

INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL THROUGH MEDIA
PORTRAYALS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

by

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A THESIS

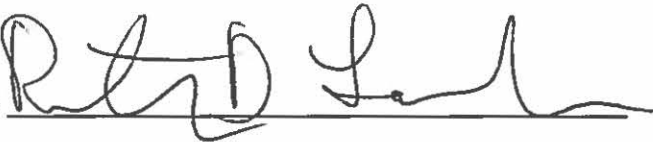
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In this paper, I analyze how media coverage of sexual assault cases impacts the victims of these assaults. In this thesis, I theorize that the media is an institution, under which betrayal of the subject can occur. I define institutional betrayal, and describe current research that has been done on the subject. I examine institutional betrayal by the media through the analysis and review of three specific cases and the ways the victims and perpetrators of each case were portrayed in the media. The issues analyzed include the Steubenville, Glen Ridge case, Kobe Bryant case, and University of Oregon cases. Following the review of these cases, I analyze media outlets' coverage of victims who choose to speak up about their experiences. I end the paper with a discussion of the ways that the media can use their influence as a tool to aid survivors. This paper concludes with the claim that in its role as an institution, the media has the potential to harm victims through insensitive portrayals of sexual assault. I also target the ways that media outlets describe perpetrators and victims that make implications about their credibility, and provide ways for media professionals to avoid these mistakes.

Keywords: Sexual assault, media, institutional betrayal, betrayal trauma theory

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Institutional betrayal through media portrayals of sexual assault

In August 2012, two high school football players in Steubenville, Ohio, were accused of raping a sixteen year-old girl and posting photos of the assault on the internet¹. The boys were found guilty, but the trial, upon receiving heavy media coverage, stirred up controversy around the country – in part because of the graphic nature of the assault and subsequent bragging, but also because of the community, and the nation's, reaction to the verdict. Professional figures in the media expressed sympathy for the rapists and concern about their fate, with one CNN reporter even saying that it was difficult to watch these boys as “their life fell apart”². These reactions incited a national debate about how American society treats the concept of sexual assault. Although in this case, the boys were found guilty, the punishment they received was disproportionately small compared to the magnitude of their crime, and raised questions about the way we view sex offenders, as well as the responsibility that we fail to assign to assailants. The case also brought up the question of the impact the coverage of the case would have on the victim. Would she be further negatively affected by the apparent bias of the media toward her assailants?

Purpose of the Review

The case sparked a dialogue about the dynamic of the media and their interactions with sexual assault survivors. In the Steubenville case, there was a lot of pressure from the communities of the athletes, as well as the media, potentially encouraging silence from the women accusing the athletes. In examining this case and

¹ Marakechi, Kia. CNN's Steubenville Coverage Focuses on Effect Rape Trial Will Have on Rapists, Not Victims. Huffington Post. 17 March 2013.

² *ibid.*

others with similar circumstances, , whether or not the accused was found guilty, we can learn from them about society's understanding of sexual assault, the trauma that a victim goes through from lack of community support, and the role that the media plays in shaping society's perception of each party in the case. Society's lack of understanding about sexual assault, and the resulting lack of community support, are significant problems that connect to media portrayals. I will touch on these issues in this paper. However, given the magnitude of the issue, I will primarily focus on the media portrayals themselves, as well as the role of media outlets. I will define media outlets for the purpose of this thesis, explore the traditional roles of media, and examine the ways, both actively and covertly, that media outlets show preference for one party when covering sexual assault cases. I will discuss the problems with "siding" with either party, and describe ways that media outlets can avoid this type of bias in their coverage of cases.

Evolution of the Topic

The topic of my thesis is relevant and necessary because now more than ever, the media, as an institution, is something that people trust and depend on for accurate information. The presence of the media has become more prevalent with the increased accessibility of internet and television. An institution with so much power has a monumental responsibility, both to its readers and to the people about whom they report. Media outlets must accept the fact that their reporting shapes the way readers view those issues, and that irresponsible or insensitive portrayals of such events can lead readers not only to have lessened empathy for survivors, but to minimize the seriousness of sexual assault. This image is detrimental to trauma survivors, and

continues to perpetuate stereotypes about accusers of sexual assault. Depicting perpetrators as free of responsibility can lead to increased instances of assault in the future, because the assaults are not specifically portrayed as wrong³. In addition to being unfounded, these representations further harm survivors⁴⁵. Insensitive media portrayals of rape or sexual assault can induce increased damage on an already victimized individual because the media is viewed as an institution, thereby making irresponsible reporting on sexual assault a further abuse of power, and a demonstration of institutional betrayal.

