THE BALANCING ACT OF SEX CRIMES REPORTING: A SURVEY OF JOURNALISTS’ RESPONSES TO NEW STANDARDS FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT COVERAGE

A Project
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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MAY 2015
I’d like to thank Amanda Hinnant, Barbara Cochran and Ryan Thomas for their guidance and support throughout not only this semester but also my entire master’s program. Completing this degree was integral to my ability to build any semblance of confidence in my professional capabilities, and these professors were the primary architects in its construction. The publications team at *U.S. News & World Report* has made me excited about the next 40-plus years I will spend in the workforce, which was not an easy task. And I must also thank my family and friends for motivating me and being my winning opponents in the Battle of Maura Tries to Quit Graduate School, which was especially bloody during my first and last weeks enrolled in the J School.
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This research examines how the journalistic community would respond to a new standard for mainstream news media’s coverage of sexual assault. Through interviews with journalists experienced in covering sexual assault, this research employs qualitative thematic analysis to gauge participants’ responses to the guidelines, specifically which parts of it they agree with and how best to implement the guidelines in newsrooms. Many journalists already practice some of the guidelines, and participants suggested explaining that the guidelines yield more accurate stories to garner journalistic support and interest.
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Maura Hohman

Keywords: sexual assault, rape, mainstream media, reporting, feminist communications theory, newsrooms, victim blaming, rape culture
Chapter One: Introduction

I chose to work at *U.S. News* for three reasons: they offered me an internship first, the name and the opportunity to work as part of a team on a weekly digital publication—in that order. I also was eager to try my hand at writing about politics, the focus of the magazine, but did not expect that I would stumble upon the opportunity to do so right away. What I got instead was robust professional experience that exposed me to the best aspects of being a member of a team, but a different one from what I was expecting. I worked with the publications group, which produced *U.S. News*’s moneymakers: Best Hospitals, Best Colleges and Best Grad Schools. The people on this team, especially my supervisor, Anne McGrath, supported me but gave me free-rein over my projects, trusted me to work independently but provided guidance when I asked for it, fully integrated me into the team but treated me respectfully according to my student and unpaid statuses.

Before this incredibly positive experience, I thought I wanted to be an editor. I was planning to use this opportunity to sharpen my editing skills and then acquire an entry-level editing job somewhere, probably for a web-based outlet. Now, I want to pursue a career in consumer advice journalism. I spent the whole semester creating these kinds of stories, starting with a seed of an idea buried in a Tweet and ending with a tree whose branches spread multiple pages in one of *U.S. News*’s prestigious print products. Not only did I find this writing intuitive, uncomplicated (in a good way), charitable and interesting, but I was also told I had a knack for the style. It might not be as glamorous as traveling to find epic narratives and recreate scenes of exceptional human sacrifice on the other side of the globe, but it combines my favorite aspects of journalism: writing, going
down an Internet rabbit hole to find sources and story ideas, my published byline, talking to people who know more than I do, and helping people.

I wasn’t initially sold on the idea of working for *U.S. News* because it seemed like a very stiff outlet, but my gut told me it would be wrong to turn the offer down. I later realized the decision was a good one and so were my justifications. Finalizing plans early kept me sane, but more importantly, folded into *U.S. News*’s brand recognition were two reasons it ended up being the perfect choice. Inseparable from the phrase “U.S. News & World Report,” the consumer-oriented focus driving all my efforts the past four months revealed to me the kind of writing I’m innately more successful at than most people (according to my supervisor), and the bullet point now adorning the top of my resume’s Work Experience section proves that I can do this writing with the best.
Chapter Two: Field Notes

Week 1: January 12-16

I began my spring internship this week, which was also my first week working in an office environment on a traditional 9-5 schedule. Beyond acclimating to waking up early and my lengthy commute, I also found it challenging to adjust to working for eight hours straight. In graduate school, my obligations were numerous, but I had free time in the middle of the day, and my schedule was more flexible. The first surprise I encountered happened on my first day when I was told I would not be working for the weekly political analysis magazine as I was told. My responsibilities had switched to pitching and writing stories for what’s referred to as “the books,” or the three print publications that make US News most of its money: Best Colleges, Best Hospitals and Best Grad Schools. As is necessary in journalism, I was open to the change and able to adapt.

I spent my first day poring over last year’s issues and submitted a list of several story ideas for each. My supervisor approved one right away and told me to start researching it the next day. I was also assigned a short research and writing assignment that required me to expand a list of STEM scholarships from one page to two. The only challenge resulting from that project was learning how to navigate another CMS. I was most outside my comfort zone during my first week when I participated in an editorial meeting for our newest project, A Parent’s Guide to STEM. I suggested several ideas, including a piece written by a parent and a story about engaging artistic children in STEM. All of them were turned down, some nicely and some not as nicely. I was
disheartened and nervous even though the executive editor was never unnecessarily
negative or impolite. She was thinking realistically, and she didn’t feel compelled to
waste valuable meeting time to protect my feelings. I learned I need to toughen up and
not take criticism personally. I also try to remind myself that my editorial mind will grow
with practice.

Week 2: January 19-23

This past workweek was short. I was only in the office for two days, both of
which were quite busy. On Wednesday, my schedule was packed with interviews for the
same story that I’ve been working on since the end of my first week. The story came
from an idea that I pitched on my first day. It’s meant to be a primer for incoming college
students and parents on what to consider when deciding to join a fraternity or sorority. I
initially pitched the story as a comparison of Greek life cultures at different types of
schools and spent my first few interviews asking questions around that idea. After a
meeting with my editor, however, I found out that she had conceptualized the story as a
list of different aspects of Greek life for students and parents to consider. I was initially
worried that my first few interviews would be unusable, but after going over my notes, I
realized they did provide a lot of information that would help parents and students learn
about certain aspects of Greek life.

After this meeting with my editor, I created an outline and used it to guide my
next interviews. Like many of my experiences from the previous week, this conversation
taught me that reporters must be open to change, but they also must make sure they know
what their editors want. I still find it nerve-wracking that I’m not constantly in touch with
my editor or getting regular updates on what’s going with the book or even an official
Week 3: January 26-30

This past week, I completed reporting for two stories and was able to write one of them in its entirety. The finished story is a list of different resources that parents might use to reacquaint themselves with STEM subjects to better help their students with homework. There wasn’t much that was particularly challenging about this story; it just required spending a lot of time on the Internet. At one point, my editor told me that I had to find a way to vet these sources for our readers, which required even more investigating into awards the sites had received and which organizations sponsored and managed the sites. I was embarrassed that I hadn’t already thought to include this information in my first draft.

I started writing the other story about Greek life. I came up with structure and presentation for the story and discussed it with my editor, who gave her approval. I’m almost done with the writing, which has proved more challenging than I anticipated. I have 10 sources for this story, which means I have a lot of information to sift through. I don’t have a word count or deadline on the story yet, but I have a feeling I’ll have to cut it down quite a bit. I thought I would be able to finish the story today, but I was given another assignment that’s higher priority: STEM field trips families can take in specific areas of the country. Similar to the homework helpers and scholarships piece, I’m spending most of my time researching on the Web. I don’t look forward to the calls I’ll have to make to fact-check all of these pieces!
Week 4: February 2-6

This past week, I had my first copyediting assignment and had my first story, a Q&A with an author, published. I also researched and wrote two more lists for the STEM guide and responded to edits. The first challenge I encountered this past week related to copyediting. An editor had changed the lead on a story I had written to include the same word twice. I debated calling attention to it for a while, and eventually I did. My editor praised me for the good catch even though I had felt like I was being too nitpicky. She said I was being “nitpicky in a good way.” When I was editing another story, I found diction that I initially perceived as sexist, but after looking up the word, I decided not to say anything. I emailed Professor Rowe back at MU about it, and she said she didn’t see the word as sexist, so I concluded it was a good decision for me not to say anything. I’m wary of being too aggressive with edits lest I be thought of as too eager to find mistakes.

The next challenge I encountered this past week involved my first ever correction. As I was trained, I recorded the interview I conducted for the Q&A, and when I was transcribing it, I misheard the source. She emailed me and asked for a change. She did not seem upset, but it was embarrassing having to tell my editor on my first ever story that I made a mistake. My editor explained that it would have been difficult for us to catch and that it wasn’t a big deal, but it certainly doesn’t feel good to have done something wrong. I’ll be more careful when transcribing in the future and try to be thankful that my first published inaccuracy wasn’t serious.

Week 5: February 9-13

This past week, I finished my third list-based story for the parents’ guide to STEM, which will be published in a few months. I’ve continued to receive minimal
feedback on my work as my supervisor is still wrapped up in finishing the graduate school ranking book, which will be printed within a couple of weeks. After finishing that piece on low-cost field trips families can take to promote STEM to their kids, I began on a sidebar for a story I had expressed interest in but was ultimately pitched and assigned to someone else. The sidebar is actually more up my alley because it’s focused on tips and useful information for incoming college students and their parents about the relationship between alcohol and sexual assault. (The actual piece tracked changes in policy etc. that colleges have been taking in response to increased awareness about sexual assault and school administration’s errors in handling it.) I’m pleased that I will be able to apply a lot of what I’ve learned in my own research when I write this piece. For example, I will avoid putting blame on women for drinking or being alone or out late at night. I will provide advice to men on how they can prevent themselves from assaulting women, etc.

One challenge I encountered as a result of my strong views about this issue was how to mask my opinions when talking to sources. I talked to people with primarily medical background, which made the discussion less opinion-based, but I still didn’t want them to feel that I already had my mind made up about the connection between alcohol and sexual assault. I navigated this challenge by asking open-ended questions, listening closely to answers and following up with more direct questions.

**Week 6: February 16-20**

Because of the holiday and the weather, I was only in the office two days last week. The main challenge I encountered was starting to write the sidebar on tips for avoiding sexual assault. (It will run in the college book.) Surprisingly, the most difficult part of the story was avoiding verbiage that perpetuated rape myths and victim blaming—
the focus of my research project. I understand better what obstacles reporters covering this subject have to encounter and why the media approach sexual assault in the way they do, not that this is ever an excuse for sexist coverage. Still, I can only imagine what kind of tips I would have included and how I would have framed them had I not been familiar with flaws in sexual assault coverage. I also wrestled some more with the strength of my own beliefs about the relationship between alcohol and sexual assault, specifically when I interviewed the director of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism on the subject. Research and my own beliefs don’t contradict each other per se, but now I’m struggling to include quotes from experts that don’t perpetuate victim blaming. The writing process is slow going.

