

To Name or Not to Name? That is Not the Question: An
Examination of Journalistic Standards in Media Rape Coverage

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INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the modern newspaper, journalists have constantly struggled to determine the appropriate way to treat the stories of rape victims. These attitudes have largely been influenced by their historical contexts. The very definition of rape as a crime has had a murky and confusing journey and continues to be rewritten. But in the later half of the twentieth century, journalists adopted the practice of withholding victims' names and personal information. Other than children, alleged victims of rape were the only persons who received such a courtesy. Journalists all seemed to agree that the nature of the crime warranted a special exception for these victims. This reasoning was based largely on the societal misconceptions and myths regarding rape. Journalists made, what they believed, was the most ethical decision, and concluded to keep the information of victims private. However, there has been a recent rise in criticisms of this policy. Journalists are now arguing that the practice of withholding victims' names is only serving to further promote those myths and stigma that the principle was originally intended to combat. These pundits would like to see members of the journalism community take the lead in shifting society's perception of rape. While their intentions are noble and their arguments valid, the idea that journalism can shift this paradigm of thought simply by revealing the names of victims is naïve and incomplete. Our country is still battling with the definition of rape, as recently as this fiscal year. And printing the names of victims will solve nothing if journalists do not also control their own perpetuation of rape myths in their coverage. Ultimately, journalists can, indeed, help steer society toward a more fair and balanced perception of rape as a crime; but it will take a major shift in the way they cover these crimes in general, not simply through the disclosure of names.

Very few empirical studies have been conducted surrounding this issue, but those few that have demonstrate that the informational value readers feel compared to the trauma experienced by named victims is disproportionate (Thomason, LaRoque, Thomas). Essentially, the reader does not feel that the story is better covered or that they are more informed of the event because the victim has been identified. Yet the survivor often feels more traumatized if the media has released her name because the stories are so rarely accompanied by adequate social framing. Journalists cling to their fundamental principal of objectivity in such a way that they become blind to their responsibilities to help educate their audience and direct public opinion in a socially positive manner. Until journalists are able to relinquish, at least partially, their uncompromising devotion to objectivity and factuality without supplementary support and contextual framing, they will not be able to accomplish serious change in regards to rape stigmatization. Naming a victim without thoroughly examining the gender, racial, and social context in which the crime occurs will only serve to worsen the cycle. A change must first occur in the journalistic process.

HISTORY OF RAPE AND NEWS COVERAGE

Rape is not exclusively a crime committed against women. Anyone can unfortunately be a victim of sexual assault. However, rape is committed an overwhelming majority of the time by a man against a woman. For this reason, the majority of this paper will refer to victims, or survivors (which is a term that is used to reinforce the strength of these individuals,) in a gendered context. Which makes sense because, at its core, rape is a gendered crime. The roots of gender violence are deep and “male violence against women is so widespread that biological

determinism has often dominated debates about its origin” (O’Toole 3). The evolution of rape’s history from this original explanation, that essentially justified it as a biological consequence, to our modern understanding of it as a crime has been a complicated one. Rape is such a complex issue because it occurs within the social constructs of a patriarchal society. Under such constructs, force was used to maintain privilege, and men used violence to keep women subjugated (O’Toole 6). Obviously through time and social movements, such behavior has become illegal, but it took our nation over two centuries to reach that point. All of those social and gender norms that are intrinsically tied to rape, like ideals of masculinity, concepts of property, and familial relations have not completely disappeared in the second half of the twentieth century since they have been challenged. So it is under these not quite deconstructed norms and stereotypes that our current coverage of rape crimes exists.

Rape victims have not always been under the protective guard of journalistic integrity. That is due largely to the fact that rape, as a crime, has faced many redefinitions over the last century. The fact that rape was not always considered an unlawful act makes the concept of rape victims a recent one. Opinion on rape has evolved over time, in congruence with shifting societal ideals on race and gender. In the first half of the 20th century, “the near absolute omission of concern for survivors reflected the common prejudice that the woman who was raped invited the assault in some way” (Simpson & Cote 211). Either through appearance or action, women somehow elicited the violent crimes that were committed against them and so; consequently, their stories of survival were not important. They were not victims of crime; merely recipients of behavior they themselves provoked.