The Role of the Media

I aim to demonstrate that the media is in fact an institution, and that irresponsible and insensitive reporting can lead to greater negative impacts not only on sexual assault victims, but on media consumers as well. I will accomplish this by reviewing literature that researches the prevalence of sexual assault and explores concepts of media ethics. I will look at individual cases of rape and sexual assault and firsthand accounts of victims. I will conclude with comments on potential future

³ Kitzinger, J., & Skidmore, P. (1995). Playing safe: Media coverage of child sexual abuse prevention strategies. *Child Abuse Review*, 4(1), 47-56. doi: 10.1002/car.2380040108

⁴ Malamuth, N. M., & Check, J. V. (1981). The effects of mass media exposure on acceptance of violence against women: A field experiment. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 15(4), 436-446.

⁵ O'Driscoll, Patrick. Kobe Bryant, Accuser Settle Her Civil Lawsuit. USA Today. 2 March 2005.

directions for my review, as well as suggestions of how the media can improve the way they handle these cases.

In this review, I define “media” as official news outlets including newspapers and magazines (online and print) and television stations. I do recognize the media could be expanded to include platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites that played a large part in some of the cases I will be examining. However, for the purposes of this thesis I will be drawing my research primarily from officially published sources.

I propose that the media contributes to making a sexual assault survivor/accuser’s experience significantly more or less traumatic based on how they portray the case and the people involved. Media portrayals of sexual assault, if executed carelessly, can lead to increased trauma for the victim, and increased sympathy for perpetrators from observers. This in turn may lead to further insensitive media portrayals - institutional betrayal - of sexual assault survivors/accusers. Institutional betrayal refers to a concept studied by Smith and Freyd, where sexual assault within organized settings is increasingly traumatic for the victim because of the failure of the institution, upon whom the victim depended, to behave in a manner that supports and validates the victim⁶.

Sexual assault is already related to traumatic outcomes⁷ without survivors having to deal with negative exposure from the media. As was found with university

⁶ Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2013). Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(1), 119-124.

⁷ DePrince & Freyd, 2002

institutions, institutional betrayal can exacerbate the outcomes of sexual assault⁸. Furthermore, the media may even perpetrate institutional betrayal with their portrayals of victims in sexual assault cases. Through the lens of betrayal trauma theory⁹, I will look at these cases section by section, examining the media's role in each, and the ways in which they committed institutional betrayal. I will contrast the way the media presented the information of the perpetrators with that of the victims. I will consider the merits of keeping private a victim's personal information¹⁰ and discuss how this concept can clash with attempts to represent the victim and the perpetrator equally. I will conclude with strategies for how the media can better handle these situations, as well as discuss my ideas for future directions based upon this research.

In all of these cases and other high-profile accusations of sexual assault that have taken place in the last 20 years, the reaction of institutions, such as universities, fraternities and sororities, and military organizations, has been just as disturbing as the frequency of the events themselves¹¹. How do we explain this insensitivity toward victims of sexual assault? A good place to start is by looking at the place where we get most of our information: news outlets.

⁸ Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2013). Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(1), 119-124.

⁹ Freyd, 1994

¹⁰ McBride, Kelly. How Journalists Can Provide Fair Coverage When Reporting on Rape Charge in Cleveland Case. 9 May 2013.

¹¹ Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2013). Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(1), 119-124.

The cases I examine in my thesis all received national attention, and people across the country, regardless of whether or not they had any personal investment in the case, had an opinion. This speaks to the ubiquity of media influence and the relevance of their presence in society.

Existing Research

Institutional Betrayal and Betrayal Trauma Theory

According to betrayal trauma theory, or BTT¹², people who experience traumatic events, such as physical or emotional abuse, are more likely to have traumatic outcomes if the perpetrators of the abuse are individuals upon whom the victim trusts or depends¹³. Examples include parent-child abuse and domestic violence¹⁴. Betrayal trauma theory is highlighted by the concept of institutional betrayal (IB). In their primary study regarding institutional betrayal, Smith and Freyd (2013) define IB as follows: “[...] sexual assault occurring in a context where an important institution acts in a way that betrays its member’s trust will be especially damaging” (p. 120). Smith and Freyd (2013) found that institutional betrayal does occur if the assault is committed within an institution to which the person belongs. They defined “institutions” as “large systems such as a university, the military, the Greek System, or organized religion. Additionally, this can refer to parts of these systems such as a campus dormitory, a military unit, a specific fraternity or sorority, or a particular church”¹⁵. If the institution does not take the assault seriously and provide a supportive environment, but instead blames the victims or implies that the victims were somehow responsible for their own assaults, the trauma that the victims experience is likely to be greater than if the acts were committed in isolation. This highlights the duality of institutional betrayal: it can

¹² Freyd, 1994

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2013). Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(1), 119-124.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

occur through seemingly opposing ways. It can take place through commission of information, such as gratuitous details about a sexual assault, or omission of information that the victim may have felt was important to include¹⁶.