**Week 7: February 23-27**

This past week was slow and resulted in minimal obstacles. I still had to grapple with the best way to present tips for preventing sexual assault without making them seem gendered while accurately reflecting what my sources had told me, much of which had gendered connotations. I settled on explaining that members of every sex could follow this advice and cautioned the dangers of binge drinking for everyone – up to 90 percent of assaults on college campuses involve at least one intoxicated person. My editor has yet to look at the piece, but I hope she’ll find it useful. I broke it down into an introduction and bullets with subtitles: “Research your school,” “Avoid intoxication,” “Understand how alcohol affects you,” “Go out in groups” and “Ask for consent.” I thought these categories and the information within them successfully moved away from the mentality that women must avoid rape instead of men not raping, but it was challenging to write in this way. Problematic ideas about who’s responsible for sexual assault are so insidious
that they frame how society views prevention; my struggle with writing this story further convinced me how important my research is.

Week 8: March 2-6

This past week I worked on several different projects. I received more assignments than I had in the past, and as stressful as it was to juggle work for three supervisors, it was refreshing to feel like my skills were needed. For Morgan, the editor of the Weekly, I had to come up with a topical theme and 10 questions for the quiz within a couple of hours. For Anne, I worked on substantial edits to a listicle story I had researched and written for the STEM guide coming out in June. I also started reporting for editorial content for the hospital rankings book. For Margi, I started researching and writing talking points regarding women’s progress in STEM fields for a speech she’ll make at a STEM conference. I’ll continue to work on those projects and a few extras this week, which I will have to complete by the end of Thursday. None of the work has proved too challenging in itself; now, I’m just learning to manage my time in a professional setting, which involves prioritizing some work over the rest while still meeting deadlines for all of it. And now that my internship is well over halfway (I’m starting my ninth week), I have the additional pressure of trying to secure a position with U.S. News come May.

Week 9: March 9-13

This past week, I had quite a few assignments to juggle. I compiled seven pages worth of talking points on women in STEM fields for one of my supervisors for a speech she’ll be giving at an upcoming conference. While researching this information, I also kept my eye open for potential panelists for the same conference for another person on
my team. I edited a couple of Q&As, one of which was published last week, and another quiz for U.S. News Weekly. I also tried to continue working on edits for my stories in the STEM guide to be published in June, but my supervisor was on vacation and hadn’t done much with them so far. I’m able to easily manage the assignments despite the different people I’m doing them for, but I wonder how often my various editors talk to each other about how much work they’re giving me. But like I said, it’s plenty manageable. The biggest obstacle I think I’ll encounter this week is keeping track of deadlines given the end of my internship in just a few weeks. I’ve been hopeful that this could turn into a full-time position, but editors have been anxious to give me deadlines before my internship ends, which leads me to believe they’re not interested in keeping me past mid-April. My next professional challenge will be bringing it up with my supervisor and asking her for advice for staying within the company.

**Week 10: March 16-20**

This past week was the busiest I’ve had. To complete all my projects, I stayed in the office until 7 p.m. three nights in a row. Prioritizing and time management weren’t the biggest challenges for me—I knew what I had to get done and when. The biggest obstacle was motivating myself to turn in my best work in a timely fashion after being told there would be no space for me on the U.S. News teams after I complete my internship. Still, the assignments kept coming, and I couldn’t ignore the part of my brain telling me everything needed to get done by the end of the week. But it was worthwhile when the executive editor told me with a smile that I had all the information I needed and that no more reporting was necessary. All of my other assignments were the same, but we had double production for the weekly, which meant double the copy editing and double
the quizzes I needed to write. I applied for three jobs at U.S. News and was told that I didn’t qualify for any of them today, so my next challenge is to keep my head and energy up during the rest of the semester.

**Week 11: March 23-27**

This past week was slower than the week before, but I still had plenty to keep me busy. I completed reporting the story on preventing food allergies in children and started writing it at the end of the week. I turned in my first draft today (Monday). I also turned around the edits to my first story, on Greek life, in one day. I was able to find most of the supplementary information I needed in the interviews I’d already done, but the challenge emerged when I had to balance it with edits for three more stories with earlier deadlines for the STEM guide. Luckily, going back and forth between projects to manage competing and revolving deadlines is not new to me. I also appreciate that in a professional environment, you don’t have to balance school assignments, as well. (Just a weekly report and some coding here and there.) I also had to wake up at 8 am on Saturday to attend a STEM fair. The event wasn’t how my editor described it, so the photographer and I rolled with the punches and made do with sources available. The main professional dilemma I encountered this past week was when my editor asked me to take on another story to complete by the end of my internship. I still haven’t decided what to do because I know I’ll be spread too thin if I say yes but I think I’ll have too much free time if I say no.

**Week 12: March 30-April 3**

This past week, I started on research for the final story I will report for U.S. News. My internship is over at the end of next week, which is hard to believe. Initially it
was overwhelming to think that I’d only have three weeks to research, set up interviews for and write the story in three weeks. But then I remembered I would do that with several stories a week for *Vox* in addition to taking classes and working a part-time job. Since starting at U.S. News, I’ve felt my confidence in my abilities increase, partially in response to the positive feedback I’ve received, but I also felt like I haven’t been professionally challenged as much as I would have liked. After making that reflection, it was easy to decide to do the extra story. I also attended a STEM fair in DC at Dunbar High School with a photographer. The whole excursion was challenging because our editor told us there would be demonstrations of experiments, but it was actually a traditional fair with boards. I took notes on the projects and coordinated getting the appropriate information based on the photographer’s best shots.

It’s easy to get frustrated when you feel as though a colleague isn’t doing his or her homework, but I stayed calm and productive by reminding myself that I would have had to go regardless of the presence of visual demonstrations. Last week I also did proofreading for *U.S. News Weekly* and responded to edits on my stories for the upcoming STEM guide.

**Week 13: April 6-10**

This past week, I had my last interviews for the final story I will be writing at *U.S. News*. The interviews went off without a hitch, and I was able to gain more perspective on the debated issue at the core of the story. The main aspect of the piece, which focuses on the ostensible long-term risks of using general anesthesia in children young than 3, that has challenged me has been relying so closely on studies and interviews with doctors. For most other medical topics I’ve written about, I’ve at least been able to
educate myself through primers on the Web, but there’s not much available on potential
cognitive disabilities related to anesthesia exposure. The reason is that not much is known
on the topic, so to get myself up to speed, I read a lot of study abstracts and conclusions
and asked doctors what were probably perceived as silly questions. Last week, I also
went over the comments from the fact-checker with my editor, Anne, which was a great
learning experience. I enjoyed working with her to best incorporate the changes without
kowtowing to the sources’ desired additions and alterations to the stories. There were a
couple of comments where I wasn’t sure if it was important to work in the source’s
comment, so it was really helpful to have someone experienced show me in general what
kinds of details are important to clarify or add.

**Week 14: April 13-17**

This past week included my final few days at U.S. News, which meant I spent all
of my time tying up loose ends. I had to finish a small amount of research and then write
the anesthesia piece for the hospital book. I had so much information that I thought
initially writing the story would be difficult, but the organization and what to include
ended up being quite instinctive. I struggled with both of these decisions on my first
story, which admittedly was longer and could have been more challenging for that
reason. But I like to think of the swiftness with which I wrote my final story, not to
mention how few edits it required, showed the progress I made this semester. My
supervisor was working remotely this past week, so it was difficult at time to make sure I
was providing U.S. News with as much help as I could during my last few days, but I
solved this very minor problem by offering to help the other editors I had worked with
over the semester. The only challenge, which was barely a challenge, that I encountered
this week was determining how to politely approach an overwhelmed editor with a full schedule about the progress she had made on my stories. I simply reminded her that my last day was Thursday and asked if she needed anything from me before I left. Rather than acting confrontational, which I wasn’t really expecting, she said no, praised and thanked me for my hard work and told me to stay in touch regarding employment prospect. She and I didn’t work together much, so the fact that she had such kind words mean a lot. I will be sad to leave U.S. News. It’s been one of the most relaxed, productive and supportive professional environments I’ve been in. If all my future employers are like U.S. News (which I doubt they will be), the next decades I’ll spend working will fly by.
Chapter Three: Self-Evaluation

My supervisor and I both were impressed by the quality of work I created this semester and how easily I was able to embrace this style of writing that I was unfamiliar with. My stories certainly improved over the course of the semester, and because they were all edited and revised within the last two weeks of the internship, they all are colored with some sheen of my most improved skills. For example, at the beginning of the semester, I was overwhelmed by the number of sources required for each story and how much reporting I was expected to do before I could even think about organizing the story. I can even recall my editor directing me to talk to a variety of people familiar with the topic and tacking on at the end of the conversation that she and I would decide what direction to go in when I was starting to hear the same answers from sources. Although this approach sounded exactly like qualitative research, but I had never done to write a story. Also, her directions were initially so vague that I didn’t know what to ask at first, and I even completely misunderstood the story angle on multiple occasions.

My tasks did not get more specific as the semester progressed. However, I quickly established an approach that felt comfortable to me. First I read a lot, and then I talked to one or two sources to learn some background and to ask about what I wanted to know about the topic. Next, I would circle back to my editor to craft an angle, and last, I would do the remaining reporting fill in the holes. All of my stories got this treatment—even the first one, though not exactly in that order—and it’s a strategy I plan to use in the future.

Although the seminars were more geared toward students pursuing political reporting, I still found them useful. I was able to apply the suggestions of representatives
from comm shops on the Hill to the occasionally ornery, high-profile individuals I’ve interviewed for stories. In addition, the seminars on media law and diversity were directly useful for any type of journalist—political, consumer oriented or otherwise; giving a voice to and empowering as many communities as possible, as well as respecting the work of others, are crucial to producing good journalism. In addition, Donna Leinwand’s passion made me excited about the many possible directions I could take my career in, and Mike McCurry clarified my understanding how public relations and government transparency operate, which I value as both a reporter and news consumer.

Overall, I’m proud of my work from this semester and was deeply flattered and moved when my supervisor called me “a very capable reporter and writer” in my evaluation. More than anything, I thought this comment encapsulated how much I’ve grown as an individual and professional since starting at the master’s program at the J School. In August 2013, I would not have thought of myself as “very capable” of anything, much less journalism. Over the past two years, I’ve sought to prove to many people, including myself, that I’m capable of good journalism. At the end of the Washington Program and my experience at U.S. News, I truly believe it.
Projects from *A Parent’s Guide to STEM* (published in June)

“Homework help”

Helping your kids with homework can be impossible when you don’t recognize the material. Whether you never learned it or don’t remember it, peruse these websites’ videos, lesson plans, activities and glossaries, and become your child’s go-to homework helper. Some of these resources are designed for students and will present great opportunities for you and your child to learn together. Others are large databases that allow you to search for whatever concept is challenging your child. Your lack of STEM knowledge doesn’t need to stop you from showing your kids you care about their education.

