Chapter Five: Analysis

Introduction

The second phase of a study that began this past fall, this research examines the current ethos in the journalism community regarding sexual assault, specifically its recent rise into our social consciousness and how it should be covered in mainstream media. The first phase of the study sought to establish a new, progressive standard for coverage of sexual violence. Integral to assessing this standard’s effectiveness is gauging how journalists would respond to it, the goal of this research.

Led by Dr. Amanda Hinnant, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, the first portion of the study explored different approaches to covering sexual assault and rape, analyzing harmful and positive techniques to create a list of best practices for discussing sexual assault in the mainstream media. Initially, it was envisioned as similar to the test created in 1985 by feminist media scholar and comic strip author Alison Bechdel. The Bechdel Test judges how well works of fiction, especially films, represent women based on one criterion: the inclusion of a scene when two female characters talk to each other about anything other than men (Waldman, 2014).

Instead of comprehensive portrayals of women, the Hinnant study coded for certain language and frames, such as words associated with consensual sex and the inclusion of the victim’s sexual history. Bolstered by previous research about media effects on audience perception of sexual violence, the guidelines from the Hinnant research ultimately assert what journalists should and should not do when covering rape and sexual assault. Its rules include: “Do include statistics to convey accurately the
frequency of the crime.” “Do not describe what the victim was wearing.” “Avoid using ‘alleged.’ Attribute facts to the people, such as police officers and attorneys, who said them.” “Ask the complainant if he or she would like to be identified, and give options for the amount of personal information disclosed.”

**Theoretical Framework**

The frameworks of normative and feminist media theory support this research. One of the original texts outlining normative media theory is *Four Theories of the Press* by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm (1956). The authors explain that, “the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates” and the “basic and beliefs and assumptions the society holds” (Siebert et al., 1956, p. 1-2). It follows that sexual-violence coverage, especially that which blames victims and perpetuates rape myths, would reflect societal “assumptions” about how and why sexual violence transpires.

More recently, *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies* revises the relationship between the press and its society by calling it “the reasoned explanation of how public discourse should be carried on in order for a community or nation to work out solutions to its problems” (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng & White, 2009, p. 65). Because of the connection between a society’s media and its ability to start a discussion that incites social change, normative theory is crucial to understanding how the media might disrupt the existing and problematic public rhetoric surrounding sexual violence. Interviewing journalists about their personal views on new practices for covering sexual assault also takes into account the importance of the individual actor according to normative media theory: “All
normative elements finally depend on persons acting according to their conscience about what kind of public communication represents truth, justice and respect for human dignity” (Christians et al., 2009, p. 69).

According to normative public communications theory, patriarchy must play a prominent role in the mainstream media’s treatment of the inherently gendered crimes of rape and sexual assault. Our societal structure establishes feminist media theory as an equally relevant lens for examining sexual violence in news media. Berrington and Jones (2002) explain: “Feminist studies since the early 1970s have emphasized the relationship between the patriarchal construction of society and the existence of male violence, particularly against women and children. This can only be understood as part of a system of power” (p. 308). Feminist media and communications theory focuses on how women are represented in the media and how these portrayals contribute to systematic oppression of women as a result of the social hierarchy within the patriarchy (Hesse-Biber, 2011). This research supports the idea that the current standard practices for sexual-assault coverage tend to represent women poorly because of society’s power structures that contribute to male violence.

According to Mardorossian (2002), theories about rape and other forms of sexual violence are absent from feminist journals because “contemporary feminist theory tends to ignore the topic of rape…in favor of more ambivalent expressions of male domination…” (p. 743) It roots itself in the significance of the individual woman’s experience but ignores sexual violence, a topic area that needs to be grounded in survivor stories to ensure that women have a voice in society (Mardorossian, 2002). Mardorossian (2002) calls for a new theory of rape that is not limited to either individual narratives or
politics and activism but rather draws the two arenas together. Similarly, the new standard supports a combination of telling survivor stories to empower them as individuals and statistics to depict accurately the prevalence of the crime. To lessen “the gulf between the rape victim and those who speak for her,” Mardorossian (2002) believes “we need a feminist politics that addresses the psychological and individual effects of victimization without, however, locating the solution to victimization in individual or psychological narratives” (p. 772). Mardorossian (2002) and the new standard for sexual-assault coverage are both advocating for supporting the voices of women by changing the way different facets of society conceptualize sexual violence.

A feminist interpretation of the language surrounding rape is also important to consider when demanding a change in the way written news stories cover sexual violence. In addition to reminding readers that language supports patriarchy, Philadephoff-Puren (2004) explains a new way to understand the cornerstone of feminist rape theory: that “no means no.” The author objects to needing women to say “no” as a way to prove a rape occurred because words by definition change meaning from context to context, and expecting women to respond to sexual violence in one way imposes a patriarchal standard on a crime affecting primarily women (Philadephoff-Puren, 2004). Just as Philadephoff-Puren (2004) advocates for looking at what it means to “consent” to sex on a case-by-case basis, the new standard provides guidelines to prevent journalists from making assumptions based on a preexisting societal rhetoric about how sexual assault transpires and why. Philadephoff-Purnen (2004) would likely support journalists who question the issue of explicit consent and language used in rape in the same way they already approach the inclusion of victims’ names.
Questioning media standards also pervades recent applications of normative theory. Fourie (2007) applies a moral frame to normative theory when discussing South African news media, but this also has practical applications for sexual-violence coverage. Fourie (2007) says morality is important to normative theory in South African media because the dominant cultural philosophy, *Ubuntuism*, is inherently moral. Similarly, journalists should be updating their approaches to covering sexual assault because of their ethical and professional obligation to represent victims—and by extension, all women—fairly.