By the second half of the 20th century, however, social movements were restructuring the way society viewed rape. The 1960s were an explosive decade for civil rights. It was also a time

when women, motivated by gender politics, began “to organize and sustain a successful ‘anti-rape’ movement” (Byerly 60). By 1972, the first rape-crisis center was established in our nation’s capital (Byerly 61). The national agenda was beginning to acknowledge the traumatic effects of rape and the need to support survivors. It took “the rise of the women’s movement in the early 1970s to bring society to an awareness of rape as a crime that mattered not as a violation of male property or of white dominance, but as a violent act that cause human beings harm” (Benedict). It was no longer an issue of property, as women had long been viewed in such cases. It was a terrible crime that left unpredictable physical and emotional scars in its wake. The feminist movement’s effective “redefinition of rape [brought an] about-face...in social institutions’ treatment of rape victims” (Byerly 59). One of these institutions was journalism. After this movement, which heavily framed rape as a horrific crime against women, journalists adopted the practice of withholding victims’ names and personal information when reporting on cases. They opted to leave out this information as a way to further protect the victims who were left coping with the aftereffects of the crime.

Rape, with its highly intrusive nature and sexual exploitation of its victims, is a particularly unique crime compared to other forms of violent assault. Consequently, the reality of life after rape, for a survivor, is filled with traumatic after shocks that can be felt for an indiscernible time following the incident. One of the defining elements of rape “is the choice of one human being to destroy another’s autonomy over her body, initiating an interminable, painful struggle to regain control of her life” (Cote 205). The violation of one’s body in such an intimate manner leaves rape victims with a deep sense of loss on a very psychological level. The trauma of a rape victim is different from that of any other crime because she loses “the sense of control so necessary to survival and will regain it only after many setbacks, false gains, and

unbelievable emotional pain” (Simpson & Cote 216). She already has to cope with the personal embarrassment and shame attached to such a violation of her body. That is a difficult enough journey to go through with oneself. The link between shame “and traumatic symptoms can persist for years and has been established for children as well as adults and for both sexual and physical abuse victims” (Jones 348). To have to do it in front of one’s entire community could have potentially devastating effects on a victim’s recovery. So any action taken by the media to perpetuate this shame will, in turn, serve to perpetuate the trauma a victim suffers. But it was not just the trauma of the victim that inspired the media to adopt a no-naming policy. Journalists also recognized the harsh societal stigmas and stereotypes that are associated with rape survivors.

The justification for leaving the names of victims out of rape stories was based on some important truths journalists recognized about rape. Firstly, rape differed “from any other crime [in that] society often blames the victims” (McBride). It is an unfortunate attitude that has saturated the public’s conscience. People want to believe the best in others, so when something as ghastly as rape is committed, they search for a way to make sense of it, which often results in assuaging blame to the victim. Thus, journalists choose not to print the name in order to prevent survivors from being subjected to such re-victimization. Secondly, rape is already the most underreported crime in the country and “rape victims [would be] even less likely to report the crime if they know their names will appear in the newspaper” (McBride). Victims know that, due to the social stigma attached to rape, they will be subjected to incredible scrutiny by a public that is suppose to serve them justice. In a criminal trial, a rape victim is not “represented by an attorney, may find that things she said to investigators will be used to discredit her testimony, and she will not benefit from the same presumption of innocence given to the defendant” (Simpson & Cote 217). So not reporting the crime seems like the less obtrusive, less exhausting,

and easiest choice. It is an unfortunate but proven trend that society treats rape victims with a level of insensitivity that no other victims of crime are subjected to, so journalists believe “they deserve a level of privacy not afforded other crime victims” (McBride). The media has come to a general agreement that, in order to protect them in a time of critical recovery, the names of victims will not be printed. This decision is supported by the work of crisis centers, which have looked into the potentially devastating effects of naming a victim.

The individuals who work at rape crisis centers around the country have a deep understanding of the crime and its lasting scars. They witness the destruction rape reeks on its victims and are therefore well versed in the difficulties faced by survivors in their road to recovery. Although there are not many studies that have focused specifically on the effect of public identification of victims, many workers at rape crisis centers have been interviewed and most unanimously agree with the previously mentioned assertion that rape victims will be even less likely to report the crime if they think their name will be published (DeSilvia 43). Rape is already a difficult enough crime to get victims to report. A 1992 report by the National Victim Center and the Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center found “that 86% of American women said rape victims would be less likely to report rape to police if they believed that their names would be released to the news media” (DeSilvia 43). These are the women themselves, potential victims, informing the media and the public at large that, if their names are released under the current system of reporting, they will not even seek the justice that they deserve. Unfortunately, “until society’s view of women and rape changes, victims will continue to be harassed or shunned, and, as a consequence, probably will be reluctant to report the crime” (Johnson 66). Thus, the conscious decision has been made to omit the names of victims in stories concerning rape. There is general agreement among most journalism professionals that survivors

should not be identified on ethical grounds. As is the case with most ethical dilemmas, this practice has received criticism as of late for allegedly perpetuating rape myths and violating basic responsibilities of the journalism community.