Current Instances of Institutional Betrayal

An example of institutional betrayal recently occurred and received a fair amount of media coverage. In March of 2014, a young woman attending Harvard University anonymously published a letter on the university's website titled, "Dear Harvard: You Win."¹⁷ The woman described being sexually assaulted by a friend who lived in the same dormitory as she did, and how she trusted him but, when she was under the influence of alcohol he sexually assaulted her even when she asked him to stop. This behavior was a breach of trust on his part, and therefore an instance of interpersonal betrayal¹⁸.

After the assault occurred, the student described repeated attempts to report her assailant to the Harvard administration, at the very least hoping to have him moved to a different residence building. She reports being met with passivity from administrators, who did not want to stir up more conflict if they could avoid it, citing policy limitations as the reason for their hesitation. According to the young woman, "our policy is so outdated and narrow in scope that it discourages survivors from entering an investigative process in the first place. And without such a process, Harvard will take very little action against the alleged perpetrator."¹⁹ Harvard's inaction is an example of

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ "Dear Harvard: You Win." Harvard Crimson. March 2014.

¹⁸ Freyd, 1994

¹⁹ "Dear Harvard: You Win." Harvard Crimson. March 2014.

institutional betrayal. The victim turned to her school in need of help, and their unwillingness to act signified a failure to take the rape allegations seriously. The young woman's frustration with her school's refusal to take a concrete stance against sexual assault likely deepens the wounds of institutional betrayal, building on the breach of trust that she had already experienced through being raped by someone she may have viewed as a friend.

The responses to this letter were perhaps as revealing as the statement itself. Winnie Li, a Harvard alumna, wrote an article showing solidarity for the victim²⁰. After graduating from Harvard, Li was violently raped by a stranger while traveling abroad in Ireland. She testified against her attacker, who received eight years of jail time²¹ Li expresses frustration that her circumstance, where she was able to see her assailant brought to justice, is so uncommon. In regards to the "Dear Harvard" author, Li speaks to the distress that the victim might feel, acknowledging that she experienced institutional betrayal, thereby experiencing added distress that Li says she did not have²². She stresses the impact of rape that takes place in a situation involving social or professional acquaintances. "They're both rape, but as devastating as mine might seem, I would find it more devastating to be deceived first by a friend and then by my university. And yet, this student is hardly alone in her experience of an indifferent campus."²³. Li's statement directly addresses the idea of betrayal trauma theory – both

²⁰ Li, Winnie. "Dear Harvard: You're Not Winning(This Article is About Rape, Not Basketball)." Huffington Post. April 3 2014.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

institutional and interpersonal betrayal²⁴– by refusing to take action, the school sends a message to sexual assault survivors that they do not take the instances of assault seriously, which could be truly damaging for a survivor who may be searching for support from an institution he or she has, in the past, drawn upon for strength.

Measuring Institutional Betrayal

To measure institutional betrayal, Smith and Freyd (2013) created the Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire (IBQ) to assess a participant’s experience and involvement in an institution, and the type of institution they were involved in, as well as institutional betrayal itself. They also administered the Trauma Symptoms Checklist²⁵ to assess the various outcomes of trauma, such as depression, anxiety, and dissociation. They found that 68% of the women had at least experienced unwanted sexual experiences, and 46% reported experiencing institutional betrayal in some capacity. This was detailed with examples of betrayal by the institutions, such as “Responding inadequately,” “covering up the experience,” and “punishing you in some way.” These findings provide me with specific reactions that victims can have to being sexually abused, and provides a way to measure the presence of institutional betrayal and the associated trauma outcomes.

²⁴ Freyd, 1994.

²⁵ Elliot, D. & Briere, J. (1992). Sexual abuse trauma among professional Women: Validating the Trauma Symptom Checklist -40 (TSC -40). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 16, 391 – 398. doi:10.1016/0145-2134(92)90048-V

Institutional Betrayal and the Media

Institutional betrayal states that if a traumatic experience occurs within an organization or institution, and the organization does nothing to aid the affected parties, the inaction of the institution will cause increased distress for the victim. I will be arguing that the media, as a “practice” in our society, has a responsibility to inform its readers. The way that media outlets cover stories of sexual assault can inflict institutional betrayals in a few different ways. People whose cases are not adequately covered by the media can experience betrayal if they depend on the media to tell the truth, or to give them, and other survivors, a voice²⁶. Conversely, coverage of a story that fails to examine both sides signifies the media’s failure as an institution to do the job its audience depends on it to do: to present people with information and allow them to draw their own conclusions²⁷. For this reason, institutional betrayal can affect members of society who rely on the media for information. This is a separate issue, however, from the institutional betrayal that accusers experience when they do not receive support in the face of sexual assault²⁸. My analysis of institutional betrayal will focus primarily on the effect of media institutional betrayal on victims.