- The Calculus Lifesaver (http://press.princeton.edu/video/banner/) – Watch videos of Princeton professor Adrian Banner as he walks his students through his textbook, *The Calculus Lifesaver*. Lectures are labeled by topic, as well as chapter number.
- Ask Dr. Math (http://mathforum.org/dr.math/) – Managed by the Drexel University School of Education, this site has archived questions arranged by topic and grade-level that previous students have asked. You can also ask a new question as long as it’s not about a specific homework problem.
- MathWorld Classroom (http://mathworld.wolfram.com/classroom/) – Part of MathWorld, a database assembled by computer software company Wolfram Research, MathWorld Classroom defines terms and concepts for amateur
mathematicians and their parents. Topics include pre-algebra, pre-calculus, geometry and more.

- USGS Education (education.usgs.gov) – The US Geological Survey provides educational resources on biology, geography, geology and water. Organized by grade level, resources include written explanations, activities and games.

- TryScience.org – This site won’t be useful to parents looking to brush up on high school chemistry, but it does provide interactive learning tools organized by “field trips,” “experiments” and “adventures.” Parents can also request to receive via mail a guide to science in their town or a national guide. TryScience.org is sponsored by IBM, the New York Hall of Science and science centers around the globe.

- Physics To Go (http://www.compadre.org/informal/) – Curated by the American Physical Society and part of the National Science Digital Library, this site includes research, at-home experiments and lessons on different subjects including but not limited to physics. Browse by topic or search to find a link and description of a site that can help you.

- BioEd Online (www.bioedonline.org) – Browse courses, lessons, videos and slideshows on biology and related topics provided by Baylor University’s College of Medicine. Search for a specific concept your child is learning so you’re better equipped to help, or work on STEM-specific activities together.

- Codeacademy (www.codeacademy.com) – Codeacademy is a net-native educational site that teaches digital skills from building a website to computing
languages like Python and Ruby. Use the site to supplement computer science course material or to learn to code to help a struggling child.

- **Code.org** – Partnering with the National Science Teachers Association and Computer Research Association and other leaders in tech education, Code.org provides free coding tutorials and computer science curricula. Let your kids explore the lessons or teach yourself.

- **TeachEngineering.org** – Funded by the National Science Digital Library Program, Teach Engineering is a collection of standards-based lessons and activities covering a variety of engineering-related subjects from problem solving to computer science.

- **TryEngineering.org** – Try Engineering offers lesson plans searchable by engineering category and age level. Managed by IBM, the New York Hall of Science and IEEE, the site also offers career and university guides.

- **TryComputing.org** – Another project of IEEE, Try Computing focuses on preparing students for a career in computer science, but it also provides lesson plans on various computing topics and a list of additional educational resources.

- **NSF Classroom Resources** (http://www.nsf.gov/news/classroom/) – The National Science Foundation has compiled resources from across the web that are helpful to teachers, students and families. Search to get help with a specific topic, or review each of the subjects from chemistry to computing and engineering.

- **CK-12** (ck12.org) – Focused on educational STEM content, CK-12 provides interactive lessons on specific areas within each STEM subject. Explore the site as a student to learn new information or as a teacher to access study aids,
activities and assessments. Partners include NASA Langley Research Center and Stanford University.

• MIT’s Science Out Loud (http://k12videos.mit.edu/) – Part of MIT’s initiative to boost performance of K-12 students in STEM, Science Out Loud is a web series created by students at MIT’s School of Engineering. Video topics range from the skydiving to invisibility cloaks.

• NASA Education (nasa.gov) – Navigable from a teacher’s or student’s perspective, the site provides videos, podcasts, teaching materials, career information and more. The student section, organized by grade level, offers better content to help with homework.

• Federal Registry for Educational Excellence (free.ed.gov) – Still in its Beta stage, FREE pulls lessons and other online resources from government sites and other organizations and arranges them by subject. There’s a section devoted to STEM as a whole, as well as separate pages for math and science.

• About Education (http://www.about.com/education/) – About.com operates individual sites devoted to various academic subjects. About Education is especially helpful with science. Each topic has a resident expert who writes trend articles and explanatory articles beneficial for students and parents.

• Wikiversity (wikiversity.org) – Part of Wikipedia, Wikiversity is an openly sourced database of educational resources. Search a specific term or browse by subject, department or grade level.
• Wikibooks (wikibooks.org) – Wikibooks is a collection of open, online textbooks compiled similarly to its parent site Wikipedia. Browse by academic subject to see relevant textbooks, or search by term to find a book that uses it.

• Khan Academy (khanacademy.org) – The wildly popular Khan Academy has interactive lessons on every STEM subject and more. Set up an account as a parent and complete activities with your child, or teach yourself whatever your child is learning.

• OER Commons (oercommons.org) – Created by the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education, OER Commons has thousands of lessons, activities and explanatory articles for all STEM subjects, as well as business, arts, humanities and social sciences.

• Annenberg Learner (learner.org) – Annenberg Learner by the Annenberg Foundation has video series, lesson plans and interactives designed for teachers. Use them with your child at home, or review math and science concepts by yourself.

• Shmoop (shmoop.com) – A Webby Award-winning educational site, Shmoop provides free learning guides in pre-algebra through calculus, biology and chemistry. Each subject is broken down into topics, ideal for parents and students looking for help with a specific question.

• Youtube EDU (youtube.com/education) – Search this division of Youtube for educational videos about any topic, or browse popular videos by subject on the homepage. Anyone can upload to Youtube, so be sure to vet the channel before changing any answers on your child’s homework.
TED Ed (ed.ted.com) – Started by the creators of TED Talks, TED Ed shares lessons made by educators and animators within TED and the general public. Lessons combine text, videos and quizzes and are organized by subject. STEM categories include design, engineering and technology; health; mathematics; science and technology.

Sidebar – Public Libraries

The Web is a great place to get free homework help, but it’s not your only option. Public libraries house shelves and shelves of books that can answer your child’s and your questions, and they also provide easy access to computers and other expensive technology. Many libraries across the country host STEM programs for kids, such as The Labs at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which guides teens in creating and sharing digital media using free library resources. Research also indicates visiting libraries boosts academic performance. You don’t need your own computer to have a successful STEM career – just a library card. To find a public library near you, visit imls.gov.

“Take a Fieldtrip”

Kids learn best through hands-on experiences that encourage them to figure things out for themselves. So especially with STEM subjects, teachers and schools plan activities that allow for discovery – and so can parents. The following facilities, which range from fossil sites to space centers to factories, are all within field-trip distance of major cities. You can probably find unique opportunities close to home, too. Ticket prices for the facilities below range from free to $35. And remember: Many museums have free
days or let you pay what you can afford rather than the posted admissions fees. So plan an adventure with your children and let them explore!

ATLANTA

• Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, Sandy Springs ($). Bike or kayak down the 48 miles of river in this national park, home to blue herons, otters, owls and bats, among other wildlife. And sit in on a ranger-led program on forest and river ecosystems.

• Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Museum (free). The CDC’s permanent exhibits include the electron microscope used to study bird flu, West Nile Virus and AIDS, and the needle-free injector integral to reducing smallpox outbreaks.

• Fernbank Museum of Natural History ($).

BOSTON

• Nash Dinosaur Track Site and Rock Shop, Granby ($). At the first valley in North America where dinosaur tracks were discovered, walk the same paths as dilophosaurus and plateosaurus and spot their footprints.

• Blue Hill Observatory and Science Center, Milton ($). Learn about atmospheric science in a building dedicated to its study since 1885. For an extra fee, get a lesson in weather forecasting or kite-making.

• The Hall at Patriot Place, Foxborough ($). Learn about the math and science behind sports. Activities include measuring force and angle to determine how far a ball will travel and designing the most effective helmet.

• Museum of Science ($).
CHICAGO

• Willowbrook Wildlife Center, Glen Ellyn (free). A rehab facility for injured and orphaned animals, with exhibits on Illinois wildlife and several nature trails.

• Kent Fuller Air Station Prairie, Glenview (free). The 32-acre prairie re-creates a time when much of North America was covered with tall prairie grass. It showcases crayfish, red-tailed hawks and 160 plant species.

• Museum of Science and Industry ($). Explore the connection among different sciences through an interactive coal-mining exhibit, a simulation of future technologies, and more.

DALLAS

• Dallas Arboretum and Mechanical Garden ($). The 66-acre facility has 19 gardens and programs for kids such as “Wetland Wonders” and “Animal Homes.”

• In-Sync Exotics Wildlife Refuge, Wylie ($). Dedicated to helping injured and abandoned exotic cats, the refuge houses cougars, tigers, lions, leopards, cheetahs and more.

• Mineral Wells Fossil Park, Mineral Wells (free). Dig up fossils dating back 300 million years and take them home. Sea lilies are common; rare finds include trilobites and shark teeth.

• Fort Worth Museum of Science and History ($).

DENVER

• Garden of the Gods Nature Center, Colorado Springs (free). Get an expansive view of the red sandstone of Pikes Peak from the visitor center’s terrace before
walking through the iconic Gateway Rocks, one of the most photographed geological formations in America.

- National Ice Core Laboratory (free). Schedule a tour in advance to visit this working lab and storage facility, where scientists study ice from glaciers across the globe, plot Earth’s climate history and predict its future.

- National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Golden (free). Consider signing up in advance for a tour that delves into the lab’s energy-efficiency research and applications. Education programs teach visitors about reducing their environmental impact.


DETROIT

- Ford factory, Dearborn ($). Get a close-up look at the manufacturing of the F-150 pick-up, plus an outline of Ford's history and the steps in building a car.

- Inland Seas Education Association, Suttons Bay (fee varies by program). Activities and classes aboard a tall “Schoolship” sailing on the Great Lakes teach history, geology, ecology and more. Try a night-time sail with an astronomer, a lesson on building boats, or a guided tour through wetlands.

- Michigan Science Center ($).

HOUSTON

- WaterWorks Education Center, Humble (free). Schedule an appointment to visit and learn about water science and the city’s drinking water supply. Visitors walk through the treatment process from a water drop’s perspective.
• Crocodile Encounter, Angleton ($). Tours of this zoo allow visitors to observe the big reptiles as they swim, eat and sun themselves.

• Saint Francis Wolf Sanctuary, Montgomery (free). Schedule a tour to see rescued residents from afar, and meet a wolfdog, a canine with wolf and domestic dog ancestry.