By definition, normative theory has distinct implications for South African media and for American media, but Fourie (2007) outlines what should tie all normative media theories together, regardless of a journalist’s views, culture or publication: “The challenge would be to search for those common human values that bind all human beings on the basis of which a normative media theory and ethics could begin to be developed in a non-prescriptive and non-pedantic way” (p. 25). In this way, uniting around a common ethic regarding sexual assault could yield universal and progressive coverage. Once a society adheres to the same moral philosophies, whether these values support survivors or define Fourie’s (2007) *Ubuntuism*, they will manifest in the society’s media.

**Literature Review**

A substantial body of feminist communications research indicates that the mainstream news media propagate victim-blaming and characterize assailants as outside the norm; this tendency plays into the public’s understanding of how sexual assault transpires, as well as women’s beliefs about their own risk for such crimes (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012; Berrington & Jones, 2002). These views are infused with seven rape
myths: the victim is lying and has ulterior motives; the victim asked for it; the victim consented and changed her story; rape is trivial; the assailant did not mean to commit the crime; the assailant is not like other men; sexual assault only happens to certain women (Franuik, Seefelt, Cepress, Vandello, 2008). Scholars can hypothesize easily enough what frames and content mold societies that disbelieve women’s allegations to such a disturbing level that women rarely report, but the challenge emerges when we articulate what should and should not be included in news coverage of sex crimes and whether the news media would be open to incorporating progressive norms.

Waterhouse-Watson (2012) uses the term “progressive reporting” in her comparison of different Australian television programs’ coverage of sexual assault. Waterhouse-Watson (2012) could benefit from describing in more detail what she means by “progressive reporting,” but she implies that it is any reporting or frame that disrupts traditional, problematic methods of covering sexual assault. The progressive frame that shows victims are believable women who are capable of theorizing about what happened to them empowers the victim (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012; Worthington, 2008). She stresses the importance of framing women as “credible” in media coverage but gives no clear suggestions of how do so (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012). How can journalists protect a victim’s anonymity while ensuring the audience knows both she and her story are real? Details make the story believable, but their inclusion risks exposing the victim and sexualizing a crime, which numbs readers and normalizes the act (Berrington & Jones, 2002).

Waterhouse-Watson (2012) demonstrates that imposing inappropriate moral judgments on victims can be detrimental to their credibility, as well as indicative of poor
journalism, but she does not explore journalists’ reasons for doing so. She discusses an episode of Australian television program *Four Corners* and explains that the journalist Sarah Ferguson makes comments that are “implicitly critical” of the victim who “regularly sleeps with footballers and sets up players and women through her Facebook webpage…” (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012, p. 66). In this case, the media perpetuated Rape Myth Number Two, the harmful mentality that a woman’s sexual proclivities can make her responsible for her assault (Waterhouse-Watson, 2012). Because the effects of common themes in sexual-assault coverage are well-established by scholars like Waterhouse-Watson (2012), my research will explore how Ferguson might have responded to a standard for rape coverage that bars journalists from including intimate information about the victim’s life.

Credibility is arguably one of the most important factors for journalists to consider when framing victims, but it is not the only one. With every victim comes an assailant, who is also part of the story. Bernhardsson and Bogren (2012) focus on common media frames for male assailants. The authors find a prevailing theme that suggests to audiences that these men are abnormal: They are from a marginalized community or they are perverts — never average men who rape because of a sense of entitlement or a lack of awareness (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012). By implying these people and occurrences are out of the norm, journalists expose audiences to the message that ordinary men do not rape (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012). Framing rapists as exceptional also further separates them from other criminals, such as serial murderers, which contributes to the idea that sexual assailants deserve special or unique treatment from the law and media. As Bernhardsson and Bogren (2012) explain:
This view is problematic because it produces an underlying moral according to which women should be able to understand in advance that certain men are (potential) rapists. Consequently, this logic implies that women can avoid being raped if they ‘are strong enough’ to reject a drink or a sexual invitation or if they choose not to go home with the “wrong” man… (p. 14)

The authors are right to suggest that sensationalizing portrayals of sexual assault sends an inaccurate message that these instances are isolated and that women are responsible for protecting themselves; however, they do not present any alternatives (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012). If reporters normalized assailants, then would they contribute to the media-instilled, female insecurity and fear described by Berrington and Jones (2002)? Journalists’ responses to such questions would elucidate realistic expectations for frames of rapists.

The latter two authors argue that under-reporting common forms of sexual assault and sensationalizing the less frequent forms create an environment of fear and insecurity that strips women of their power (Berrington & Jones, 2002). When the exaggerated frequency in newspapers of drug-assisted rape is conflated with a tendency to blame the substance and not the assailant, women must fear for their safety in everyday interactions involving alcohol (Berrington & Jones, 2002). Berrington and Jones believe journalists’ poor editorial decisions regarding sexual assault are driven by the knowledge that sex sells — despite the accepted psychology that rape is about power and patriarchy, not sex (Berrington & Jones, 2002).