CRITICISM OF THE CURRENT POLICY

Journalists pride themselves on delivering the news to the public in a fair and accurate manner, without bias and free of favoritism. It is striking, then, that for so long almost every newsroom participated in the blatant and purposeful exclusion of a vital piece of information in rape cases. The public could construe withholding the victims' names as a form of bias or tilted commentary on the journalist's part. The omission of this information is against the very foundations of objective journalism. In fact, it could be quite dangerous to the integrity of the press as a whole. It is a slippery slope when journalists begin "selecting certain categories of information and seeking to do social work by acting against [basic] principles" (Overholser). If the public allows reporters to pick and choose which information they will write about, then no one will receive a fair and balanced perspective on the issue. Some editors expressed their discomfort with the policy arguing that by suppressing information they "are deciding what is good for society, for the public, for an individual" (DeSilvia 43). In a survey given to newspaper editors, "42.8 percent said it was unfair to publish the name of the accused and not the accuser" (Thomason 43). By omitting the name of the victim, editors worry that they are publishing stories that demonstrate bias or favoritism. Some editors believe that "naming the accuser provides a level of balance and presumption of innocence" for the accused who, in accordance with his constitutional right is innocent until proven guilty. Allowing an exception to the general

rule is indeed dangerous and there is a valid concern about the negative impact such a practice could have on the integrity of journalism as a profession and as a democratic necessity. The press has a responsibility to communicate when injustice is inflicted and is often able to create change through its relentless reporting.

The omission of victims' names not only threatens the fundamental principles upon which journalism exists; some argue that it also serves to perpetuate the societal misconception and scrutiny that it intends to alleviate. The purpose of withholding a victim's identity is to protect the individual from the stigma attached to rape. But the secrecy can potentially reinforce ignorance. Journalists may actually be doing victims a disservice by maintaining their anonymity by "inflaming still further the cruel search for dirt about [them]" (Overholser). Hiding the victim's name suggests that the victim herself has something to hide. It only piques the public's curiosity and encourages scrutiny of the victim's personal life. Some journalists worry that "suppression of the name – treating rape as so horrible that we can't name the victim – makes us party to creating the stigma" (DeSilva 43). And in this new digital era, personal information has never been more easily accessible. This precedence to withhold the names was created "before the Internet, before the 24-hour news channels, before what we call 'convergence'" (McBride). When the practice was originally established, with the intention of protecting victims, journalists were the only ones with access to this information in the first place. But now, with information instantly available and easy to share, whether a journalist withholds this information or not has little effect on the publicity of a victim's information. The secrecy seems unnecessary now that "newspapers are not – as they once were – the gatekeepers of such information" (Overholser). So journalists should not feel ethically obligated to keep identities secret anymore. They need not play the role of protector. Instead, they should embrace a more transparent approach to their

coverage of rape. This shift in coverage may help to improve societal perception. The law is limited in its ability to “effectuate practical change or to transcend, let alone improve, social attitudes”(Orenstein). But journalists, in their distinct roles as communicators, have the opportunity to do just that. By naming the victims, the media humanizes them, potentially making their plight more visible to the public.

AN EXAMINATION OF INSTANCES OF IDENTIFICATION

These criticisms seem to have influenced editors and have led to a recent shift of some newspapers to begin naming victims in their coverage of sexual assault crimes. The practice of *The Winston-Salem Journal* to print the names of victims, Geneva Overholser’s series in *The Des Moines Register*, and the decision by NBC and *The New York Times* to release the name of the plaintiff in the William Kennedy Smith rape case are all demonstrative of this shift in coverage which seem to “indicate that newspapers might abandon the long-standing practice of not identifying sex crime victims” (Thomas 42). *The Winston-Salem Journal* has always subscribed to the practice of naming both accused and accuser in their coverage of sexual assault, making them an exception to the rule. In the 1990s, two other highly publicized stories approached the issue in a similar fashion. Overholser’s paper, *The Des Moines Register*, printed an award-winning set of stories chronicling, with her consent, one victim’s story of rape and recovery. At around the same time, in 1991, the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith, a member of the famous Kennedy family, garnered national attention and in an abnormal move, NBC and *The New York Times*, two prestigious news organizations, identified Smith’s accuser. An examination of these

cases identifies valid points made by editors defending their choice to identify victims, but also reveals problems with the current way media outlets approach rape coverage.