• Children’s Museum of Houston ($). Geared toward toddlers to 12-year-olds, the museum makes learning interactive through invention workshops led by professional “makers,” or experienced engineers and designers, and conservation lessons in a native plant garden, for example.

NEW YORK

• Sony Wonder Technology Lab (free). Watch email and other Internet traffic zip around a world map. Try programming a robot. You can get a feel for what it’s like to perform heart surgery through a haptic controller, which recreates a surgeon’s sense of touch.

• Gateway National Recreation Area (free). This park spans the coastal areas and waters of three boroughs of New York City and part of New Jersey, offering everything from wildlife sanctuaries and bird watching to ocean beaches.

• New York Botanical Garden ($). Situated on 250 acres in the Bronx, the garden has something in bloom year-round. Find out about plants of the rain forest, desert and more.
• Museum of Mathematics ($). The math problems in this museum look nothing like the ones in textbooks. Use construction toys to build a mathematical structure or go for a ride on a square-wheeled tricycle.

• American Museum of Natural History ($).

PHILADELPHIA

• Wagner Free Institute of Science (free). View mounted animals, fossils, shells, bones, an extensive mineral collection, and the fossilized skull of the first American saber-tooth tiger, discovered in 1886.

• Crystal Cave, Kutztown ($). The cave sparkles with calcium crystals and walls of flowstone. Learn about the science behind cave formation.


• The Franklin Institute ($).

PHOENIX

• Arizona Challenger Space Center, Peoria ($). Exhibits include interactive displays of the solar system, pieces of space shuttles and a planetarium.

• Desert Botanical Garden ($). This 140-acre facility offers displays of desert plant life, desert plants’ uses to humans and sustainable desert gardening.

• Arizona Science Center ($).

PORTLAND, ORE.
• Zenger Farm ($). Schedule a visit to observe urban farming and sustainability in action. The farm prides itself on protecting the wetlands nearby by never using chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

• World Forestry Center ($). The center’s museum has hands-on exhibits featuring tree species from across the globe. Go on a simulated river raft adventure, learn to operate a timberjack harvester, find out how people around the world use forests, and go on a virtual tour of the four types of forests.

• Oregon Museum of Science and Industry ($). In the science playground, visitors age 6 and under can use buckets and shovels to experiment with the physics of sand and water. Older visitors can explore the museum’s four other halls on life science, technology and more.

SAN FRANCISCO

• San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park ($). This park serves up history, science and engineering through a recreation of the city waterfront over the decades, early-morning bird watching led by rangers, and demonstrations of 19th-century technology.

• Cable Car Museum (free). Learn about the engineering of centuries past by viewing old cable cars, detailed models and such mechanical devices as grips, tracks, cables and brakes.

• California Academy of Sciences ($).

SEATTLE

• Future of Flight Aviation Center and Boeing Tour, Mukilteo ($). Visit a commercial jet assembly plant and take a factory tour to see how aircraft are
constructed. In the aviation center, learn about airplane design, flight systems, propulsion and the future of aviation.

• Stonerose Interpretive Center & Eocene Fossil Site, Republic ($). The fossil site is a dried lake whose fish, plants and insects have been preserved for 50 million years by volcanic ash. Use hammers and chisels to dig up fossils that experts will help you identify.

• Pacific Science Center ($).

WASHINGTON, D.C.

• National Arboretum (free). The 15 gardens and displays include extensive collections of azaleas, herbs and dogwoods and a bonsai museum.

• The National Zoo (free). Known for its giant pandas, the National Zoo houses 2,000 animals representing 400 species.

• National Inventors Hall of Fame (free). On the same campus as the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, the hall displays the technological accomplishments of over 500 inductees.

• National Air and Space Museum (free). In two locations in Washington and suburban Virginia, it contains the country’s largest collection of aviation and space artifacts, including the Wright brothers’ plane and the Apollo 11 command module. See rocks from the moon here, too.

• National Museum of Natural History (free).

• Maryland Science Center, Baltimore ($).

“Compete”
These national competitions, from traditional science fairs to timed construction challenges, offer unique educational opportunities for every type of learner. Students confident in their STEM skills can show them off, and those less so can learn from teammates and boost their interest in an exciting atmosphere. Some competitions require entrants to participate as a team through a school or club, which might pay the entry fee; others will allow individual participants to join for free. Many reward winners with cash prizes. For more information on costs associated with a competition, deadlines and how to register, visit its website.

- FIRST Competitions: Thousands of students participate annually in FIRST’s four competitions for designing and building a robot within the parameters of various challenges (usfirst.org).

- BEST Robotics Competition: In just six weeks, students race to build a working robot that will complete specified tasks faster than its competitors (bestinc.org).

- Intel International Science and Engineering Fair: The world’s largest precollege competition, ISEF offers is open to winners of local and regional science fairs affiliated with the Society for Science and the Public (student.societyforscience.org).

- Intel Science Talent Search: High school seniors submit reports of their individual, college-level research to be reviewed by scientists, engineers and mathematicians (student.societyforscience.org).

- ExploraVision: Participants research a modern technology and write a report envisioning how it will have developed in 20 years (exploravision.org).
• Conrad Spirit of Innovation Challenge: Starting with pitching to pretend investor and progressing to portfolios and presentations, students craft a solution to a global issue in one of four problem areas (conradchallenge.org).

• Team America Rocketry Challenge: Students design, build and fly a rocket while incorporating an added challenge, such as hovering for several seconds at 800 feet with a raw egg (rocketcontest.org).

• eCyberMission: Sponsored by the U.S. Army, the online competition requires students to research a problem in their community and discuss their discoveries in online forums (ecybermission.com).

• Microsoft Imagine Cup: Participants in the cup’s three primary competitions will design and build a technology using a combination of software and hardware (imaginecup.com).

• Future City Competition: Using computer game SIM City, students will design a city to meet a certain need, such as adequate space for sustainable farming to feed the entire population (futurecity.org).

• SourceAmerica Design Challenge: Students interested in community service and engineering will design a technology to assist people with disabilities in the workplace (instituteforempowerment.org).

• The DuPont Essay Challenge: Students research and write 700-1,000-word essays about using science and STEM technology to solve a global crisis (thechallenge.dupont.com).
• U.S. Department of Energy National Science Bowl: Students are asked and answer questions aloud about a variety of science and math topics, such as chemistry, physics and energy (science.energy.gov).

• Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology: Students submit a report written about team or individual research relating to a topic, such as astrophysics, nutritional science, genetics and more. (siemens-foundation.org).

• Google Science Fair: Students conduct an experiment on a topic, such as food science, robotics or math, and submit their results on a website they built (googlesciencefair.com).

• BioGENEius Challenges: Students submit research resulting from experiments conducted based on one of three challenges: the healthcare challenge, the sustainability challenge or the environment challenge (biotechinstitute.org).

• Junior Science and Humanities Symposia: Students complete original STEM research, which must include an experiment, observation or fieldwork, write a report and give an oral presentation at a symposium (jshs.org).

• Discovery Education 3M Young Scientist Challenge: Students create a video between 1 and 2 minutes that outlines their idea for a solution to a local or global problem (youngscientistchallenge.com).

• Science Olympiad: At Olympiad competitions, students compete in a series of hands-on team events in areas such as genetics, earth science, mechanical engineering and more (soinc.org).
• TEAMS (Tests of Engineering, Aptitude, Mathematics and Science): As a team, students answer multiple-choice and essay questions relating to real-world engineering challenges (teams.tsaweb.org).

• MATHCOUNTS Competition Series: Students answer a series of questions individually and then as an entire team; qualifying students will also participate an oral Q&A session (mathcounts.org).

• Broadcom MASTERS: Eligible students must be nominated by a local or regional SSP-affiliated fair to submit an application explaining their team or individual research (student.societyforscience.org).

• National Youth Cyber Defense Competition: Students practice strengthening the security of virtual machine images—for example, what a user might see when creating a new password—by finding and fixing vulnerabilities in those the competitions sends them (uscyberpatriot.org).

• American Mathematics Competitions: Students take timed math tests with questions varying by age group; the highest scoring students move on invitational competitions, such as the USA Mathematics Olympiad (maa.org).

• VEX Competitions: VEX, maker of educational robotics materials, holds competitions that require students to create and operate robots by responding to a challenge using VEX products (vexrobotics.com).

Projects for *Best Hospitals 2016* (published in July)

“Is prevention possible?”
In 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics directed parents to delay feeding their babies foods associated with allergies, such as milk, eggs and peanuts, until ages 1, 2 and 3 respectively. A decade later, the percentage of children with food allergies had risen by roughly 50 percent, and numerous studies have caused the group to pull back from the recommendation. Now, in the wake of convincing new research suggesting that an early introduction to peanuts might actually be protective, the AAP, the National Institutes of Health and other allergy research groups are on the verge of overhauling their guidance.

The new study, conducted by researchers in the UK and known as “LEAP” (for “learning early about peanut allergy”), was inspired by the observation that Israeli children, who regularly eat Bamba, a popular peanut butter-flavored snack produced in Israel, are less likely to have a peanut allergy than children in the UK. LEAP researchers divided 617 infants who had a high risk of developing a peanut allergy into two groups, assigning one to avoid peanuts and the other to eat small quantities of Bamba starting between 4 and 11 months old until they turned 5. Result: The group that ate peanuts was 86 percent less likely to become allergic.

The study’s significance lies in its randomized and controlled nature, says David Fleischer, an allergist at Children’s Hospital Colorado. The findings will factor prominently in the new guidelines, says Fleischer, who is part of the committee creating them. He expects that the new guidance will be released by the end of the year. The reality is that the vast majority of kids won’t get a food allergy, says Robert Wood, chief of allergy and immunology at Johns Hopkins Children’s Center. But since there are an
estimated 150 to 200 fatal food reactions in children each year, knowing that they can potentially lower the risk of an allergy will undoubtedly relieve parents.

A 2013 article written by a committee of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology may offer a hint of what the new stance will be. In it, Fleischer outlined research indicating that once babies are successfully introduced to solid foods between 4 and 6 months of age, parents should give them tastes of allergenic foods one at a time, waiting three to five days between each introduction. (Peanuts can’t be fed to infants, but a smidgen of peanut butter, perhaps mixed with cereal or fruit, can do the job.) Although these recommendations predate the LEAP study, Wood notes, the recent research has given them more authority.