Certainly, focusing on drugs instead of the rapists who use them sends the message that women are responsible for watching their drinks, but discussing these men
becomes more complicated when considering media frames. The image of the normal man who regularly rapes women with drugs sends the message that women should constantly fear for their lives and must protect themselves; however, portraying these men as sick and perverted suggests that a normal classmate would never be a rapist, which is misleading because most rapists know their victims (Berrington & Jones, 2002). As these articles show, polarized portrayals lead to inaccuracies because people never have one characteristic. Walking a middle line between “totally normal” and “complete anomaly” might be beneficial, but only if it is accurate. Grounding reports in statistics about the frequency of the crime and facts about the incident that do not endanger the victim can help journalists assure the report does not exaggerate or cast blame — if accurate numbers are easily attainable (Women’s eNews, 2013).

Through a discourse analysis of articles covering rape from the British conservative paper The Daily Mail, Anneke Meyer (2010) illustrates that written statements can blame victims, exonerate assailants, minimize the act and make assertions about rape all at once. Meyer (2010) delves into the issue of sourcing while covering rape, which can be complicated when sources believe the same problematic views as the rest of society. Excluding opinion pieces, Daily Mail writers sourced officials who have comparable views to the paper. Readers perceived these people, such as police officers and paramedics, as experts whose comments have authority, which is not categorically true (Meyer, 2010). A journalist’s ethical obligation to include a variety of people while reporting elicits several questions. When do journalists feel obligated to quote police officers and others connected to the incident? How do journalists determine if their statements are appropriate? Do journalists believe it is ethical to omit a statement,
regardless of where it fits in with the rest of society, because it does not align with their intention to dispel rape myths?

Meyer (2010) references several columnists who suggest rape with alcohol is not as serious as stranger rape and consequently skirt the complex issue of how consent transpires behind closed doors. (Meyer, 2010). The experiences and responses of survivors vary so vastly that it seems obvious not to compare one to another in light of whose is more serious. Instead of highlighting that rape is an individual and personal experience, Meyer (2010) seems to assert that all rape is equal and by extension, the same: “Platell ignores feminist insights that rape is mostly perpetrated by intimates and acquaintances, and that these types of rape can have even more severe effects on the victim because of the betrayal of trust entailed” (p. 25).

Any type of rape is traumatizing, but making generalizations can lead to the problems outlined by other authors regarding portrayals of assailants: normalizing one group reduces the public’s awareness about another (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012). Similarly, believing one type of rape to be more serious than another inherently places blame on the victim of the “less serious” attack. Standards that prevent victim-blaming and dispel rape myths should be applied to coverage of every type of assault, and showing that each experience is different by relying on the facts should be paramount (Fountain, 2008). Also, spreading assumptions about rape can reinforce societal expectations of how victims should respond. Journalists experienced in covering sexual violence could shed light on how makers of the media assess how stories manipulate women’s sense of personal safety, as well as society’s understanding of the severity and effects of rape.
The Hinnant Study was primarily theoretical; therefore, this research will assess whether its standard can be applied successfully in newsrooms. Through a series of interviews of journalists with experience covering sexual violence, the study answers the questions: How do journalists feel about the current state of journalistic ethics regarding sexual-violence reporting? What do journalists think about using the test in their own work? How do journalists think the professional community would respond to a new, progressive standard? What do journalists think about the potential for the test to affect change in our society’s understanding of sexual violence?

Methods

Through interviews with a variety of journalists who have experience covering sexual violence, this research explores whether the journalistic community is ready to implement a new standard for sexual assault coverage. Qualitative research was the most appropriate method for this study because qualitative research is “especially well-suited for accessing tacit, taken-for-granted intuitive understandings of a culture” (Tracy, 2013, p. 5). This advantage of qualitative research applies to this study because rape culture and the way it manifests in the media are so ingrained into American media that simply surveying journalists and aggregating their answers to multiple choice questions will not provide a comprehensive answer, which the research questions demand.

This research employed interviews because this method allows the researcher to delve into another individual’s perspective on a topic and establish a complete picture of another person’s view of the world better than any other method. As Tracy (2013) explains, “Interviews elucidate subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents’ perspective” (p. 132). This research aimed to elucidate how journalists
approach sexual assault by asking about their lived experiences and how the standard might fit into them.

One-on-one discussions guided by relevant prompts and questions revealed the editorial and reportorial decisions individual journalists have made in their own lives and helped the researcher to understand a participant’s reasoning. The subjects of this study included journalists from different media outlets who had covered sex crimes. Because the research focuses on lived experiences, the main requirement for participants was experience writing about sexual violence in the news. The research is focused on the current state of sexual violence reporting and how it can be improved, and consequently included only individuals currently involved in mainstream media.

Participants came from local and national outlets, some focused on broadcast and others on print. Like most, if not all, media organizations across the country, all of the participants’ employers have an online platform therefore all participants had experience writing about sexual assault either for print or the Web. Journalists came from: U.S. News & World Report, The Northwest Herald outside Chicago, Al Jazeera America, Women’s eNews, The Cleveland Plain-Dealer in Ohio, Reuters, CNN, Huffington Post, The Columbus Post-Dispatch also in Ohio, The New York Times and The Student Press Law Center.