Winston-Salem Journal

Although the general precedent to withhold the names of victims in sexual assault cases developed during the 1970s, one publication in North Carolina did not follow suit. In Winston-Salem, “the *Journal* has regularly named rape victims in its news columns since at least 1971” (Haws & Ramsey 98). So while the rest of the industry was making a conscious effort to, in their eyes, be more sensitive to the needs of survivors, the *Journal* was making a simultaneously conscious effort to remain steadfast in their practice of printing both names. To put it simply, “when an arrest is made in a rape case in the *Journal’s* circulation area in north-central North Carolina, both the victim if an adult, and the assailant are identified in the news story” (Haws & Ramsey 99). The editors of the *Journal* defend their policy as an indication of their duty to present a fair and balanced story to their public. In the spirit of objectivity, “the *Journal* argues that there are always two sides to rape stories” and that it is their responsibility, as members of the press, to adequately represent both sides (Haws 12). But journalistic integrity is not their only motivator for abiding by this policy. The editors wanted to make it clear that they “are not untouched by the emotional pain suffered by victims, but [they] feel strongly that [they] are making a statement in this community that rape should no longer carry a stigma for the victim and be a source for shame and embarrassment” (Haws 12). This is a legitimate goal of social change that the press hopes to inspire in the public. And journalism is a powerful medium through which such paradigm shifts can be accomplished. But, in an instance when they are

attempting to champion the rights of the victim, it appears the voices of those victims have been ignored.

In the interest of discovering the influence this policy had on the lives of those victims named, and possibly drawing broader conclusions for the survivor population in general, Haws and Ramsey conducted research on the particular case of the *Journal*. For their study, they examined the years of microfilm from 1991-1994 and of the 184 women mentioned in sexual assault stories, they were able to find the addresses of 88, only 41 of which ended up being deliverable, and of those 41 they received a total of 18 responses (Haws & Ramsey 100). The survey essentially asked the women about how they felt after the stories identifying them were published. With only a couple exceptions, “the victims were angry about being identified in the news story” (Haws & Ramsey 101). Although the *Journal* staff argued that, by naming the victims, they hoped to lessen the burden and stigma attached to the crime, their actions accomplished the exact opposite. After a rape, many victims feel “embarrassment, shame, and blame...identification only increased that feeling among the North Carolina women” (Haws & Ramsey 101). And in a town where anonymity is not an option for victims, the *Journal's* policy has proven to actually discourage some women from reporting the crimes. One woman admitted that she “was hesitant to file charges against the person who had raped [her] twice, repeatedly-threatened to kill [her]...all because [she] knew that [her] name would appear in the *Winston-Salem Journal*” (Haws & Ramsey 98). The responses of these victims seem to demonstrate that the *Journal's* policy only served to perpetuate the victim's suffering while discouraging future reports of sexual assault. The research conducted on this particular case validates the concerns that influence most editors' choice to withhold the names of survivors.

The Des Moines Register

The *Des Moines Register* adopted a similar policy in the case of one survivor who was adamant to have her story told. Geneva Overholser has been a great advocate of extending journalistic transparency to cases of rape. While serving as editor of *The Des Moines Register*, Overholser approved a series of articles, published in 1990, that publicly documented Nancy Ziegenmeyer's experience as a rape victim (McBride). Ziegenmeyer approached the newspaper to do the story. She wanted others to know and understand what she had been through, in the hopes that it might encourage other victims to come forward. The series was well received by both the public and the journalism community, garnering a Pulitzer Prize. In this instance, identifying the victim seems to have had a positive effect. These articles, however, were published under unique circumstances. Ziegenmeyer not only gave her consent to have her name released, she was the one who initially approached the paper to have her story told. She represents a potentially limited population of victims who feel comfortable identifying themselves. But the popularity of her story demonstrates that "this country is coming to honor those survivors of rape who choose to speak publicly; their examples offer support for others" (Simpson & Cote 217). After this groundbreaking publication, it seemed that journalists might be growing more comfortable with treating rape victims "as we would any other adult victim of crime...name her, and deal with her respectfully" (Overholser). Ethically speaking, it seems unnecessarily deceptive and potentially harmful for journalists to withhold such information, especially when releasing it has the capability to instigate such important social change. Unfortunately, altering deeply engrained societal ignorance with regard to rape is not so easily accomplished.

Ziegenmeyer's story put a face on the devastation caused by sexual assault and her courageous story helped bring the plight of victims once more to the national forefront. And though the coverage was accurate and balanced, reflecting sound reporting by those involved in its construction, it still served to perpetuate certain rape myths. A black male, a stranger who attacked her out of nowhere, raped Ziegenmeyer. And while she obviously had no control over the racial makeup or relationship to her attacker, the fact that this story garnered so much attention reinforced the idea that strangers, usually of another ethnicity than their victims, committed rape. But individuals with whom the victims are familiar overwhelmingly commit the majority of rapes. The fact that "the amount of rape by acquaintances or relatives is greatly under-represented by the media" presents the public with a false generalization of circumstances surrounding these crimes. Of course this does not take away from the trauma suffered by Ziegenmeyer or her bravery. But the lack of framing involved, the omission that an acquaintance or friend commits most sexual assault, demonstrates that, even though "reporters may construct accurate and otherwise journalistically sound articles [they] still miss the point of an event, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and public misunderstanding" (Byerly 62). Objectivity in reporting, the inclusion of victims names, all of it is not enough if it is not also accompanied by appropriate research and discussion of the broader implications of this crime.

