construction or framing an issue.

This scenario is evident in the news stories that transpired after the 1998 death of a New Jersey state police dog named Solo that was shot and killed in the line of duty. The brutal shooting and death of K-9 Solo grabbed the media's attention and the story was distributed nationwide by the Associated Press. As a reaction to the shooting of Solo, a 14-year-old girl in California responded by organizing a program to fund the purchase of protective vests for police dogs. It was believed that if Solo had been wearing ballistic armor, he would have survived the shooting.

The New Jersey legislature also responded to the media's attention generated by Solo's death and enacted new state legislation, which enhances the penalties for injuring or killing a police animal. The New Jersey legislation was referred to as Solo's Law in an effort to honor the fallen canine. These reactions were considered newsworthy and also gained national coverage. Consequently, as a result of the purchase of

protective vests in California and the New Jersey state law, the media once again was charmed by the emotional outpouring toward a police canine and continued to cover these stories. This additional media attention further enhanced the reputation of Solo, who had become a national figure.

Once media organizations realized the appeal of police canines generated by the Solo stories, they looked for similar stories in their local news markets. Two subsequent events continued the media's interest in shootings that involve police officers and police canines.

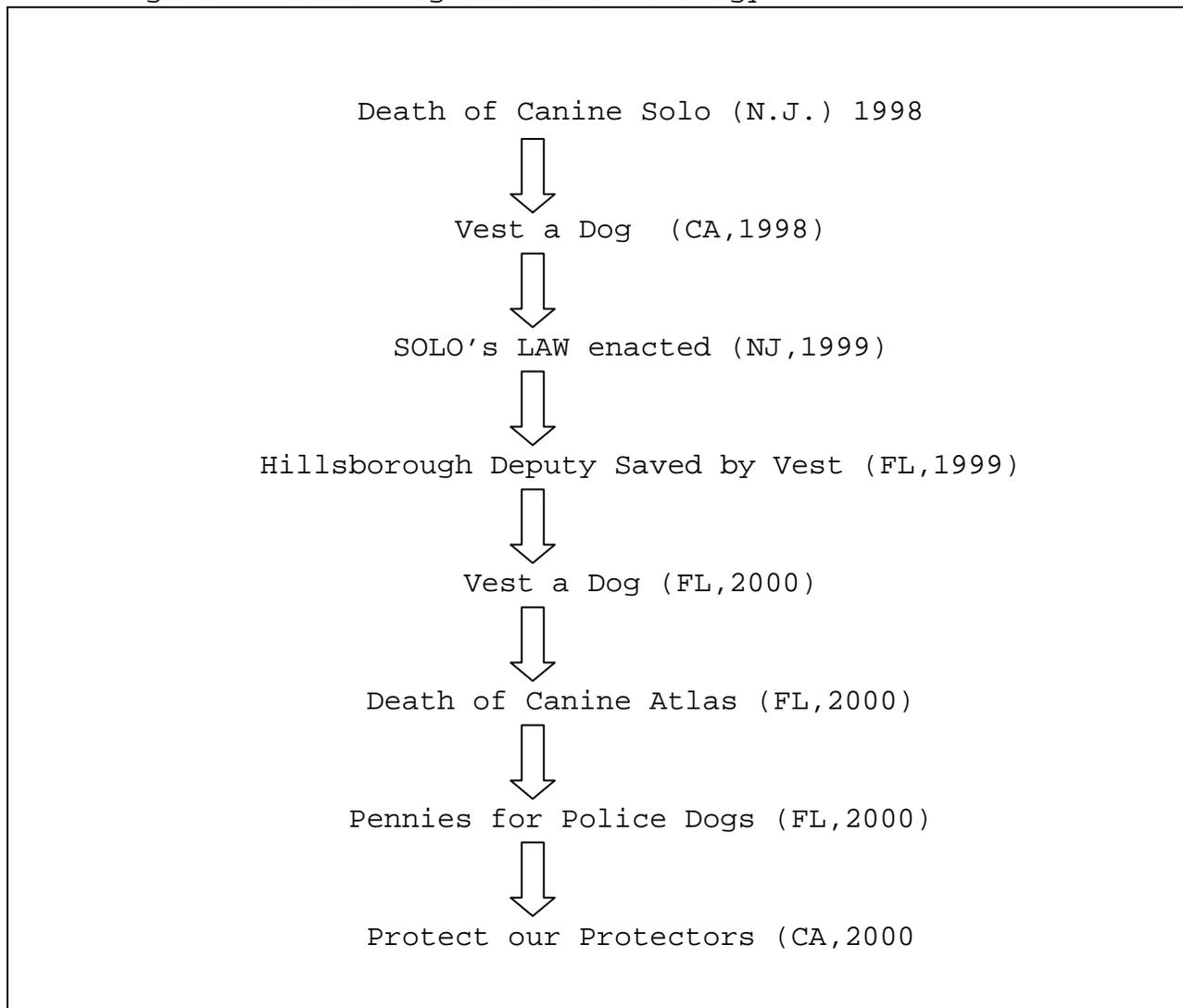
Consequently, when a Florida sheriff's deputy survived a shoot-out as a result of wearing protective body armor the news stories that followed championed the positive aspects of protective gear. Finally, the shooting death of Atlas, a police dog in Miami (FL), generated such media attention in Florida and nationally that two nonprofit organizations were chartered which would provide protective vests for police canines [Pennies for Police Dogs (FL) and Protect our Protectors (CA)]. Each of the aforementioned organizations was started by children in response to specific incidents as reported by various forms of the media.