These organizations cover the scope of types media outlets that comprise the American media landscape, from prominent broadcasters with a substantial Web presence, such as CNN, to fringe websites with a clear ideology, such as Women’s eNews. As one of the participants remarked, most journalists in the U.S. work for local outlets, hence their high representation in the interview sample. In an attempt to collect
different types of media voices, I included an opinion writer who has also been a talking head on national television networks. The rest are reporters, who interview and write stories daily. I would have liked more diversity in roles within media organizations, but I was limited by time and the size of my professional network. However, I am still confident in the quality of my research because as reporters, these individuals are on the journalistic frontlines of the issue. The participants represented a wide range of professional experience, from a columnist who has been shedding light on this issue since the early ’90s to a recent college graduate who discovered her interest in sexual assault reporting during an internship.

I interviewed 13 people. After roughly the tenth interview, I was no longer hearing new responses to my questions, but I conducted two more to assure that I had enough viewpoints feasibly to be representative of most individuals reporting on this subject. To encourage participants to be honest, I guaranteed anonymity. The name of the journalist did not seem as pertinent to the study as the rhetoric he or she uses and why he or she uses it.

Primarily, I recruited participants through my own professional network, emailing contacts at various news organizations and asking fellow master’s students for assistance. For example, two of my 13 participants came from the online news portion of *U.S. News & World Report*, where I worked as an intern (but on a separate team). I also asked subjects for recommendations of other journalists to interview to ensure I was speaking with the prominent voices on the topic. One of my participants won a Pulitzer for her coverage of sex crimes; another was involved in creating the Poynter seminar on sexual assault reporting. Several are journalism professors. I also “cold” emailed several
journalists whose sexual violence reporting I have personally encountered. All but two did not respond to my requests.

Nine out of my 13 interviews were on the phone. Interviews times ranged from 23 minutes to two hours. If a participant was based in Washington, D.C., I conducted the interview in person in order to better establish a relationship. However, I do not feel the other interviews suffered because journalists regularly connect with individuals they’ve never met on the phone. Furthermore, I was never at odds with my participants, despite the controversial nature of the topic.

The research topic takes on the complicated social issue of gendered violence, and unstructured interviews lent to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic than structured interviews. They allowed me to respond freely to participants’ comments and to change interview structure from person to person according on their responses. Individual reflection on professional decisions was important, and unstructured interviews facilitated this type of discussion. I used a protocol (Appendix A), also known as an “interview guide,” with prompts for discussion to ensure each interview generally covers the same ground (Tracy, 2013, p. 139). Because the standard from the Hinnant et al. study was not complete when I was conducting interviews, I focused on the challenges to reporting on sex crimes that participants have encountered, the problems they foresee with employing the same set of guidelines to every sexual assault story, and how the journalistic community’s views on sexual assault have changed. Despite the absence of the actual rules, by addressing these components, I was able to assess whether journalists would open to guidelines as a concept.
During the interviews, I took notes of participants’ comments that resonated with me or captured the essence of what they were saying, in addition to recording them so I could transcribe them later. While transcribing the interviews, I would highlight comments I found particularly compelling and would add comments in Microsoft Word to keep track of my initial impressions while listening to the interview. For my first phase of coding, I read the transcripts and highlighted in Word the comments that stuck out to me, generally because they were an eloquent articulation of a thought many participants had, a new observation about sexual assault coverage, a different approach to covering sexual assault that they’ve used, a potential contribution to the guidelines or a potential problem with them.

During the second phase, I reviewed my highlights and notes and organized them by which research question they most related to. I printed out the annotated transcriptions and marked them with pen. Then, I copied and pasted the highlighted comments into separate Microsoft Word documents, one for each research question. Last, I reviewed the documents, noting what themes emerged across interviews. When discussing the most important aspects of sex crimes reporting, all participants spoke about: relevancy as the best method for determining what information to include in a story, accuracy as the highest standard for presenting the story, objectivity to avoid being overly deferent to victims’ points of view, and sensitivity when interacting with victims. When most if not all participants had the same views toward the issue addressed in a research question, I felt comfortable extrapolating from these homogenous views to create an answer; however, some topics yielded a variety of opinions, which required a more nuanced response to the research question.
Results

Participants were asked a series of questions that elucidated from various angles the topics at the core of the research questions. For example, participants discussed how their colleagues’ views on sexual assault have changed as part of the research question focusing on the current state of journalism ethics. Overall, participants felt that journalists approach sexual assault reporting ethically, with mistakes resulting from a lack of knowledge and not an active effort to silence or discredit victims. Journalists might use sections of the guidelines in their own reporting provided they aligned with practices they already employ; they would not follow suggestions that they perceived as contradictions to traditional journalistic values. Participants speculated that journalists in general would be unlikely to change their approach to sexual assault coverage simply because the guidelines said so. Still, they believe that journalism has the power to alter society’s perspective, and certain aspects of the guidelines could do so for the better.