William Kennedy Smith

In 1991, one of the most famous American families found themselves in the middle of a widely publicized rape trial for charges brought against one of its members. William Kennedy Smith, the nephew of former President John F. Kennedy and former Senators Robert and Ted

Kennedy, was accused of raping a young woman in Florida. Because the case involved such a notorious public figure, it received extraordinary media attention. And NBC, breaking from tradition, disclosed the name of Smith's accuser. *The New York Times* also quickly followed suit. *The Times* had originally subscribed to the tradition of omitting a victim's name, acknowledging that "the practice of withholding names became unanimous in the 1970s when women argued that it would make rape victims more likely to come forward" (Thomas 43). But in the case of a Kennedy, this rule suddenly seemed to make less sense and the paper offered up the name of Patricia Bowman, the young woman who had filed the charges. *The Times*, along with the news producers at NBC, argued that "some editors now believe[d] that failing to identify rape victims perpetuates the idea that rape is a crime that permanently damages a woman's reputation" (Thomas 43). Despite the fact that studies have demonstrated that women feel even more traumatized and the trauma is likely to last longer if they receive negative attention regarding the crime (Jones 349). During the Bowman case, a survey asked editors for their opinions on the stigma issue regarding publication of a victim's name and "slightly more than 34 percent said rape victims would ultimately be better served if newspapers printed their names and that doing so would help to remove the stigma of rape" (Thomas 43). While the editors' desires to create positive social change is admirable, they are only experts in their field of journalism. With no background in psychology and no training in emotional distress cause by this crime, they hardly seem qualified to make such a generalization. And their omission of any expert feminist opinions or trained rape trauma counselors is demonstrative of the imperfections that still need to be corrected in modern media rape coverage.

NAMING IS NOT ENOUGH

Journalism prides itself on its objectivity. Reporters are required to accurately and fairly communicate the facts and remain personally detached from the story. With this emphasis on objectivity, it is no wonder that some individuals in the field would take issue with the practice of not publicly releasing victims' information. However, it is this same objectivity and cold detachment that makes withholding names necessary. Journalists are driven to give the "details of a crime without discussing these details within the context of the greater social issues related to that crime" (Franiuk). By refusing to interpret the facts, journalists can inadvertently perpetuate the myths and stereotypes that surround rape. The Zeigenmeyer story reflects these shortcomings through its omission of relevant rape statistics. The work on the Smith rape case, even by a prestigious publication like the *New York Times*, still served to promote harmful stereotypes. In its coverage, "the *Times* not only named the woman but profiled her in ways that horrified many readers...the story mentioned her traffic violations, her mediocre school record, the illegitimacy of her child, her divorce, and other personal matters" (Simpson & Cote 214). None of this information is relevant in a rape case, but is often used to demonstrate the character of the victim, putting her reputation on trial and making her private life available for public scrutiny. In no other crime is a victim subject to such invasion. Rape myths imply that the crime is only committed against "women who are not being careful enough, 'who are asking for it,' and who entice men through their appearance or behavior" (Heath 48). When reporters create profiles that look for characteristics in a victim that might support these claims, they are doing the public a disservice.

A similar situation occurred in the case of 26-year-old Kimberly Ernest who was brutally raped and murdered in 1995. One *Philadelphia Inquirer* Columnist, Claude Lewis, wrote that “Ernest’s character had been ‘assassinated’ and that the local media had sunk to the level of grocery store tabloids” (Vixen). Yet, those editors and reporters who directed the coverage contended that “they were just reporting the facts and did so with as much sensitivity as possible given such an unsavory case” (Vixen). This commitment to factuality, without consideration for how those facts should be framed in the larger social context in which they occur, is one of the most glaring problems with modern media coverage of sexual assault.

Even now, in 2011, this blind commitment to objectivity has recently resulted in another *New York Times* article that seemingly blames an 11 year-old girl for the gang rape of which she was a victim. The incident took place in a small Texas town and when the reporter asked one of the residents how she felt about the ordeal, she admitted that it “had destroyed [the] community”(McKinley). The reporter goes on to quote the woman as she explained how she was upset that “these boys have to live with this the rest of their lives”(McKinley). Now he obviously cannot be criticized for simply reporting, verbatim, what one resident said about the incident. However, his presentation of the quote is far from fair and balanced. By simply leaving it at that, without presenting a sound bite from a resident who feels for the plight of the victim, the reporter is essentially presenting the group of alleged perpetrators, 18 boys so far, to be the true victims in this case. It seems irresponsible to push for releasing victims’ names when reporters do not yet seem capable of presenting a fair and balanced portrait of the story. The author’s own rhetoric in this article even demonstrates the tendency to blame the victim. He muses, “if the allegations are proved, how could [these] young men have been drawn into such an act?”(McKinley). “Drawn into the act,” as though these men, some of whom are 21 years of age, were lured, seduced even,

into a sexual encounter with an 11 year-old girl. This is not to suggest “malicious intent by [the] author [but] more a reflection of that author’s internalization of our culture’s beliefs about sexual assault”(Franiuk). Journalists are humans too and as such they are equally as susceptible to the ignorant societal perceptions that permeate within our culture. Thus, it is unfair to expect them to be the champion instigators of such a drastic shift in attitudes. Especially when the very conception of rape as a crime is still debated in this nation’s highest government branches.