How can you predict whether your baby or toddler is among the tiny minority who will develop a food allergy? Having an allergic sibling means a child is seven times more likely than someone without to develop one, says Susan Raschal, an allergist at Covenant Allergy and Asthma Care in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Eczema and asthma indicate a higher risk, and some allergists think having a parent with a food allergy might also make a child more susceptible. Parents of these kids should consult a doctor before introducing potentially problematic foods, Wood says. Allergists can launch a carefully controlled food challenge, giving the child the food in increasing doses in the office, with 15-minute monitoring periods in between. A reaction means a consultation about techniques to avoid the food, alerting caregivers and responding to a severe reaction.

Regardless of a child’s risk, knowing the signs of an allergic reaction is critical. Look for hives, swelling around the lips and eyes, coughing, wheezing, vomiting, crying, red skin and a runny nose or other asthma symptoms. “Twenty years ago, I’d say, ‘avoid,
avoid, avoid,’” says Alkis Togias, branch chief of the Allergy, Asthma and Airway Biology Branch at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. “But this strict approach does not seem to have worked.” The new guidelines should make it easier for hesitant doctors and concerned parents to make the leap.

“The new frontier for pediatric surgery”

Thanks to advances in modern medicine, premature babies and other children born with complications are more likely than ever to live full, healthy lives. But this also means more parents will have a baby or toddler among the one million children who will need surgery with a general anesthetic before their fourth birthday. The potential for long-term effects after being exposed to anesthesia that young is a high-profile question of growing importance for anesthesiologists, surgeons, pediatricians and parents.

The initial concern emerged from studies done on mice and monkeys, which showed signs of memory and learning disabilities after being exposed to some anesthetics and sedatives. The theory is that anesthesia and other drugs that make you unconscious can injure and kill a developing brain’s cells, and change their structure and ability to communicate with one another, says Beverly Orser, MD, professor of physiology at the University of Toronto. Experts estimate the brain is at the highest risk for these effects between the ages of three and four.

All of the research in humans has been observational, where doctors have looked for signs of disabilities in exposed children years later. The results vary. One study suggests that children exposed to anesthesia more than once are almost twice as likely as unexposed children to have a learning disability; another indicates that gender and mother’s educational level are better predictors of a child’s success in school than
exposure to anesthesia. It’s also too soon to know whether certain types of pediatric patients are more at-risk for experiencing effects or if the effects could fade with time.

The evidence for long-term risks in children is far from established, but that doesn’t mean parents shouldn’t discuss it with their child’s doctor. If a child might need surgery, one of the first questions to answer is if the procedure can wait, which “gives you more time to know the child is healthy and to discover potential problems you might not otherwise know about,” says Connie Houck, MD, senior associate of perioperative anesthesia at Boston Children’s Hospital. Houck is also chair of the American Association of Pediatrics’ surgical advisory panel, which is in the early stages of researching a consensus about procedures that can be safely postponed, “not because there’s definitely a problem, but because there’s questions,” Houck says.

For many families, waiting until a child’s fifth birthday to do a surgery isn’t an option. And general anesthesia is necessary for most procedures, especially in little ones, who fidget. “We need to look at the overall picture in terms of risks and benefits,” says Lena Sun, MD, chief of the pediatric anesthesiology division at New York Children’s Hospital. “The last thing I’d want is a child who needs something done not to have it done because it’s an up in the air question.” Ultimately, the decision about whether a child has surgery should be left up to the surgeon, care provider and parents, says Santhanam Suresh, MD and head of the department of pediatric anesthesiology at Lurie Children’s Hospital in Chicago. “There’s a judgement call. Each and every case is individual,” he says.

Learning more about the potential risks of anesthesia on growing brains is public health issue, but it’s equally important to know that whatever effects that might emerge
are “relatively modest,” says Randall Flick, MD and director of Mayo Clinic’s Children’s Center. “If they were more severe, we would have known this a long time ago because we’ve been using anesthesia for decades.”

**Project for Best Colleges 2016 (published in September)**

“To join or not to join”

Collegebound seniors might feel relieved after settling on where they’ll be going come fall, but the big decisions are far from over. Is it better to pick a roommate or be randomly assigned one? What courses make sense and what majors bear considering? Will joining a frat or sorority be the right move for me? Despite what the headlines might have you believe, “going Greek” entails more than an intense social life – including responsibilities to the chapter and often to the local community, for example, as well as money out of pocket. Yes, the occasional (if not frequent) party is still an integral part of the fraternal experience. But being active in the Greek system is actually supposed to be “about developing yourself as a total person,” says Peter Smithhisler, president and CEO of the North-American Interfraternity Conference. The governing structure and membership activities are aimed at honing leadership skills, he says, and often involve managing people and a budget.

Meantime, the hard-partying lifestyle has been under attack for some time (story, Page TK). “There have been systemic changes to the entire Greek system within the last 20 to 30 years,” says Alan DeSantis, professor of communication at University of Kentucky and author of “Inside Greek U.: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Power, Pleasure, and Prestige.” Especially at big state institutions, for example, “zero-tolerance policies on hazing have eliminated public humiliation in places like the quad.
and cafeteria,” he says. And many colleges have implemented stricter alcohol policies. In January, Dartmouth College announced an aggressive plan aimed not just at the 51 percent of students affiliated with a Greek organization, but at the whole school culture. Student organizations that give new members, also known as “pledges,” a lesser or “probationary” status must end the practice. Everybody will undergo a four-year program of mandatory education on sexual violence prevention, and hard alcohol will be banned on campus. Here are some thoughts about Greek life to contemplate as you decide on your own moves:

Why join? Many students join a house to make a large community feel smaller, to establish a social safety net in one fell swoop. “Coming into your own is a hard process,” says Aubrey Frazier, assistant director of fraternity and sorority life at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. “Connecting to a fraternity or sorority can help.”

Others are attracted to the shot at leadership positions, philanthropic opportunities and strong alumni support. Students interested exclusively in parties might be surprised to find out that Greek students tend to graduate at a higher rate than average, and that the organizations pride themselves on instilling community and moral values in their members. “We enjoy our weekends, but the entire experience and process has provided me with the opportunity for self-development and self-reflection,” says Frank Baptista, a 2015 grad of American University in Washington, D.C., whose experience in Sigma Chi didn’t match up with his expectations for fraternity life at all. Baptista served as president of his fraternity and on AU’s fraternity and sorority life programming board.

What percentage of students participates? In general, smaller schools tend to have a higher percentage of Greek students, Frazier says. “On some campuses, there’s the
sense that you have to join fraternity and sorority life to be somebody.” Similarly, on rural campuses without access to a vibrant off-campus community, notes Matthew Hughey, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut who’s researched the Greek system, it’s often the case that “fraternity and sorority houses are where people go.” He adds that they are often social hubs on urban campuses, too, but a city setting affords non-Greek students more outlets.

A fulfilling collegiate experience without Greek life relies on finding other ways to meet and bond with like-minded people, and big schools typically have hundreds of other student groups to choose from, as well as the chance to rally in a big way around athletics. At Washington and Lee University, a small school in Lexington, Virginia, 77 percent of students join, compared to about 10 percent at the University of Texas at Austin.

What’s the time commitment? As is true with most pursuits, Greek faculty advisors say you get out what you put in. Becoming an officer of the chapter or taking an active role in social and philanthropic events, for example, will offer rewards in fun and experience that just doing the bare minimum won’t.

And what is the bare minimum? Frazier says to expect a weekly chapter meeting at the very least; skipping often leads to fines. Most organizations will also plan and host one or two social events a month, from cocktail parties with live music to crawfish boils, and at least one community service event per semester. The size of the chapter roles can dictate how much time each member must commit. Baptista dedicated about 15 hours a week to Sigma Chi activities, which included chairing the chapter’s Derby Days competition for cancer research; Sigma Chi’s philanthropy events raised $27,000 over the
course of last year. He estimates that members without leadership roles devote four to five hours a week to meetings and helping with chapter events.

What will the cost be? Don’t be afraid to ask up front about the financial burden. Dues can range from $20 to $200 or more a month. Members living in chapter housing will have additional expenses for room and board.

Generally, dues follow a monthly schedule and cover social events, insurance, dues to the national (or international) chapter and operational costs, such as recruitment and upkeep of community spaces. Frazier says Greek students at Rollins pay between $300 and $900 a semester. Scholarships are often available through schools and the Greek national organizations, and some chapters have payment plans that allow members to spread the cost over an entire semester or year.

Once you’ve decided to go through recruitment, experts recommend doing some research to find the place that best aligns with your values and interests. “Anybody can put on a good show for three days,” says Frazier. “Look into each organization’s events and how they convey themselves.” Other attributes to think about include size and the opportunities for housing.

How many members are in the chapter? Big chapters tend to have money and can easily support campus-wide events, and they boast big alumni networks. But the sense of brotherhood or sisterhood can suffer when members can’t know everyone, and it can be tough to gain a leadership role. On the other hand, a tiny chapter is apt to lack resources and programming. DeSantis believes chapters should max out at 70 people. In addition to considering the personality of a chapter, Myrna Hernandez, assistant dean of students for campus living and community development at Depauw University in Indiana,
suggests that students think about whether they’re looking for the greatest number of connections or the deepest connections.

Does the chapter have a house? Will you be expected to live there? Students at some universities hold chapter meetings in classrooms, whereas members at other schools eat, sleep, study and socialize in their fraternity or sorority house. Whenever she wanted “to crash there between classes or hang out or eat lunch,” the Alpha Xi Delta house was accessible and welcoming even though she wasn’t one of the 10 sisters who chose to live there, says Stephanie Riley, a 2015 grad of California State University–Northridge. Some Greek organizations do require students to live in the house for a time, regardless of whether it’s more economical than dorms or off-campus apartments.

Because sorority houses on most campuses don’t host parties with alcohol, Julie Johnson, panhellenics committee chairman of the National Panhellenics Conference of sororities, says living there isn’t dissimilar to the residence hall experience. Anyone choosing a fraternity will want to know not only whether they’ll have to live in a house but also what that lifestyle would entail.

What’s chapter policy on other activities? Greek students tend to be hyper-involved in campus life, since a big part of the system’s focus is on giving back to the community. Greek-affiliated students occupy most student leadership positions at Rollins, for example, Frazier says.

Often, in fact, joining other groups is not only recommended but required by the national or international organization. Some frats and sororities expect to see their members spread prominently throughout organizations on campus, such as student government or new student orientation; others are OK with attending a weekly club
meeting. “It’s important for students not to be one-dimensional,” Smithhisler says. “The balancing act is part of the collegiate experience.” The result may be a crammed schedule.

