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Editorial

Human–Animal Bonds, Belonging and Community through a One Health Lens

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ABSTRACT

The theme for this edition of Vantage is "One Health." I congratulate the team at Vantage for choosing a theme that is much needed, and I thank them for giving me this opportunity to reflect and engage with it. Public health is no longer limited to just the health of humans, it extends to include animals and environmental health as well. The One Health approach relies on a collaborative approach between humans, animals, plants and the ecosystem. We live in an age where we routinely encounter instances of an ecological crisis, a zoonotic pandemic or a climate disaster.

Keywords: One Health, collaborative approach

Let's take a look at examples of a fragmented approach and its consequences. A newspaper report from Kolkata noted vaccinating 30, 688 animal bite patients while only 3,087 street dogs were vaccinated and 932 male dogs were sterilised (Bandyopadhyay & Ray, 2026). Similarly, Maharashtra experienced a major avian influenza (H5N1) outbreak in May 2026. This led to the culling of approximately 4 lakh birds in poultry farms (Express News Service, 2026). These instances, though very different from one another, illustrate a common problem: the critical need for a symbiotic relationship between humans, animals, plants and the environment. One Health asks us to replace a fragmented vision with a relational one. The well-being of humans, animals, plants and the ecosystem cannot be viewed in isolation; they are a part of a whole. Mwatondo et.al (2023) advocate a three pronged approach for a sustainable and equitable One Health programme. The first is promoting and managing collaboration and cooperation amongst stakeholders; the second is to focus on local and national level activities and the third is to promote the participation of local communities. Thus, advocating a bottom-up approach.

The technical approach to One Health has primarily focussed on the spread of zoonotic diseases, seeking to curtail the spread of these diseases through lab surveillance, viral hunting and biosecurity protocols. However, the spread of a disease is not just limited to the microbe or the pathogen; it is socially impacted as well. Communities and their actions impact the welfare of the planet as a whole (Degeling et. al, 2019). Currently, the state focuses on vaccinating humans but neglects to vaccinate dogs on the same scale, thereby treating them on an entirely separate metric.

When there is a crisis due to dog bites or avian influenza, the state breaks down the social

landscape into rigid binaries: the 'safe' space for humans (their homes) and the 'unsafe' streets. This is followed by the immediate application of technical solutions- culling and vaccination. There is rarely an attempt to address the problem from the perspective of the social spaces where the human and non-human species actually encounter each other.

One Health need not always be understood through the lens of a crisis of the kind mentioned above. As Donna Haraway notes, "But disease can't be the whole biosocial story" (Haraway, 2003, p. 31). Disease and human security represent just one perspective and one dimension of the larger narrative, yet a technocratic approach has treated it as if it were the entire story. As Mwatondo et al. (2023) argue, a sustainable approach needs a bottom up framework that integrates everyday local community practices. It must be embedded in the daily praxis of human and animal interactions and the ways in which their relationships shape their shared environments and each other's lives.

Human- animal interactions are a part of our everyday interactions and affect human well-being, social relations and shared public spaces. While one of the key areas of focus of One Health is human and animal interaction, particularly the transmission of zoonotic diseases which spread from animal to humans and humans to animals, these interactions also shape our daily existence. This aligns with the World Health Organization's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 1946). Therefore, One Health must extend beyond the prevention of zoonoses, to actively promoting the health of both man and animal. For One Health to be truly effective, it is important that it becomes a part of our shared everyday lives, moving past the technocratic fixes and into the shared everyday praxis of neighbourhood spaces.. The neighbourhood park is perhaps the truest site of this praxis in an urban metropolis. The central question shifts to: *how do we live well together?*

My entry into this reality is through Snoopy, a beloved fifteen-year-old male cocker spaniel and a family member who passed away on 22 February 2026. To our family, he was a family member; to the urban neighbourhood, he was a social anchor. He facilitated play, drove social interactions, and was a regular at community celebrations. Metonymically, a pet dog's life is deeply entangled with our shared life, household and social environment.

Snoopy's aging body and cancer changed the rules of play. His human friends learned that the 'boy' who played cricket and was the best fielder could no longer run as fast. Consequently, animal welfare organically became a central part of the neighborhood children's socialization.This perfectly illustrates the bottom-up community participation that Mwatondo advocates.