By constructing news stories that focused on protective vests the media generated a public perception that such gear was a necessity and those responsible for the protection of others should be equally protected. The news stories reported and written about the deaths of police canines Solo and Atlas and the survival of a sheriff's deputy in Florida tapped into the emotional reservoir of a nation. These stories sparked the

inherent goodness that exists in children and fueled the creation of organizations dedicated to protecting those in law enforcement with protective vests. The reporting of such events only perpetuated the growing perception that protective vests for police officers and police canines would be the difference between life and death.

Prior to 1998 when police canine Solo was shot and killed, news stories focusing on protective vests were rare. However, following the 1998 shooting, a surge in media coverage was noted. While the injuries experienced by police canines remained stable, the reporting of such injuries by the media increased. Therefore the increase in media coverage of protective gear worn by police officers and police canines can be traced to the original stories generated by the shooting death of canine Solo. In addition to the news media coverage, Hollywood had been aiding the public's perception of police canines by producing such movies as *K-9* (1989), *Turner and Hooch* (1989), *Top Dog* (1995) and *K-911* (1999). These movies created a positive environment with which to view the police canine in the line of duty. After each of these movies was made, Hollywood and the media inadvertently were creating an emotional link for the public to grasp. Therefore, public opinion and the perceptions about police canine were likely softening over time. Consequently, these movies could have served as the primer for the subsequent news stories on canines Solo and Atlas, which helped generate the incredible interest in protective vests for police animals.

Figure 1: Vest Progression Chronology



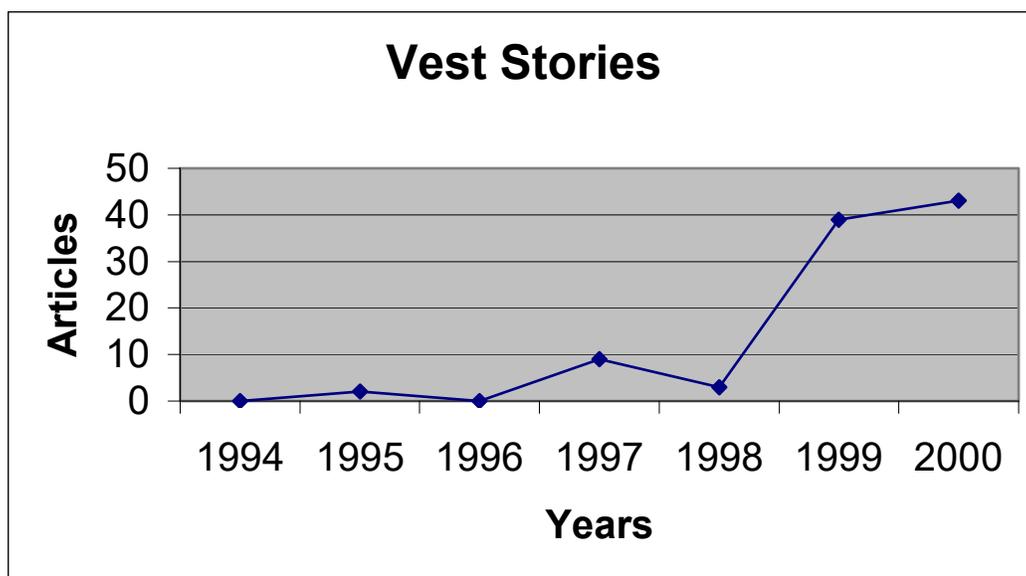
While a review of media stories indicates police canines are positively viewed and often portrayed as the "four-footed community police officer of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (Mesloh & Surette, 2001), it is necessary to note that public opinion is rarely stable and frequently shifts under the slightest of influence. The formation of public perceptions created by the media's framing of police canine issues has established protective vests in the mind of the public as the solution to all death and injury scenarios for police service animals. The organizations

founded on the premise that protective vests worn by police canines and police officers will prevent all death and injuries are faulty. While the basis for providing vests is generated from human kindness and the goodness of children there are some concerns that need to be addressed.