Is hazing an issue? Most campuses now ban the hazing of new pledges, as do all members of the North-American Interfraternity Conference and the National Panhellenic Conference. Forty-four states even have anti-hazing laws. “There’s definitely been a concerted effort on behalf of fraternities to root out hazing,” says Moe Stephens, director of Greek life and leadership at University of Puget Sound in Washington. But it’s still “a touchy subject that everyone needs to keep talking about.”

For many students these days, the rituals that go along with becoming a member offer a positive and risk-free experience – “overwhelming in a good way,” recalls Riley. A favorite memory: meeting the “big sister” assigned to mentor her, who had anonymously pampered her for a week with treats such as iced coffee delivered to class and a decorated car.

Like college campuses and the students who populate them, Greek organizations have distinct personalities. The idea is to search for a good match.

**Sidebar on preventing sexual assault at colleges.**

According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, drunk assailants commit up to 75 percent of sexual assaults at colleges, and 81 percent involve victims under the influence and unable to consent. Unlike the health complications caused by excessive drinking, the nature of the relationship between intoxication and sexual assault is unclear. “The problem with alcohol is that it’s neither all good nor all bad,” says Dr. Corey Slovis, professor and chairman of the department of emergency
medicine at Vanderbilt University. “It relaxes you and lowers your inhibitions, but it’s never a defense for sexually assaulting someone.”

When leaving home for the first time, students become responsible for their safety and health. These tips will help prepare them for the dangerous side of college drinking regardless of gender, school or interest in the party scene.

Research your school. The earlier you start the better, even during the initial college search, says Julie Zeilinger, member of Barnard College’s class of 2015 and editor of feminist blog “The F-Bomb.” Look into what consent education a school requires, resources for victims offered by the health center and on-campus organizations, and whether the administration has adopted amnesty policies. (Some schools have implemented rules to protect victims of an assault from being punished for violating the code of conduct at the time of the incident by, say, drinking underage or using drugs.) To avoid additional stress in the aftermath of an assault, familiarize yourself with your school’s sexual misconduct policy when you arrive, suggests Tracey Vitcher, chair of the Board at SAFER. And last, be skeptical of schools reporting low numbers of assaults. They might seem safer on the surface, but these schools generally underreport or don’t provide safe avenues for students to report.

Avoid intoxication, especially if you’re new to drinking. You’ve heard it before: Drinking alcohol increases impulsivity, reduces inhibitions, impairs your ability to make decisions and, in high doses, eliminates memory – all effects that can interfere in an intimate situation. Still, being drunk is never an excuse for sexual assault, nor does it mean an assault is a victim’s fault. Drinking is a behavior that needs to be learned, and
NIAAA research shows when parents and students discuss the risks of alcohol and family expectations, students are less likely to get drunk.

Understand how alcohol affects you. Factors like age, gender, ethnicity and weight, as well as how often you drink and whether you’ve eaten before drinking, play a role in how your body will respond to alcohol. Director of the NIAAA Dr. George Koob stresses the relationship among dose, blood-alcohol level (BAC) and bodily effect. A BAC of .08 will start to disrupt your brain function; half the people who reach .5 will die. Visit rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov for personalized information on your alcohol consumption.

Go out in groups. When drinking, students of every gender can benefit from sticking with at least one person whom they trust. Go out with the mindset that you’ll look out for other people and that everyone has a responsibility to keep those around them safe. Portable technology even makes it easy to ask for help from a friend not with you. Smartphone apps such as Circle of 6 and Kitestring send prewritten texts upon request or automatically to specified emergency contacts, letting them know the app-user might be in danger. “We need better bystander intervention,” Zeilinger says. “Sexual assault affects all of us, and we need to ask ourselves what culture we want to live in.”

Ask for consent. An enthusiastic “yes” goes a long way, but also recognize when consent can’t be given. Dr. Koob says a person who’s been drinking is defined as unable to consent as soon as a sober third-party recognizes the person is impaired. Applying this technique outside of a medical study can be difficult, so in general, this happens around a BAC of .08, the legal driving limit.

**Author Q&As for U.S. News Weekly**
“Just a feel-good exercise?”

Within the last two decades, increasing numbers of organizations, from departments in the federal government to nonprofits, are seeking public input to make tough administrative decisions. Abandoning the superficiality of the traditional town hall meeting, these stakeholders are hiring outside consultants who specialize in engaging citizens. The resulting public dialogue has achieved unprecedented reach, but some wonder whether it gives too much weight to individuals and too little to institutions. In “Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry,” Caroline Lee, an associate professor of sociology at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, explores the need for such public engagement experts and their varied success at catalyzing social change and civic participation. Lee recently spoke with U.S. News about the payoffs and pitfalls of this new trend. Excerpts:

What is the public engagement industry, and who are some of the major actors in it?

“Participation has a long history in the U.S. You can go back to New England town hall meetings or the civil rights movement and find lots of touchstones for current practices. What I call the public engagement industry emerged in the last 30 years or so. It’s consultants, people working in federal agencies and other organizations, or volunteers who produce events that engage a broad cross section of people in decisions affecting their lives. A public hearing where everyone gets three minutes at a microphone is really unsatisfying. This new kind of public engagement involves people talking in small groups, telling their stories, giving reasons for their ideas and maybe even changing their minds.”
What was the catalyst for the rise of this industry?

“The traditional public hearing has been made fun of everywhere from The Onion to [the TV show] “Parks and Recreation.” In the ’80s and ’90s, there was a sense that public participation had been dominated by interest groups, which prevented any attempt at consensus-building. The “decide, announce, defend” model of administrative decision-making wasn’t working.”

How has the rise of the public engagement industry affected democracy as a whole?

“It focuses on actions people can take right away to fix problems in their community, but some problems are too big for individuals to fix. Even if public engagement makes people feel better about decisions their municipalities are making, we need to be asking larger questions about who is taking responsibility.”

Is the rise of the public engagement industry good for democracy?

“It’s a great alternative to people shouting at each other, and participants generally like it, but it’s driven by the partisanship, polarization and professionalization that it seems to be a reaction to. We’ve had a massive expansion of everyday people participating in politics, but we’ve also seen deepening inequality. Participation in itself can be good, but we need to ask hard questions about the impacts of expanding participation. Is it enabling people to have more voice, or is it just a feel-good exercise?”

How have technology and social media played a role in these changes?

“Face-to-face dialogue is essential to good public engagement. You do see social media experimentation, but this public engagement is way more participatory and demanding than voting or clicking “like” on some political organization’s Facebook
page. It’s changing expectations of how much people want to participate in politics in some pretty exciting ways.”

Has the public engagement industry caused any problems for democratic participation?

“These processes have short-term impacts on people’s attitudes towards politics and their sense that individuals are key to social change, but this new kind of public engagement shifts people’s expectations of the institutions that we all rely on. Participants tend to see the local level as the only reasonable place for action and to leave the larger politics of public life up to those organizational clients and institutional sponsors. We face such challenging systemic problems – climate change, the global financial crisis – that we just can’t afford for the ambitions of the electorate to be limited that way.”

What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

“You hear a lot today about how bad conventional politics is. It’s partisan and it’s gridlocked. These new forms of engagement seem really appealing. Over the long term, these processes are likely to become routine. But I want people to think about the consequences of this becoming the kind of politics that we think is ideal. It feels empowering to be part of the solution, but there are still cases where larger scale organization may be necessary, and we need to think about how to make that part of the political process, too.”

“Giving Citizens a Bigger Voice” [Jan. 30] incorrectly named a model of administrative decision-making. It is the “decide, announce, defend” model.

“Robbing their people blind”
In many nations today, corruption pervades every level of society. When people in these countries finally rebel out of frustration, their response often takes extreme forms. According to Sarah Chayes, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and author of “Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security,” this kind of malfeasance often is mischaracterized as a consequence of internal security crises when it is really the cause. Chayes, who was inspired to write the book after spending 10 years in Afghanistan during the Taliban insurgency, shows how corruption has been destabilizing countries for centuries and how it consistently undermines international efforts to achieve long-term global stability. Excerpts:

Why did you decide to write the book?

“Corruption became the focus of my work in Afghanistan, but what drove me ultimately to write the book was a speech that I gave in early 2010 to an audience of about 250 counternarcotics officers from 45 countries. The talk was on the opium economy in southern Afghanistan, but I couldn’t resist including two slides that diagrammed how the Afghan government was functioning as a vertically integrated criminal organization. I expected those to be throwaway slides but, to my amazement, people lined up to tell me that I had just described their own country. In every one of these countries, there was a violent, religious insurgency. I thought: There’s a cause and effect here that everyone is missing, and I need to explore it more deeply.”

You suggest corruption has risen in many nations since the 1990s. What caused this?
“My hypothesis is that it’s connected to the collapse of communism. This change in political ethics took the brakes off leaders who had been constrained in their public behavior by the communist ethos. It also linked excessive wealth to virtue.”

What are the different forms of corruption?

“One type is petty corruption, which refers to shakedowns of regular people by government officials. Another is public procurement theft, or siphoning off public money via padded contracts. There’s also the use of bureaucracy as an enforcement arm for the kleptocratic elite. The equivalent of the IRS in Tunisia often would allow businesspeople not to pay their taxes so long as they gave a cut of their profits to the ruling family. Then there’s high-level corruption – the siphoning off of revenues at the top. But these aren’t separate activities. Corruption at the bottom and in the middle feeds the guys at the top.”

What is the connection between government corruption and religious extremism?

“For a decade, I watched how the increasingly abusive and flagrant corruption of [former Afghan President Hamid] Karzai’s regime (and the U.S. role in enabling that) drove people into the arms of the Taliban. Think of how you feel after three wasted hours in the DMV, when you’ve got no recourse, when you’ve been insulted, when you know the money taken from you will go in someone [else’s] pocket, and when this happens for the fifth time. You want to shoot someone, and the Taliban are there with a gun. Corruption isn’t the only driver of religious extremism and revolution, but it’s an accelerant.”

What kind of corruption is in the U.S.?

“Look at the inordinate role that Wall Street and the energy, health and military-contracting industries have had in determining U.S. public policy. Look at the financial
meltdown of 2008 and the incredibly little [amount of] personal accountability that has been imposed on the individuals whose decisions led to that meltdown. We’re on the continuum.”

How should the U.S. engage with corrupt governments?

“People need to demand better from their own governing elite, but the U.S. can do more to support their efforts. It [could use] visa denials, asset forfeiture, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act and constraints on military assistance [to pressure individual] countries. Ordinary people can boycott banks serving as money launderers for criminals and kleptocrats, as well as law firms defending corrupt government officials.”

Will corruption ever cease to be a political or security issue?