Snoopy's presence as a social anchor also extended to friends of the four-legged variety, though he was famously selective. He only liked Lisa, the Indie who lived on the streets and her daughter Blackie who too lived on the streets and was occasionally taken in during winters.The multispecies networks are not merely human constructs but are also actively formed by animals themselves. Snoopy was selective not just about his dog friends but also about his human friends; he had his 'best human friends' too, thus exercising his agency. Going to the park and running was an important part of his routine and was non-negotiable, and he could not be dragged home till he had his fill of the park.

Reflecting on this relationship, Claude Levi-Strauss observed "Birds are *metaphorical human beings* and dogs, *metonymical human beings*, cattle may be thought of as *metonymical inhuman beings"* (Levi-Strauss, 1966, p. 207). For him birds live independently, forming separate societies that structurally mirror our own, which is why

we give them human names like Jack, Robin, or Polly. Dogs, however, have no independent society; they live metonymically within our homes as Snoopy did. We name them like us because they share our domestic lives.

When the Resident Welfare Association (RWA) intervened and tried to restrict play, it was an attempt to strip away Snoopy's metonymic human status. They wanted to treat dogs like cattle- as metonymynic inhuman beings. The fear of the RWA is exactly that of the dog bite cases in Kolkata mentioned in the preceding section. There is an anthropocentric fear of this very crisis getting replicated. Fear drives this technocratic over- regulation. This highlights two competing views of a pet dog: we can look at them simply as animals, or we can view them as vital members of the community.

The spatial restrictions faced by a pet dog like Snoopy get magnified manifolds in the case of stray dogs. Sociologically, they occupy an ambiguous social space and are neither fully like wild birds nor are they entirely metonymic like pet dogs. The strays living in gated communities rely for their existence on the commons. When the state, local resident bodies react with hostility, force relocations or sterilizations or restrict feeding by empathetic residents, they assert an absolute anthropocentric understanding of the commons. This reactive hostile governance demonstrates a lack of a multispecies understanding of the community. The stray dogs are viewed as a threat and hazard and are not viewed as a part of the urban ecosystem. Managing these spaces through systematic community-led initiatives like vaccinations- rather than fragmented and sporadic knee-jerk reactions- is exactly the kind of bottom-up approach that One Health framework advocates.

This conflict raises critical political and sociological questions: *Who decides the right to legitimately occupy public spaces? Who governs?* The dynamics of regulation, exclusion, inclusion and the hierarchisation of species are all at play here. When we challenge the anthropocentric understandings of the commons, the presence of dogs proves that communities are constituted by both humans and animals. Animals are deeply embedded in our everyday routines, relationships, conflicts and formal and informal surveillance. The question thus shifts from whether animals can be accommodated in the community to whether communities themselves should be understood as multispecies environments.

Snoopy provides a window into a world where the multispecies interaction is not just an abstract concept, but a materially manifested reality. The classification of man and animal is not merely a part of the 'science of the abstract' but is deeply rooted in the 'science of the concrete' (Levi-Strauss, 1966). By grounding One Health in the everyday praxis, the framework undergoes a critical transformation. Sociologically, it implies that all species have an equal right to the Earth.

When we circle back to the macro crises of dog bites in Kolkata and the culling of birds in Maharashtra, we realize that these are symptomatic of the larger anthropocentric and technocratic approach. This illustration of Snoopy's life substantiates the fact that One Health requires a transdisciplinary approach. Crucially, this framework demands that we look at animals not as passive non-human elements that need to be managed, but as active participants who exercise their agency, choices, routines and relationships. Acknowledging the agency of dogs - both in the selective bonds formed by pets like Snoopy and the survival networks navigated by community strays- forces us to rethink governance. The claims of all- humans and non-human species are legitimate. Legitimacy goes beyond a narrow anthropocentric understanding and extends to all species. There is a need to go beyond simply bringing academic fields together; it demands

integrating diverse forms of knowledge, learning from local communities, going beyond academia and engaging with practitioners and the lived experiences of all species to solve real world problems.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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