Research question 1. The first research question addressed what journalists think about the current state of the ethics governing sexual violence reporting. The consensus among participants was that mainstream media coverage of sexual assault has improved vastly within that past three years or so, when the public first began to talk about the epidemic of sexual assault, which carried into how often and the ways in which the media covered it. Several sources suggested major factors leading to this change in mindset were a viral column written by survivor Angie Epifano in Amherst College’s student newspaper, the Sandusky trial and the graphic nature of the crimes, and the Obama Administration’s forthright stance on ending assault on college campuses. Once source said that, because journalists are more eager to critique sexual assault reporting than other
crimes’, the media conversation quickly expanded. Sources observed that there is more coverage, though certain types of sexual assault—on college and university campuses, for example—are disproportionately represented. Generally, journalists feel the coverage is more “honest” and that “we’re more sensitive than we’ve ever been to the issues and how they differ for victims of sexual assault than other crimes” (Personal communication, Feb. 19, 2015; personal communication, March 12, 2015).

That said, one subject suggested that too many journalists are not involved in the conversation, and many others believe that too many small mistakes are still made. For example, journalists will confuse terminology, especially as it relates the criminal justice system and disciplinary processes at schools, misuse statistics, “poke holes” in sex crimes reporting to a degree that they wouldn’t for other crimes, and use “allege” incorrectly and more frequently with sexual assault than other crimes (Personal communication, March 10, 2015).

None of the journalists believed that such errors in editorial judgment were “malicious” or reflective of a concerted effort to make victims seem less credible, which one source remarked used to be the case because victims and the government are both on the prosecution side of a court trial, and journalists are trained to scrutinize the government no matter what. (Personal communication, Feb. 27, 2015; Personal communication, March 4, 2015). Now, they are more likely a result of inadequate resources for journalists to inform themselves about the issue, particularly in smaller newsrooms, or sloppiness. Gone are the days of people, journalists included, focusing on what victims were wearing while they were attacked, most participants noted.
Some subjects expressed concern that this heightened societal awareness comes at the expense of telling objective, truthful stories, while others expressed views that unnecessarily discrediting victims is still an issue. Everyone underscored the importance of verifying victims’ stories and agreed, often citing Sabrina Erdely’s *Rolling Stone* story, that this does not happen enough because it’s difficult to question victims about their stories in a sensitive manner. The interviews took place before *Columbia Journalism Review*’s assessment of the story, and sources still thought the mistakes of Erdely and the editorial staff at *Rolling Stone* could have a chilling effect on journalists’ willingness to pursue in-depth reporting on sexual assault stories. For example, one source said that she considered interviewing a victim to write an anecdotal lead for story, but out of fear being inaccurate like Erdely, she used court documents from a case that had already been written about in other outlets.

Some journalists feel certain aspects of sexual assault reporting are treated differently from other crimes when they should be treated the same, yet other aspects are treated the same when they should be differently. For example, one journalist said she must go to greater lengths to corroborate the statements of victims of sex crimes, which she think reflects an inaccurate societal perception that victims lie. On the other hand, one reporter said journalists should be more discerning with what details they disclose about victims of sex crimes than with information about other victims, which she does not believe happens enough.

**Research question 2.** The second research question addressed whether journalists would use the guidelines in their own reporting. The prevailing opinion was that sexual assault stories should be treated on a case-by-case basis because the methods that yield
the most sensitive and effective coverage for one incident might not apply to another. For example, one source discussed a dilemma she had over disclosing how a predator was related to his victim because, given the size of the community her paper covered, its inclusion would likely reveal the identity of the victim. She and her editor decided to include it because they felt it was more important to inform the public of the extreme predatory nature of this man than it was to protect the victim, who had moved out of the town. She made the decision based on unique circumstances. The point behind this story was echoed throughout all of the interviewees’ responses to strict rules as a concept.

Gauging how journalists might apply certain aspects of the guidelines was challenging without a finalized list of rules. That being said, many subjects agreed with some of tentative rules and already applied them in their own reporting. For example, the rules that no one contested were prohibiting describing victims’ attire and defaulting to not naming victims while still giving them the option to be identified. Close behind was eliminating overly sexualized or vague language, which the research team labeled as “language associated with consensual sex.” One court reporter said she intentionally used vague language because she believed readers would not engage with stories that were too explicit. Another source had evidence to the contrary. She recalled that quoting details from Jerry Sandusky’s formal indictment resulted in a better understanding of his crimes among the public and consequently more convictions of sexual predators in Pennsylvania (Personal communication, March 12, 2015).

Journalists disagreed with prohibiting “alleged” in all of its forms because they see it as a necessary precaution not only to avoid legal risks but also to preserve the truthfulness of the story. One reporter suggested that if Erdely had strategically used
“alleged” throughout her piece, it wouldn’t have received the same degree of backlash. Most subjects agreed with the provision to include statistics in order to put singular incidents in context for readers and to convey the reality of sexual assault. Additionally, they stressed the importance of using the statistics correctly. One subject said she interviews the authors of whatever study she plans to cite, and another recommended only pulling numbers from certain organizations, such as the Department of Education (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2015; Personal communication, March 19, 2015). Interestingly, there was disagreement on the validity of the popular “1 in 5” statistic. One reporter had interviewed the author of the study and found it credible despite public skepticism; another thought the study’s sample was too small to be applied to all schools.