It is difficult to ask journalists to release rape victims’ information when determining whether or not they are victims in the eyes of the law is such a complicated and arduous process. Overholser smartly argued that treating rape victims differently from victims of other crimes was dangerous for its promotion of secrecy and preferential treatment, the very nemesis of an objective press. But how can journalists be expected to treat rape victims the same as victims of murder when the law does not? If an individual is robbed, it means something was stolen from them. There are few gray areas. The definition of rape, however, has received dozens of makeovers over the last century alone. And as recently as March 2011, “House Republicans proposed banning federal funds that cover abortion in cases of rape if the attack was not ‘forcible’” (Baumann). They essentially asserted that only instances when force was clearly used would be considered rape. Thus, rape under coercion, emotional manipulation, or when drugs were involved might not stand up in court. It is discouraging when lawmakers and justices are unable to clearly define rape and then uphold that definition in the courts. The public observes this inability and “the public perception and discussion of the trial process deeply impacts future cases and the cultural atmosphere surrounding rape accusations” (Franiuk). If our democratic officials cannot come to a clear consensus, it is unfair to expect journalists to take on the responsibility. They are, after all, a product of the culture.

The news media are powerful communicators that are capable of significantly influencing the attitudes and opinions of the public they serve. Mass media saturate our culture today and “are an important social institution that shapes our perceptions of the world...by repeating certain themes while marginalizing others” (Worthington 7). Thus, if the media’s coverage of sexual assault incidents reflects negative stereotypes, the audience will adopt these views as well without acknowledging the gendered implications of the attack. Even if journalists take certain care to make sure their stories do not perpetuate negative assumptions associated with rape victims, their work is still incomplete. Studies have found “that reports on rape include relatively few details about the crimes, often leaving out information, such as the location, use of force or victim’s attempt to resist” (Johnson 67). If journalists claim commitment to factuality, as their rationale for naming victims, then that commitment should be reflected in all details of the story they produce, not just identity. The goal of any news story is to present an accurate account of events to the public, but it’s possible that the public does not feel they need to be informed of a rape victim’s identity in order to have a meaningful understanding of the story.

Editor’s who have begun to name victims in coverage of sexual assaults have done so on the grounds that it is their journalistic duty to provide a balanced, unbiased story as well as with the assertion that identification will free rape victims from societal stigmatization. Considering this is such an ethically gray area, one might think that considerable research would have been conducted to either support or refute these claims. But, “compared to other areas of communications research, little empirical research exists on the effects of rape-victim identification on news media, victims, or the public” (Johnson 66). Michelle Johnson, as described in her article, “How identifying rape victims affects readers’ perceptions,” seeks to discover if these justifications for identification are indeed valid. Her study focused on three

variables: “how victim identification affects the story’s educational value, the amount of sympathy readers expressed for victims, and the assignment of responsibility for the crime” (Johnson 67). The results demonstrate that journalists’ assumptions may not be as accurate as they thought. In general, a majority of the respondents, “seemed reluctant to have the news media name people in their stories about rape...86 percent said news organizations should not name rape victims” (Johnson 71). In the cases when a rape victim was identified, most of the respondents did not necessarily believe that knowing her name made a contribution to their understanding of the story. In fact, “the way writers link facts together influences readers’ perceptions” the most (Johnson 71). So the ways journalists construct the story have more influence on readers’ attitudes, and thus their potential adoption of stereotypes, than simply identifying a victim. And even though vocal supporters of the naming policy claim that identification will help solve the problem of stigmatization, Thomason’s survey results of editors indicated that most “do not see any long-term benefit from printing names of rape victims” (Thomason 48). All of this information indicates that “details of the crime and the way the crime is reported probably have a much more powerful impact on readers’ perceptions than the use of the victim’s name” (Johnson 77). Naming the victim will not lead to any significant social change amongst readers unless it is accompanied by an enlightened account of the events surrounding the alleged attack.