“I don’t think it ever will because humans have conflicting instincts behind their behavior. One is greed; another is a desire for justice. As long as we have greed plus ingenuity, we’ll be corrupt.”

What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

“The issue of corruption is urgent and immediate. If we care about our security, we need to reduce how our government enables corruption abroad. We also need to look at the subtle ways our political process is being corrupted in America. If we don’t want to lose our republic, then we better get indignant and do something about it.”

“The crystal ball of U.S. security”

Andrew Marshall was known for seeing the future, but after 42 years as the director of the Office of Net Assessment, he retired in January. And no one can predict what will happen to the mysterious section of the Department of Defense – not even Marshall. In “The Last Warrior: Andrew Marshall and the Shaping of Modern American
Defense Strategy," Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts, both former Marshall staffers, chronicle Marshall’s upbringing and career, from his advising on U.S. military strategy at the RAND Corporation to his four decades in the federal government. Marshall illuminated the need for net assessment (surveying U.S. military capabilities as compared to those of opponents), predicted America’s rivalry with China and led the nation’s involvement in the Revolution in Military Affairs. U.S. News talked with Watts about declassified net assessments, the office’s contributions and a post-Marshall Defense Department. Excerpts:

Why did you decide to write a book about Andrew Marshall?

“Because of the way the Office of Net Assessment had operated going all the way back to 1973, there was very little understanding of what went on, the sensitivity of the assessments that were produced and who the principle customer was – the secretary of defense, certainly in the early days. Along with some others who had worked in the office, I felt it was important to reveal enough about diagnostic net assessment so it would continue as a practice within the Department of Defense and hopefully the U.S. government.”

What led to the creation of Office of Net Assessment?

“Net Assessment was a creature of the Cold War. In the end of 1971, President Richard Nixon did a reorganization of the foreign intelligence community, and one of the things that got added into the directive was to establish a net assessment group on the [National Security Council]. Andy was consulting on the NSC at the time, and he was asked to head it. It motored along until 1973. When [former Director of Central Intelligence] Jim Schlesinger was shifted to the Pentagon to be Secretary of Defense, he
talked [former Secretary of State Henry] Kissinger into letting Andy come with him to the Pentagon to set up a net assessment program.”

How did Andrew Marshall alter U.S. defense strategy?

“He asked good questions and because of his longevity was able to continue asking questions. Also, he steadily identified emerging strategic problems the Defense Department would face in addition to opportunities to compete more effectively. He recognized that the rise of China was going to be a long-term strategic problem long before most people in Washington and the security studies community were willing to see it as anything other than an economic trading partner.”

What portion of current U.S. defense strategy is attributable to Marshall?

“Andy and people on his staff raised the issue that after the Cold War ended, precision munitions, wide-area surveillance platforms and computerized command-and-control networks were going to change how conventional wars would be fought in the future. He started the conversation first within the Pentagon, and eventually it went international. It’s still being discussed. He also contributed to AirSea battle when the Air Force and Navy finally concluded that neither of them could win a future conflict involving China on their own, and therefore they needed to start working together instead of staying in their separate compartments.”

What are some of his biggest contributions?

“He’s been a mentor to a lot of people by exposing them to diagnostic assessment. A little over 100 people have been on his staff either as military officers or civilian analysts. If you asked Andy Marshall, I think he would say the people that he’s been able to help and influence would be his most important contribution.”
How did changing presidential administrations affect his work?

“While Andy certainly had views, he was never political. Andy wanted the assessments to diagnose the situation and point to emerging problems and opportunities, but it was up to the secretary of defense to make actual choices or changes. He didn’t get entangled in politics.”

How will the Office of Net Assessment change without Marshall at its helm?

“I honestly don’t know. Right now there is strong support for the office from the [Office of the Secretary of Defense and from] Congress, but I would be foolish to hazard a guess as to whether that will continue into the next administration.”

What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

“Andy is a remarkable personality. He got involved in strategic nuclear forces in 1939 and continued to be until the beginning of this year. His perspective on military affairs and security studies and strategy is unprecedented. I hope readers gain an appreciation for the unusual contributions Andy made over the decades.”

“The end of gender roles”

In 2015, gender roles seem to seep into every aspect of society, from TV commercials to talk of a woman in the White House, but they’re actually a new societal phenomenon. Of the 100,000 years humans have been on Earth, women have been excluded from power only for the last 12,000. And even more recently, women have started to break away from the identities that color them as less capable than men. But according to Melvin Konner, a medical doctor and professor of anthropology at Emory University, this progression doesn’t mean women and men are the same. He argues in his book “Women After All: Sex, Evolution and the End of Male Supremacy” that in the
biological battle of the sexes, women and men fundamentally differ – and women come out on top. Konner talked with U.S. News about his anthropological research, the origin of gender roles and, most importantly, their expiration. Excerpts:

What inspired you to write the book?

“While studying the development of children in Botswana and London, a colleague and I found one difference consistent in both places: boys are more aggressive than girls. Every culture has this, and it points to something biological and not learned, at least partly. Also, I saw my daughters grow into outstanding young women, and I finally decided that, even though I’m a man, I wanted to weigh in on why women are superior and try to combat the age-old beliefs that people have to the contrary.”

What caused society to establish gender roles?

“In hunting and gathering societies, women couldn’t be excluded because of the small groups, but around 12,000 years ago, there was a big increase in population density. People settled down and started farming, and the result was that men could exclude women from decision-making and specialized in roles within society. Private and public spaces became separate, and it was possible to relegate women to the home and keep them out of public life.”

Why were women excluded from positions of power?

“Everything in that era was contingent on physical strength, and that enabled men to develop a worldwide ideology of male supremacy, which became accepted in the so-called civilizations that emerged from farming societies. It lasted until a couple of centuries ago.”

What parallels do you see between ancient male supremacy and today’s?
“What Boko Haram and [the Islamic State group] do is a good indication of what men throughout history have done: make war, slaughter their enemies, capture wives and daughters, and use those girls and women for their own sexual purposes. That’s been the essence of the male-dominated world for 10-12,000 years.”

What progress toward gender equality has been made in the last two centuries?

“In the 1800s, women started chipping away at oppression with the establishment of secondary schools for girls, admissions of women to colleges and medical schools and the beginning of the suffragist movement. People say nothing is changing, but that’s ridiculous. All over the developing world, there are girls in school who never could go until a few years ago. The number of women in the Senate has gone from 1 to 20 since 1985. The number of women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies has gone from 0 to 25 since 1998. The majority of high school graduates, college entrants and graduates are women. Nearly half of law and medical school entering classes and 40 percent of business school classes are women. I don’t think there’s any stopping it.”

What are some current examples of male supremacy?

“Ninety-five percent of CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations are still male. There are attempts to exclude women from the board rooms of many of these companies. Women are paid 77 cents on the dollar for equivalent jobs. Women are belittled, bullied and subject to sexual harassment and ridiculed for taking time off to have a baby. There’s a whole ideology that only men can do certain kinds of things, and it’s false.”

What’s the biggest difference between men and women?
“Men will pay for sex; they’ll harm for sex, they’ll force sex and they’ll kill for sex. It’s just not characteristic of women to do those things. In all societies, 90 percent of homicides are done by men.”

Why do you think male supremacy is nearing its end?

“The burst of women’s achievement feels like pent-up energy and ability suppressed by thousands of years of wasting half the talent of the human race. Within the last half century, women have proved wrong 12,000 years of claims why women couldn’t do certain jobs – because of their menstrual cycles, they’re too emotional, don’t think logically, might get pregnant, are easily intimidated by men, can’t take the stress of public life and leadership. It’s the beginning of something new.”
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-Puren (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 to 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
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


Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Background Info

• How long have you been a journalist?
• Why did you want to become a journalist?
• What led you to reporting on sexual assault?

RQ1: How do journalists feel about the current state of journalistic ethics regarding sexual-violence reporting?

• What was your first experience reporting on sexual assault like?
  o What was particularly challenging?
  o What made you uncomfortable?
• How have you seen attitudes towards sexual assault change in the newsroom or among colleagues?
• What problems have you observed in your own experience with covering sexual assault?
• Tell me about a time when you had questions about whether something in your own experience relating to sexual assault reporting was unethical.
• How do you approach victim credibility?
• How do you approach assailant credibility?
• What problems have you observed in other outlets’ coverage of sexual assault?
  o Tell me about a time you saw a story on sexual assault that you thought was handled poorly.
• What standards does your newsroom have for covering sexual assault?
  o Tell me about a time you thought they were ineffective.
  o Tell me about a time you thought they were effective.
• Do you have any personal standards you uphold in your sexual assault reporting?
  o How did you come up with these rules for yourself?
• Do you think media outlets need to change the way they cover sexual assault?
  o What are some of the problematic themes or procedures you’ve noticed?
  o Why do journalists continue to use them?

RQ2: What do journalists think about using the test in their own work?

• How would you feel about asking themselves the questions in the test every time they cover sexual assault?
  o Tell me about a time in your career when it would not have been feasible.
  o Tell me about a time in your career when you would have benefited from the test.
• Which types of questions do you think are the most problematic?
  o Those relating to victim’s attire? Victim’s location? Victim’s relationship with assailant? Victim’s alcohol and drug consumption?
• Which are the least problematic?
• Would you use this test?

RQ3: How do journalists think the professional community would respond to a new, progressive standard?

• Is it reasonable to expect all news outlets to follow the same set of rules for covering sexual assault every time?
  ○ What problems do you foresee with implementing rules that to be carried out in every story? (For example, never state what the victim was wearing or whether the victim had been drinking.)
• How does the way you report on sexual assault compare to the way you report on other crimes?
  ○ Do you think sexual assault should be treated differently from other crimes?
  ○ How should its low conviction rate affect the way it’s reported on?
  ○ How should the intimate nature of the crime affect the way it’s reported on?
  ○ Should all sexual assault be reported on in the same way?
• What outside influences do you have that affect the way you report on sexual assault?
  ○ What legal issues do you have to consider when writing about sexual assault?

RQ4: What do journalists think about the potential for the test to affect change in our society’s understanding of sexual violence?