Journalists were the least willing to accept specific rules regarding including information that could make the victim seem less credible. “Relevance” to the story the journalist is telling—and not necessarily the incident itself—and how these details were “framed” were the key concepts for every participant (Personal communication, Feb. 27). The case-by-case idea reappeared because what is relevant in one case might not be in another, regardless of how the journalist frames it. One participant said sometimes whether victim had been drinking is relevant to the story, but other times it’s not. Another repeated this sentiment with sexual history. She said such details can be important to include so the public can better understand how sexual assault happens: “…that [the victim] had a relationship with him before is…not relevant in the way of, ‘Oh, she had sex a bunch, so she’s probably lying,’ but it can be relevant in ways of explaining what sexual assault can look like, what it does look like,” (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2014). Similarly, another source noted: “You can’t only include the facts that make
everybody feel good because if you hide those things, you minimize the impact they have on sexual assault,” (Personal communication, March 9, 2015). No one said definitively whether they include or omit such details more often because their decision depends on the story’s angle.

**Research question 3.** The third research question addresses the potential response in the professional, journalistic community to the new, progressive standard put forward by the guidelines. No subjects believed that there was an active demand for guidelines, despite some of the confusion they had witnessed among reporters unfamiliar with the issue. Several subjects suggested that journalists by nature are averse to strict rules and would be less likely to follow or respect the guidelines if they’re presented as such. As one participant said, “I’m the kind of reporter where if anyone ever tells me something I have to do, I try to find ten reasons for doing it a different way,” (Personal communication, March 9, 2015).

On the other hand, the same participant said that journalists all have the desire to tell better stories and value the tradition of objectivity, both attributes that could be levied to garner support for implementing a new standard. Another participant suggested the guidelines would be better received if they were labeled as a resource that will improve coverage and assist with removing biases about sexual assault that might otherwise infiltrate the story. She also remarked that journalists “love resources,” (Personal communication, March 19, 2015).

Beyond how journalists might react to being required to follow the guidelines, journalists also have different opinions regarding the ostensible journalistic obligation to change societal views, which could be perceived as the end goal of implementing a new
standard. One reporter who started her career as women’s rights advocate said that she does not believe the goal of her work should be to change society’s views herself, but rather to spark the conversations that can change views. Another remarked that his news organization is “objective but… not afraid to say certain things [such as equal rights for the LGBTQ community] are not up for debate.” A third said that when covering rape trials, she has a journalistic obligation to publish claims made by the defense attorney to discredit the victim, regardless of whether she finds the attorney’s assertions to be true. Despite the varied opinions on framing contentious social issues, all sources agreed that the approach that yields the best results is uncovering the truth.

**Research question 4.** The final research question addressed journalists’ views on the potential for the test to affect change in our society’s understanding of sexual violence. Overall, the participants were positive about journalism’s ability to move any social conversation forward. Two sources even stated that mainstream news media are one of the strongest driving forces behind societal opinions, one of whom remarked that “journalists…are definitely one of the most powerful if not the most powerful voice out there who are capable of changing these attitudes because the words we use are the words that society adopts, basically,” (Personal communication, Feb. 19, 2015).

Other sources also had similar views about the impact of mainstream media’s diction, one of the areas the guidelines seek to standardize. When journalists use language associated with consensual sex, they place readers in an “erotic space…and you have to force the mind and push harder to get outside the presumption that sex is pleasurable. When you start with the language of violence, it’s not as difficult to move the observer to the reality of the harm,” (Personal communication, March 4, 2015).
Similarly, most participants believed that specificity over vagueness when describing an incident improves societal understanding of the trauma resulting from sexual assault. One subject observed that, as a reporter, “we interchange things like ‘groping,’ ‘molesting’ and ‘fondling’ with ‘sexual assault.’ It’s better to be specific…if you don’t understand it, then society isn’t getting the details…You’re not doing [readers] any favors by cheapening what happened,” (Personal communication, March 12, 2015).

The most effective way, participants said, to progress society’s understanding of a debated issue, such as sexual assault, is to be accurate. One participant noted that “if [journalists] uncover facts…that can greatly influence society’s perception of this because if a reader can’t argue with it, that’s going to change some minds and hearts, hopefully,” (Personal communication, Feb. 27, 2015). In general, most sexual assaults are perpetrated by someone the victim knows, and on college campuses, they often involve alcohol. Therefore, participants thought including details that explain this reality can improve society’s understanding of how sexual assault transpires, despite the stereotypes they might evoke in readers’ minds. One participant summarized the problem and solution:

The public wants really simple narratives. They don’t want to hear about cases where, yes, someone may have been using drugs with someone, and they may have even had sex with them before, but this time they said no…I’ve heard editors say, “Do we really want to use this one as an example? People are going to hate this woman.” And it’s true…but we’re the media and we’re trying to explain this to people. (Personal communication, March, 9, 2015)
This reporter says that, even though the average reader might be resistant to having his or her views about sexual assault challenged, she believes it’s important to do it anyway. Spoon-feeding straightforward narratives that do not represent what the majority of sexual assault looks like—a nuanced story with an imperfect victim—slows societal progress. She says she often fights with editors to use the women that people will hate because she believe doing so is crucial to accurately covering the issue.