While no research is available documenting the extent of protection that a vest would provide a police canine, the public's perception and the continued reporting by the media champion the use of such equipment. The phenomenon of socially constructing an issue and then spinning the perception of the public has occurred when referring to the use of protective vests for police canines. However there is research that evaluates social construction and its linkage to criminal justice issues. It was from this point that Mesloh & Surette (2001) evaluated the progression of news articles reporting on police canines and the use of protective armored vests. A total of 2,022 newspaper articles were identified from a Boolean search (<http://www.newslibrary.com/> that included the words *police dog* from the years 1994 through 2000. The intention was to identify major trends and changes in the socially constructed image of police dogs and their activities over a seven-year time span. It was pointed out during the course of a content analysis of newspaper articles regarding police dogs that a substantial trend was noted in the number of stories focusing upon the purchases of ballistic vests to protect the animals (Mesloh & Surette, 2001). There were 96 articles over the seven- year period, which focused specifically on body armor for

police dogs. As shown in figure 2, articles regarding canine vests were rare prior to the high profile canine deaths. However, a sharp increase began in the beginning of 1999 and continued through the end of the study.

Figure 2.



During that time, police dogs were framed in a positive context and when linked with specific articles, constructed a perception that implied a need for public involvement. This need for public involvement has taken the form of ballistic vest purchases. While the use of such equipment has obvious effects for police officers the same cannot be stated for canines. While there are benefits for canines wearing vests there are some unstated hazards. Protective vests are typically thought of as providing defense against a gunshot wound. However, the vests are designed to provide adequate protection from a bullet impact that hits the vest at approximately a 90-degree angle. However, no research has been done to determine what protection

would be offered if this was not the case. A likely scenario involves a police canine deployed to apprehend a fleeing suspect who then fires a gun at the dog. However, when imagining this scenario the suspect would be standing and firing the gun at a downward angle in order to hit the target (the dog), which would be running toward the suspect. The problem arises because the protective vests are designed to cover the chest and back region of the dog, therefore, leaving the head area completely exposed and vulnerable to a gunshot wound. Obviously, the head presents the most likely target, as it is closest to the suspect and their weapon. It is also unclear whether or not ballistic vests offer sufficient protection against blunt trauma injury as no studies could be found demonstrating the effectiveness of the material to disperse the projectile energy on a dog's physiology. Lastly, the additional weight and bulkiness of the vest may reduce the speed and maneuverability of the canine, while offering the suspect the ability to use the vest as a gripping point during a physical confrontation.

In addition, there have been no reports in the United States that a canine ballistic vest has saved the life of a police animal. As a result of the positive social construction revolving around protective vests for canines harm may actually come to police dogs since so much faith has been placed in the ballistic vest that agencies may actually begin to place the dogs in a wider range of functions that are inherently more dangerous. Finally, the public may at some point expect that vest protected animals be deployed in tactical operations as an

additional non-lethal option. Although S.W.A.T./ K-9 interaction is commonplace in many containment scenarios, the perception of the dog as "bulletproof" by the public possibly raises future issues, particularly when deadly force is eventually used against suspects. It is inevitable that someone will ask why the 'armored dog' was not sent to subdue a barricaded and heavily armed individual. This is an example of a framing that was meant to be positive but suffers from negative externalities.

With this in mind, agencies should be cautious as they accept the donation of K-9 body armor. Although the gift symbolizes community support towards the canine unit and the police department as a whole, it may carry with it unreasonable expectations that the dog and vest are unable to fulfill. It will not protect the dog under all circumstances nor will it eliminate the need for deadly force against criminal suspects. Realistically, the vest provides the police dog with an added level of protection and some negative features that only the canine handler can truly judge in the final analysis. Clearly documented policy and procedures for deployment and an understanding of the canine's abilities and limitations may reduce future problems between the community and the law enforcement agencies.

## Biographies

Charles Mesloh is a former law enforcement officer and K-9 handler and trainer with a Master's degree in Public Administration from Florida Gulf Coast University. Currently, he is an instructor at the University of Central Florida pursuing a Ph.D. in Public Affairs. His areas of research include law enforcement training, canine utilization, forfeiture, and use of force.

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