

Consider the extreme differences in the media reporting of four separate fatal dog attacks in 2008

DECEMBER 2008

An Arizona woman was killed by one or two dogs identified by authorities to be Labrador Retrievers.

One local newspaper published an article following the discovery of her body.

A California man was attacked and killed by one or two dogs that the media identified as his grandson's pit bulls.

This incident was reported by at least 285 media outlets, both nationally (in 47 U.S. states) and internationally (in 8 other countries). MSNBC, Forbes, USA Today, Fox News, CBS News, and ABC News all picked up the story. (One dog was later reported to be a mastiff-pit bull mix)

SEPTEMBER 2008

A New Jersey infant was killed by a dog reported to be a Siberian Husky.

The incident was reported only in the local media, in approximately a dozen articles. All reports described the incident as an unfortunate accident. The infant was reported to have been simply "bitten" by the dog. The dog was described as "non aggressive." One headline read "Dog that killed infant only intended to be playful."

A Nevada infant was killed by two dogs reported to be pit bulls.

More than 200 outlets around the world reported this incident, most with the words "pit bull" in the headline. Television news reports and a recording of the 911 call are still available online. Stock photos of pit bulls baring their teeth illustrated many of the newspaper accounts. All articles reported the dogs to be "vicious," and/or "aggressive." The dogs were reported to have either "burst," "barged," "forced," or "broke" into the home from the backyard, in order to "maul" the infant. (One month later officials revealed that the dogs had gained entry into the home after one dog, "used a paw to open the living room sliding door.")

Sensationalized reporting that focuses our attention on breed leads us away from an understanding of the complex circumstances surrounding these tragic and extraordinarily rare events. It will not produce safer and more humane communities.