Fake News in the Animal World: Which Reporters Should We Believe?

We have all been inundated with enough “fake news” these days that we probably don’t even like the term. I debated about putting it in the title, but the phenomenon that I want to discuss has some similarities. In our daily lives, as we listen to local, national, and international news, we have to do some research and make decisions about which reporters and news outlets to rely on for information. It’s not an easy task!

The same is true when one is trying to learn about animals. Times have certainly changed, and it seems that things are moving in more positive directions in terms of the way we treat animals. At the same time, old myths die hard, new myths arise, and the most earnest learners must sort through vast amounts of information to determine what sources to trust. I think most people who have animals love their animals, and they want to do right by them. At the same time, there is no shortage of “experts” and “gurus” telling us how we should do it. It can be enticing to follow what they say, especially if they say it charismatically as many do. They speak with confidence and definitiveness and they seem to be experts, but are they really? We need to exercise some caution because not all of these individuals are as expert as they might have us believe. They, themselves, might believe fervently in what they are telling us, but that doesn’t
mean that it is actually accurate or the best way. Furthermore, just because someone has written a book, has a show on television, or has many “followers” does not mean that their message is as good as it sounds.

We want to do right by our family companion animals and our therapy partners. Here, 3 of the author's play therapy dogs show their feelings about being in the playroom.

There is a great deal of misleading information out there about animals and their roles in our lives, including therapy. This is certainly true about dogs and horses, the animals involved most frequently in therapy programs. This is “fake news” in the sense that it is not built on a solid foundation. It sounds very good, but it provides incorrect information. It does not reflect the latest knowledge about animals known from ethology and behavior research. I just watched an "award-winning" DVD about horses and therapy, and it was disturbing. What was said on the video made it all sound very good. What I saw on the video is another matter entirely. They talked about giving horses choices while using predatory stances and equipment to remove choice from the animal. They talked about voluntary behaviors by the horse while closing off all options for anything else. Fancy words by humans can cloud what is really going on with the animals. It is quite easy to be lulled into acceptance by the well-presented words and "explanations" about why Method A or Method B works. If we are not skeptical at all, we can become enthusiastic about Methods A and B and never look further into methods C and D. We begin to close off information that might be much better for ourselves and our animals. When we have limited time and are bombarded with information from all directions, how can we decide what and whom to trust? Which reporters should we believe?
How do we decide what to believe about building a relationship with this horse?

It matters to the horse, and it matters to us, but it's not always easy to spot the "fake news."

The good news is that there is one source of objective information about animals, and it has been with us all along -- the animals themselves! In these days when we are eager to involve animals in our lives and our work, I think one of the most important skills we need to develop is to recognize, read, and interpret animal body language as accurately as possible. That means putting aside our romantic notions about the "magic" of our relationships (even though they feel magical) and really listening to what the animal is communicating to us. I can guarantee you that you'll see and learn some things that are surprising. But I can also guarantee you that you will have a better relationship in the long run... a truly benevolent, mutually respectful relationship that is built on trust and real choice and excellent 2-way communication.

I mentioned the DVD that was unsettling for me to watch. The narrators had many good things to say. The photography was beautiful. Compelling stories were told. I remained unconvinced for two reasons: (1) what the horses were showing in their body language, and (2) the manner in which the humans were interacting with them. While I listened to the commentary, I also listened to what the horses were communicating. When one speaker said the horses were “connecting,” the horses were showing that they were switching off. When another speaker said the horses were volunteering to be with the people, I saw stress signals in the horses as the humans blocked off any possible egress. The human movements were well-practiced and part of a popular movement in terms of training and working with horses. The practitioners were skilled. And the movement is better than how horses were treated before. Even so, if we could ask the horses, I’m not sure they would be all that excited about it. The predominant body language that I saw was obedient and dutiful, but it lacked joy and interest and initiative.
The late great Sailor (companion and therapy partner of Tracie Faa-Thompson), is shown here during an Animal Assisted Play Therapy™ training workshop, showing interest in what the people are doing. He is not held in place in any way and is free to go wherever he wishes in this large grassy area. His choice to be with the people is completely voluntary. This type of behavior is not achieved through many of the methods taught by some of today's popular figures. It arises from a commitment to listen to the horse and take his opinions into account, and to use horse-friendly interactions at all times.

For me, this is not how I want the animals in my life to respond. I want enthusiasm and interest and offered behaviors. I want a give-and-take in our relationship, even if I have to change my plans sometimes. I don’t mind if my animals are a little “naughty” as they explore their own interests. I want to treat the animal with the same respect I treat my human friends. This means that while I read and listen and watch what others are doing with animals, I maintain my own capacity for critical thought and a healthy dose of skepticism. I can do that because I’ve decided on what reporters to believe. These trusted reporters do not profess to being experts, but they are. These reporters do not put on a show--they are genuine. These reporters are the animals themselves.
This "reporter," the author's Murrie, is honest and straightforward with his communications, if only people listen. That is true of all the animals in our lives.

When we want to develop a relationship with someone whose language we don’t understand, the first steps usually involve learning more of each other’s languages so we can communicate. The same is true of our animals. First we must learn the body language about the species itself. Next, we must learn the communications of our own specific animals. This is done by listening and engaging our capacity for empathy. We watch and learn. We see what things have a positive impact and which do not. We adjust.

There are many ways to teach our animals, and I prefer those that are positive in nature. When animals have behaviors that are dangerous or unwanted, we teach them what we want them to do instead. We try to be clear in our communications with them while listening to what they are telling us in their own language. Again, we adjust. Animals are adjusting to us all the time, so perhaps there is much to be gained by this dance created by our mutual adjustments.
This is a vast topic, but an important one to explore. It all begins with an acknowledgment that our animals are saying things to us all the time and taking steps to listen to it as much as we can!

So when we see the next expert telling us how we should behave with our animals, let’s stop and get our animals’ opinions about that. They will not steer us wrong. It’s important for us to keep learning, of course, and what the ethologists and behaviorists and neuroscientists are learning about animals is valuable indeed. Let’s just make sure we consult with the real experts--the animals themselves!

The author's dog, Jagen (1997-2014), lets her feelings be known. When we provide real choices with multiple options to our animals, they will let us know their preferences and desires. We just have to ask and then listen to what they have to say. They are not capable of deceit so we can believe what they tell us if we learn that language. There is no "fake news" among nonhuman animals, so they are the reporters we can trust the most!
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