Discussion

History has demonstrated that accurate and compelling journalism can incite change, whether it’s by cornering Congress into implementing a new policy or by calling attention to the epidemic of sexual assault. Participants, especially the reporter whose story catalyzed the Ohio law requiring testing of rape kits, believe this is what good journalism does (Borchardt, 2014). For the guidelines to be a part of the change that journalism can create surrounding sexual assault, they must incorporate the perspectives of the journalists with boots on the ground, college campus or small community because they are the individuals who would use them. The perspective of a few journalists should not overturn all of the research and theory supporting the guidelines, but the barriers they have encountered and their perspectives on sexual assault in general offer valuable input.

The interviews indicated that most journalists feel positively about the measures taken to report on sexual assault in an ethical manner, thanks to a newly heightened social awareness toward its prevalence, but they note the exception of “journalistic sloppiness leading to small mistakes,” such as mislabeling a school as under investigation by the Department of Education (Personal communication, Feb. 27, 2015). Participants implied journalists would be most receptive to guidelines encouraging steps they were already
taking but would be resistant to those requiring a change in behavior. One source fully supported a guideline replacing “alleged” with “reported” because she already does this, but another was wary of this rule because she feels “alleged” is necessary to be accurate. Participants thought journalists would ignore rigid rules but would be more likely to use the guidelines as a flexible framework. A court reporter might question including a quote from a defense attorney if the guidelines recommended analyzing the implications of publishing it, instead of directing journalists to ignore one side of the trial altogether. Journalists remain positive about their work’s ability to improve society but do not believe they should be the ones to prescribe the steps for progress.

In the context of covering court trials, many journalists brought up the importance of including the accused’s defense to ensure the story is balanced. The guidelines initially discouraged doing so because it propagates the idea that this strategically crafted and probably dishonest argument is equally as valid as the victim’s story. To keep the story truthful and objective, the guidelines could recommend adding a note explaining how evidence enters a trial to help readers understand that not all quotes represent facts and that a trial does not represent the whole story behind an incident. The note could be structurally similar to a correction. One source mentioned that she has added disclaimers warning about the explicit nature of stories, establishing a precedent for notes on topics other than highlighting previous errors.

None of the dissent around prohibiting forms of “alleged” offered adequate journalistic benefit to justify the degree of doubt it places in the reader’s mind. For example, one source explained that she uses “alleged” to assure that statements are accurate and because she doesn’t feel comfortable framing something as a fact when she
can’t prove it is. But if a journalist cannot prove that a piece of information is a fact, should he or she even include it in the story? Inserting “allegedly” helps her avoid repetitive sentence structures that result from attributing every statement to a person or a document; however, stating the source can both strengthen the credibility of a story and eliminated the need for “alleged.” Another participant said she uses it because of her organization’s concern about legal repercussions, which could also be bypassed by connecting information with sources. One subject took issue specifically with incorrect usage of “alleged,” stating that “the ‘alleger’ is the government, so…there’s no such thing as an ‘alleged’ victim.” She also noted that “alleged” appears more often in reports of sex crimes than it does with other violent crimes. To balance these viewpoints, revised guidelines might first state that using “alleged” does not protect a journalist from legal recourse; then, they should prohibit pairing “alleged” with “victim” or “rapist” and recommend examining each usage and comparing it to comparable coverage of a nonsexual crime.

Rather than prohibiting inclusion of information that could be perceived as discrediting to the victim, participants’ views implied a better guideline would be focusing on relevance. For example, one participant recalled an inner debate over sharing that a victim was a virgin at the time of her rape:

Why am I including that detail? Is it because she’s a virgin that it makes the rape worse? Or that she’s probably telling the truth more because she was less likely to be having casual sex because she was a virgin? Is it important to explaining the trauma this is having on her because she…was a fundamentalist Christian and…had only ever held hands with a boy? (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2015)
By stopping to ask herself why she wanted to include the victim’s sexual history, this reporter decided to frame the detail in a way that didn’t perpetuate the stereotypes she articulates above. Encouraging journalists to determine relevance by answering why certain information is important could prevent gratuitous, intimate details from entering a story, as well as assure the controversial details convey the victim’s experience instead of discrediting it. In the guidelines, noting that comparable information about the perpetrator often cannot be included because he will not speak to reporters could provide additional fodder to help determine relevance—thinking, “I can’t say this about the accused; should I say it about the victim?” By providing a framework for approaching unsavory details in complex cases, this reflection time could also make more journalists comfortable writing stories that challenge readers.

The progress made regarding the role a victim’s clothing plays in her assault somewhat problematizes journalists’ rationale for sharing the victim’s alcohol intake or sexual history. But perhaps society needs to reach an understanding that alcohol does not cause assault, in the same way it no longer believes what a victim was wearing causes it. Meanwhile, prioritizing relevance to the story and explaining that intoxicated individuals cannot consent, which participants said they try to do, might get us there.