• What problems do you see with the way our society perceives sexual assault?
• How do you think these views are reflected or maintained in mainstream media?
• How can journalists encourage society to change its views on sexual assault?
  ○ Is it journalists’ responsibility to incite change or to preserve the status quo?
• How do you think following the rules of the test in a story might affect a reader’s understanding of an incident?
  ○ Is the test drastic enough to change personal views?
  ○ Is the test too drastic?
Appendix B: Professional Project Proposal

There was a substantial change to my professional experience. Although I did all the work related to the weekly described in the proposal’s introduction, my main responsibilities were pitching, reporting and writing stories for U.S. News’s publications team, which produces the grad school, hospital and college rankings books. My research methods also underwent changes. I used my professional network to acquire participants as planned, but I was not able to acquire the ideal amount of diversity among subjects. Most were female and reporters whose primary medium is written stories that run in print or online. Also, the finalized set of guidelines was not complete by the time I needed to begin my interviews, so I had to discuss a new standard for sexual assault coverage as a concept with hypothetical examples of potential rules instead of parsing the each rule individually. Last, after conducting several interviews, I realized the second research question was essentially asking what the third and fourth questions addressed in tandem, so I chose to eliminate it because it was not adding anything different to the interviews.

Introduction

As an undergraduate student at Georgetown University, I studied French and English. The coursework required for these subject areas primed me for a degree in journalism because of the focus on analysis of the written word and foreign cultures. The English component encouraged me to read, which I have continued to do in the journalism school, but it also forced me to look at the world with a critical eye. Pursuing a French degree instilled in me a love of the mechanics of language, which has influenced my desire to work in magazines as an editor and writer. I had no experience with
interviews or telling stories other than my own before arriving at journalism school, but the frequency with which I wrote in undergrad, as well as the late-night debates I had with classmates, prepared me for working in a newsroom. Both of my areas of study fell under the umbrella of the liberal arts at Georgetown, so I also studied government, philosophy and theology — all subjects that have influenced the way I observe and write about the world around me.

Truthfully, I knew nothing about what working as a magazine journalist requires when I arrived at the journalism school, but I did not know it at the time. I wanted to write professionally, and I strived for a career that would require me to travel. I did not anticipate that my natural abilities, which I would later enhance, would prove to me that my choice was a good one. My semester reporting for *Vox Magazine* led by Dr. Hinnant, my project chair, taught me basic interview skills, how to find a story focus, to manage deadlines, and most importantly, that I love talking to people about their passions. I learned I enjoy writing about varied topics, from farming to feminism to food. (This knowledge has simultaneously encouraged me that I could be happy writing almost anywhere and crippled me with anxiety at the prospect of pinpointing that “anywhere.”) I also discovered that I would enjoy working on a magazine staff even more when I did not have to balance it with two graduate-level courses and a part-time job.

My intermediate writing class with Jennifer Rowe returned me to the fiction-writing skills I developed as an English student. Professor Rowe moved me beyond the structure of the short article into the complicated art of storytelling. Magazine editing, also with Professor Rowe, makes me smile when I push myself to condense my humor into a few words. It centers me when I sit alone and transform into a detective searching
for ways to make a story more compelling. It has convinced me that I should make magazines. Advanced Writing with Berkley Hudson has helped me discover the kind of writer I hope to become. That person is someone who tells stories that matter not only just to me, but also to entire communities, to those who are curious and to those who want change.

Platitudes aside, the journalism program has prepared and excited me to be a magazine writer. Because I started this program with zero familiarity with the industry, the professional project will complete my educational experience. By the time I graduate in May, on my resume, I will have dozens of clips, copyediting skills, experience with PR and marketing from my assistantship and several months as an intern at a digital weekly. I am confident that my two years at the Missouri School of Journalism have positioned me to contribute at a high level to any magazine I choose to work for. I cannot predict exactly where my career will take me, but I can describe where I hope it does. I would like to start out as a staff writer for a magazine or blog. I hope to gather different experiences at different outlets and ideally move up the ranks at my favorite. I’d like to see my influence or voice disseminated among the public and know that it has helped someone think differently, pursue a new hobby or laugh. I’ve always thought that I wanted to transition to PR work for nonprofits, but right now, that seems too limiting. What I want for my career is to spend it being creative and upholding my integrity.

Professional Skills

For the professional portion of my project, I will be working for *U.S. News Weekly*, a weekly political analysis magazine that is downloadable in PDF and available for tablets. It is part of *U.S. News and World Report*. The magazine regularly covers
events taking place on Capitol Hill and policy issues, and incorporates the perspectives of well-known analysts and authors. According to the magazine’s managing editor Morgan Felchner, the responsibilities of interns are widespread. At the start of the internship, I will conduct interviews for the Q&As with authors that run every week in the back-of-book section. I will write and edit them myself. Additionally, I will help with research for features, pitch stories and be one of the final sets of eyes in the copyediting and proofreading stages of stories. My work will be published in the digital magazine.

The internship I had this past summer with health newswire service HealthDay has prepared me for this position in addition to my coursework in the journalism school. At HealthDay, every week I pitched several story ideas for educational video segments on women’s health topics. I researched and interviewed experts in different health fields and spent hours on nonprofit and government sites to find relevant facts and statistics for stories I wrote as a freelancer. They were published on consumer health site Everyday Health. As a writer for Vox Magazine, I have written Q&As and become comfortable interviewing sources with varying levels of celebrity. I also learned to write quickly and accurately and have grown familiar with the entire story-production process. These experiences played in an integral role in my hiring at U.S. News Weekly; they convinced both the staff of the magazine and myself that I will contribute to the publication in a significant way.

I will start my internship on January 5, 2015. Because I am working for academic credit without pay, I will have to stop working by the time I complete my degree. I will be working from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day in their office in Georgetown; however, I will also be available on Fridays to attend the Washington Program’s required meetings.
and seminars. I will include my writing, research and the stories I helped to edit in my final project report to chronicle how my work has improved during my time at *U.S. News Weekly*. I will work with various editors and staff reporters from the magazine and will report to managing editor Morgan Felchner. I will be supervised by magazine employees but will also be expected to work on my own.

**Theoretical Framework**

My professional project’s scholarly research component seeks to build on the results of a study that established a new, progressive standard for news coverage of sexual violence. This study was led by Dr. Amanda Hinnant, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism. I participated in the research, which was conducted during the fall of 2014. We plan to have it published by the journal *Feminist Media Studies*. The original study explored different approaches to covering sexual assault and rape and analyzed harmful and positive techniques to create a list of best practices for discussing sexual assault in the mainstream media. It is similar in concept 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 test in Hinnant’s research ultimately asserts 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 if the complainant would rather be referred to as ‘victim’ or ‘survivor.’”

My research will contribute to the field of professional journalism by assessing how journalists respond to the idea of a new standard for covering sexual violence posited by Hinnant et. al. The Hinnant study was primarily theoretical; therefore, my research will assess whether its standard can be applied successfully in newsrooms. By interviewing journalists with experience in covering sexual violence, my scholarly research will gauge the journalistic community’s response to establishing a new normative standard for discussing the controversial and sensitive topic. The study will answer the questions: How do journalists feel about the current state of journalistic ethics regarding sexual-violence reporting? How do journalists feel about changing the standards the mainstream news media use when talking about sexual violence? 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?

This research is supported by the frameworks of normative and feminist media theory. 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-Puren (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) *Ubuntunism*, 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 to 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.

Methods

Through interviews with a variety of journalists who have experience covering sexual violence, this research will explore whether the journalistic community is ready to implement a new standard for sexual-assault coverage. Qualitative research is 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
they 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 will use interviews because this method allows the researcher to
delve into another individual’s perspective on a topic and establishes a more 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 aims to elucidate how
journalists approach sexual assault by asking about their lived experiences and how the
test might fit into them. Besley & Roberts’ (2010) research questions also focused on
personal views and professional experiences, and they answer them effectively through
interviews. I will send my subjects the new standard ahead of the interview to ensure they
are already familiar with what it seeks to do when answering my questions.

One-on-one discussions guided by relevant prompts and questions will reveal the
editorial and reportorial decisions individual journalists have made in their own lives and
will help the researcher to understand a participant’s reasoning. The subjects of this study
will include journalists from different media outlets who have covered sexual violence,
and who play a prominent role in determining sexual-violence-coverage policies for their
publications. Because the research focuses on lived experiences, the main requirement for
participants would be to have covered sexual violence in the news a few times before the
interview. Because the research is focused on the current state of sexual-violence
reporting and how it can be improved, I would include only current journalists as
participants.
Local broadcast, newspaper and magazine journalists will ideally represent the majority of the study participants because these three media forms dominate majority of what Americans consume. These outlets also demand different editorial choices of their journalists, so it will be valuable to observe the variation between how television broadcast journalists, who have the largest consumer base, frame sexual assault versus reporters at local newspapers. Ideally, participants will have different positions within their organizations, such as assigning editors, reporters, columnists and producers, but the most important quality is that they have worked on content covering sexual violence.

Examples of participants might include reporters and editors on crime and public-safety beats or journalists who encountered and wrote about the topic by accident. I hope to have equal representation of men and women in my sample because gender plays a prominent role in how one views the world, as well as how one is viewed by others. I anticipate male and female journalists will have different approaches to framing sexual violence, and equal gender representation would lessen any subconscious gender biases I might have as a researcher.

To gain access to journalists and their potentially unsavory stories, I will guarantee anonymity; the name of the journalist is not as relevant to the study as the rhetoric he or she uses and why he or she uses it when interviewing and writing about sexual violence. I plan to use a similar approach to protecting my subjects’ privacy to that of Besley and Roberts (2010): “Given the small population, we removed detail that might identify individual journalists. This means we cannot link journalists’ comments to coverage of specific meetings, or provide demographics. We, nevertheless, provide as much contextual detail as possible” (p. 71). I will recruit participants through my own
professional network, as well as by “cold” emailing journalists whose sexual-violence reporting I have personally encountered.

I will strive for in-person interviews whenever possible, and because I will participate in the Washington Program, I will highlight Washington, D.C.-based media outlets. Although this might be a small sample, it is appropriate because Washington is a populous city with several university campuses, which are a hotbed for sexual assault. I will use unstructured interviews because “they allow for more emic, emergent understandings to blossom, and for the interviewees’ complex viewpoints to be heard without the strict constraints of scripted questions” (Tracy, 2013, p. 139). Furthermore, less-structured interviews are likely “to tap both content and emotional levels” (Tracy, 2013, p. 139).

The research topic takes on the complicated social issue of gendered violence, and unstructured interviews lend to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic than structured interviews. They allow the researcher to respond freely to participants' comments and to change interview structure from subject to subject based on their experiences. Individual reflection on professional decisions is important to this topic, and unstructured interviews will facilitate this type of discussion. The interviews will still use a protocol, also known as an “interview guide,” with prompts for discussion to ensure each interview generally covers the same ground (Tracy, 2013, p. 139).

I will aspire to publish my research in Feminist Media Studies, Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, Howard Journal of Communications and Mass Communication and Society.
References


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