The way it currently stands, media coverage of rape trials unfortunately serves to promote rape myths. Rape trials, in themselves, tend to perpetuate unfair “standards of what counts as rape” and since journalists are called to cover these trials, they accurately report these misconceptions, and do little to correct them (Franiuk). Society often blames all of its problems on fictional television programs or films; citing that individuals develop opinions on subjects

based on their portrayal in these media. But “these same viewers may look at television and print news as unbiased presentations of fact” so the perspectives presented in those media have an even greater impact (Franiuk). As long as rape remains unclearly defined, and defense lawyers try to attack the character of the accuser, and the journalists assigned to these trials report with blind objectivity, the misconceptions, myths, and stigma attached to rape victims will continue.

RAPE COVERAGE AS SOCIAL ACTOR

It is possible, however, for journalists to cover sexual assault in a manner that does promote positive change in societal attitude. It just requires some reexamination on what constitutes good journalism, specifically in the unique case of rape. As previously discussed, rape is a crime that carries a lot of gendered implications. Rape is now viewed “not as a single act with its own end, but rather a systematic practice through which men control women” (Byerly 61). Rapes, for the most part, are committed by men against women, Yet, the significance of gender is never actually discussed in coverage of these crimes. It is common practice for journalists, when constructing a story, to call upon expert sources that might provide supplementary information. However, such sources are notably absent in sexual assault coverage and it is not for lack of availability. The voice of a sexual-assault expert “is critical to supplement the reporter’s own knowledge of rape and to provide credible analysis and attribution” (Byerly 62). Rape is a complicated crime, even as defined by the law. It has had a particularly tumultuous history in our society. Consequently no one expects journalists to be adequate experts on the subject. But, at the moment, “the mainstream press is so unwilling to consult feminist sources that it has effectively crippled its chance of covering sex crimes properly” (Byerly 60). This

unwillingness to seek feminist opinions is indicative of a greater societal discomfort with women's issues and a lack of education about the important contextual framing in which these events take place. If certain steps are taken, it is possible for journalists to dismantle the harmful stereotypes that they have spoken up against. It just takes more than simply identifying the victims.

If journalists are truly committed to helping tear down the harmful burden of stigma that rape victims must suffer through, then they must examine their professional institutions and enact real change. In terms of education, very little has been done to improve programs at institutions. For the most part, "journalism textbooks typically address the problem of whether and when to name rape victims, but otherwise provide no comprehensive discussion of rape or its reporting" (Byerly 62). The ethical issue of victim identification is obviously a priority for journalists. But there is a lack of inflection and self-criticism of sexual assault coverage, which is comprised much more of who, what, where, when. Michigan State University tried to remedy this with their introduction of a training program designed to teach journalist students how to interview victims of violent crime (Byerly 65). Dramatized interview situations, while helpful demonstrations for appropriate conduct, still lack a broader vision of the deep implications that are intrinsically tied into any story on this issue. Sexual assault and rape do not happen in a vacuum. They are the result of societal constructs, deeply rooted in U.S. history, that carry gendered stereotypes, which we continually permeate throughout our culture. As uncomfortable as some journalists might be with any action that could be construed as indicative of bias, it is necessary to adopt some basis of framing through which they can responsibly portray the realities of this crime. Both veteran and novice reporters "should always be reminded of their primary professional responsibility to inform and interpret for their audiences such complex,

deeply significant problems as rape and sexual assault” (Byerly 68). Journalists are often so caught up in their ideals of objectivity, that they lose sight of their obligation to break down complex issues for their readers. They can fulfill this responsibility without compromising their journalistic integrity, but they must be comfortable with a reexamination of how they usually function on such stories.

It is possible for a reporter to provide a factually accurate story while providing an educated and responsible perspective on the greater stakes at play. A case study by Nancy Worthington examined the “framing analysis of nine investigative news stories with interview data from the central journalist, a female news producer” (Worthington). The producer was able to compile an informative and progressive series of reports that uncovered the blatant violation of university conduct codes by officials who refused to pursue accusations of sexual assault by the female campus population. The producer’s investigative series went beyond the virgin-vamp dichotomy that is usually characteristic of such stories; when a woman’s character is called into question and she is profiled as either virgin, an innocent victim, or vamp, a provoker of her attack. These reports, however, “suggested that unpunished sexual assault against female students was, to some extent, institutionalized at the college” (Worthington 7). This was an important point for the producer to make as it put the incidents into a greater social context. Trusted officials at this university were allowing these atrocities to be committed. As far as society has come in its anti-rape movement, clearly antiquated attitudes about sexual assault are still popular, even at respected institutions of higher learning. But the reports did not just state that accusations had been made and dismissals had been issued. This producer dug deeper to discover the pattern and did not hide the gendered implications in which it was soaked. She used

this information, and the stories of the victims, to demonstrate to her audience that sexual assault is still an important issue.