Many participants felt how the guidelines would be presented in newsrooms was equally important, if not more so, as their content. The guidelines, or any journalistic code of ethics, for that matter, are not legally enforceable, so journalists need to want to use them voluntarily for them to be effective. A recurring theme was framing them as a resource for telling better stories about a tough topic because journalists are “interested in getting it right,” (Personal communication, March 2, 2015). Instead of titling them
“guidelines,” branding them as “resources” might also elicit a warmer response. Treating the “resources” as a flexible framework would make them more effective because they’d likely be more widely used; however, new challenges emerge if the guidelines are seen as so flexible they can be disregarded altogether. Right now, what journalistic practices are and are not seen as ethical seems to be determined by individuals, who don’t always agree with one another, instead of the community as a whole. One participant explained:

I wrote a story in 2008 and it was on a young woman who was raped…I said at a Poynter seminar I let her see the story before it was published. She didn’t ask me to change anything…and people were outraged…I said, I had a 17 year-old rape victim who was shot in the face. She trusted us with details…She let us follow her for eight months. You’re damn straight I was going to let her see what was going to be printed first…We should have some hard and fast rules, like you don’t take gifts from people, but some things, you just have to do. (Personal communication, March 9, 2015)

Determining which guidelines can be optional and which cannot be will require more research, but even after the line is drawn, journalists will still want room in the guidelines for the exceptions, based on participants’ views.

Because journalists are trained to be skeptical in order to expose corruption, they are instinctively resistant to rules or restrictions. Therefore, providing a justification for each recommendation could preemptively answer any questions about the rules and make journalists more open to them. For example, instead of simply stating that “alleged” should never modify a person and should be used sparingly, the rule could go one to explain that, contrary to popular belief, “alleged” does not protect journalists from
defamation charges, that it appears more often in sex crimes coverage and that the actor performing the alleging is the government, which, in a court setting, only explicitly alleges that crimes occur and not that someone is a victim of the crimes (Personal communication, March 4, 2015).

Because many of the participants were eager to discuss the best practices for interacting with victims as sources, including instructions for interviewing victims could pique journalists’ initial interest in the guidelines, even though they were originally focused solely writing. One source said journalists were “all on the same page about the writing,” (Personal communication, March 12, 2015). Although the Hinnant et. al study certainly calls into this assertion into question, this reporter’s opinion suggests that if journalists encountered a set of guidelines exclusively geared toward writing about sexual assault, they’d be less likely to pick it up than if it also incorporated techniques for approaching and interviewing victims. Suggestions for dealing with victims and how to corroborate their stories in a respectful manner could also stem the caution resulting from the *Rolling Stone* debacle.

Based on the interviews, perhaps the most effective approach to disseminating the guidelines would be to tell journalists they will lead to more accurate stories to prevent journalists from thinking they’re rooted in sensitivity training. To do so, certain recommendations will have to be revised. Reporters will be skeptical if the guidelines categorically prohibit including certain information, such as the victim’s alcohol intake or relationship to the accused, or using “alleged” no matter the context. Although all participants believe that journalism can be the driver behind social progress, they do not envision their role as journalists is to advocate for or prescribe social change. Therefore,
if they see that following the guidelines can yield more accurate stories, which in turn more effectively catalyzes change, they will be more likely to apply them.

Conclusion

Based on the role the mainstream media play in shaping society’s understanding of sexual assault and rape, this research addresses how journalists would respond to a set of guidelines that advocate for coverage to improve society’s views of the contentious issue. Generally, journalists reporting on the sexual violence do not see many problems with media coverage of sexual assault, and they believe the problems that do exist are small and can be resolved with education and easily accessible resources. They also feel that no two sex crimes are the same, and therefore strict rules would not benefit every situation. Certain guidelines, such as those prohibiting including details that perpetuate victim-blaming stereotypes, contradict journalistic values, they say.

The primary limitation affecting this study was my professional network, which I used to find participants. I was able to speak with journalists at respected organizations, but my contacts provided minimal options for interview subjects. For example, only one of my participants was male, and though many were very experienced, none were editors. Because sexual assault is a gendered issue, the absence of male voices could mean my responses only represented a slice of the journalistic community. The lack of editors means the responses might not reflect the opinions of those with experience managing a publication. The varying levels of professional experience might control for the latter limitation to an extent, but I cannot be sure.

Next steps for this research include creating a complete list of guidelines and having journalists provide feedback each one individually. Through this process, the
research team could appropriately assess whether the hypothetical barriers journalists posit could justify revising the theory-based suggestions. After the guidelines undergo this phase of critique, the next step would be to assess how they affect average news consumers and their understanding of sexual assault. This could be done through focus groups that ask participants to read and discuss two stories about the same assault, one of which follows the guidelines and one of which does not. Because this research focused on reporters’ views, a new step would be to gather editors’ perspectives to better understand the obstacles they face when working with stories on sexual assault. If their goals and limitations are distinct from reporters, another set of guidelines might be necessary.

Even professionals trained to look past prevailing opinions to uncover the truth are not immune insidious social biases, such as those at the heart of rape culture. And as much as individuals working within a system are experts on how it operates, they might be less apt to notice its flaws from the inside looking out. An understanding that journalists are part of society and by extension socialized in the same ways should propel the guidelines, but some concessions have to be made for them to be used at all. That is to say, the guidelines are only as effective as the number of journalists that use them. This research ultimately seeks to affect change in society’s understanding of sexual assault—and consequently prevent it—and with the guidelines as raw material, journalists can craft the tools for society to do so.
References


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