In order to construct her report, the producer needed to interview the victims. Although their names were easily accessible, their identities were insignificant unless they were accompanied by their stories and how administrators ignored these stories. So the “assault survivors were given voice to describe their experiences, which helped to convey the brutality of the acquaintance rapes” (Worthington 7). The distinction between giving a victim the opportunity to voice her story instead of simply naming her is an important one. When a woman is raped, she has been stripped of choice, a fundamental attribute of free will, of our humanity. If a survivor wants to delve into the intimate details of her experience, it seems right that she should be restored some semblance of choice in the matter. And while this producer pursued her leads and pushed to have some of the women share their experiences, she also demonstrated good judgment and ethical reasoning when, in one case, she considered a woman “‘very-fragile’ and didn’t think she adequately understood the implications of an on-camera interview” (Worthington 12). Journalists must make ethical considerations when interacting with their sources. This particular producer’s decision not to interview one of the victims, even though she had volunteered to tell her story, is demonstrative of the agency a reporter can have in protecting assault victims while simultaneously producing a fair and accurate story.

An examination of this producer’s series illuminates the potential for social good that reports on sexual assaults can accomplish. After this news came to light, numerous university officials were forced to resign and sexual assault awareness and prevention on college campuses was thrust back onto the national agenda. None of this would have been possible, however, if the producer had resigned herself to simply reporting the facts. She framed the story in its greater

societal context and “experienced considerable agency that allowed her to construct gender-sensitive representations that overlapped with criteria for journalistic excellence” (Worthington 8). The two do not have to be mutually exclusive. It is not only possible to accomplish both simultaneously; it should be a journalistic expectation of sexual assault coverage.

There are obviously challenges to this careful coverage in today’s journalistic climate. Newspapers and television news programs are each feeling the pressure from their corporate owners due to lower profit returns. Journalism has morphed into a recycled package of information from AP or Reuters and photos from nameless contributors. This case study, though, suggests that “even under the constraints of profit-oriented news conglomerates, individual journalists may find opportunities to exercise agency in ways that can produce progressive news representations” (Worthington 12). One of journalists main arguments for their sometimes inclusion of rape survivor’s names is to help deconstruct the stigma associated with victims. But if they really want to accomplish this worthwhile cause, they need to take matters into their own hands and create a revolution first, in the way rapes are covered in general. Although investigative journalism programs have taken a huge hit in recent years, the “format with the additional time allowed both in front of and behind the camera creates opportunities for journalistic agency that mesh well with the goals of feminist priorities for news about sexual assault” (Worthington 13). The investigative structure is already an institution in journalism thanks to the infamous efforts of Woodward and Bernstein. And as a widely respected technique to find and then report on a story, it seems plausible that it could be utilized to accomplish some social good for women’s issues just as it has for countless others. Feminism is often a term that can polarize individuals for the connotations it carries and its implication of gendered disparity. But the way sexual violence has previously and is still currently “reported inscribes myths about

rape, women, and male power that contribute to the stigmatizing of victims while helping to lessen the legal and social penalties for perpetrators” (Simpson and Cote 211). As it currently stands, sexual assault coverage only serves to further damage the reputation of women involved without drawing attention to the greater societal stigma and stereotypes that affect the nature of the crime.

CONCLUSION

Journalists need to grow comfortable with the reality that sexual assault is a crime that cannot be separated from its gendered nature and the patriarchal institutions under which it’s definition has evolved over this nation’s history. Until they do, and they are able to report on the subject with informed insight, not just bland factuality, they should withhold on identifying survivors on the grounds of journalistic integrity. Unfortunately, “no amount of clarity or accuracy in the news reporting will end the trauma of someone who has been raped, but care in reporting may avoid the infliction of fresh wounds through stories that ignore or misrepresent behavior” (Simpson & Cote 208). So, ethically, it still seems right to omit names until they can be accompanied by consistently responsible reporting.

In today’s society, it still falls under a journalist’s ethical duty to withhold the private information of victims in cases of rape and sexual assault. Arguments can be made that this practice is deceptive and potentially dangerous to certain fundamental principles of journalism. But, until journalists accept that their dedication to clinical objectivity does not always result in fair and accurate coverage, the precedence not to go public with names and personal information should remain. If journalists were able to cover the already unbalanced nature of rape

investigations and trials in an impartial manner, then it is possible that releasing the names of victims could help enlighten the public and eliminate ignorant stigma. But the journalism community needs to reexamine certain ethical standards regarding objective coverage and fair and balanced reporting before members can promote the role of the press as an instigator of social change. It does not seem fair to expect the public's perceptions regarding rape to change if journalists are not expected to tell them that their perceptions are misplaced to begin with. In the case of rape, reporting the facts truthfully only serves to further disguise the truth about the facts. And until journalists are able to turn a critical eye to their coverage of rape as a societal issue, they have a responsibility to protect victims from the press's own shortcomings.

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