Definitions of Media

Though the media encompasses multiple organizations, my definition of it will be focused on just a few aspects. I define the media as an institution for the purposes of

²⁶ Greer, C. (2012). *Sex Crime the Media*. Routledge.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2013). Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(1), 119-124.

this thesis. An institution, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture.” Further, Chris Greer’s book, *Sex Crime in Media*, examines why the media is a significant institution in society: “Through their role as public watchdog and as representatives of those members of society who do not themselves command a public voice, journalists empower the masses” (Greer, p. 9).

Rape Culture in the Media

In discussing specific cases of media portrayals of sexual assault, I will focus largely on cases where the perpetrators are successful athletes – either within their communities or at a national level. The reasons for doing so are as follows: first, in studying media reactions to sexual assault cases, it is beneficial to focus on the ones that receive a lot of media coverage. Because athletes are often revered as societal heroes, when they commit crimes, media outlets tend to cover them much more closely than they might other cases.

Additionally, the culture that many athletic teams create for their participants may trivialize rape. Sports teams provide a model within which rape culture can be examined. Peter Laufer explores this concept in his book, *A Question of Consent*, which analyzes the happenings of the Glen Ridge Rape Case. He references a quote by Robin Warshaw, author of the book *I Never Called it Rape*. ““Like fraternities,” concludes Robin Warshaw, “athletic teams are breeding grounds for rape, particularly gang acquaintance rape. They are organizations which pride themselves on the physical aggressiveness of their members, and which demand group loyalty and reinforce it through promoting the superiority of their members over outsiders” (Laufer, p. 76). She

recommends that schools add required courses in the dynamics of acquaintance rape – especially for star athletes.” This statement highlights the crucial role that institutions play in our society, as well as the potential they have to influence their participants. Members of athletic institutions or fraternities feel an immense amount of pressure to fit in and maintain the image of aggressiveness, which they often mistake for strength and superiority. This kind of pressure can lead to more instances of sexual assault within sports teams in order to exert that aggressiveness and prove themselves to the institution²⁹. If these kinds of institutions can have this much of an impact on members, it is reasonable to assume that the media may be no less impactful. By reporting on this kind of behavior as if it is normal and expected from this section of society, the media runs the risk of condoning such actions. Treating those behaviors as acceptable leads consumers of the media to expect and excuse the peer norms of rape that fraternities and athletic institutions can foster.

By making this assertion, I do not mean to insinuate that rape does not take place in circles other than the athletic world. High-profile cases are by definition the ones that get a lot of attention, but countless cases slip through the cracks. This highlights the duality of the role that media can play in affecting victims.

²⁹ Laufer, Peter. *A Question of Consent: Innocence and Complicity in the Glen Ridge Rape Case*. Mercury House, San Francisco. 1994.

Statistics on Sexual Assault

This research is also relevant because of the sheer prevalence of sexual assault in our society³⁰. Of the women who participated in the study by Smith and Freyd, 68% reported experiencing some kind of unwanted or coercive sexual experience at some point in their lives. In addition to the staggeringly high rates of sexual assault, where about one in four women are sexually assaulted³¹, the circumstances under which it typically occurs are both unexpected and disturbing. According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), about two thirds of rapes are committed by someone known to the victim. Additionally, 60% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police, and 38% of rapes are committed by someone that the victim considered a friend³². There are a range of statistics regarding sexual assault, some of which are not mentioned here. Sexual violence against men is also a significant problem, but because of the staggeringly high statistics of women who experience sexual assault, I will be focusing on sexual assault against females.

³⁰ Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2013). Dangerous safe havens: institutional betrayal exacerbates sexual trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 26(1), 119-124.

³¹ McBride, Kelly. Why Railing Against CNN for its Coverage of the Steubenville Rape Case is a Waste of Time. Poynter Institute. 19 March 2013.

³² Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, 2009.

Examining Media Coverage of Sexual Assault Cases

The cases I am reviewing disproportionately focus on the perpetrators.

Therefore, my coverage of them will do the same. I will first discuss each of the cases in detail, reviewing the course of events followed by the media coverage of each case. I will examine if and how the media committed institutional betrayal in their reporting. At the end of each section, I will discuss the role and experience of the victims in each case based on the information I have collected from media reports. This section is not an exhaustive overview of sexual assault coverage in the media, but rather a series of examples of cases that highlight instances of institutional betrayal as well as a few instances of positive media coverage of sexual assault.

Kobe Bryant Rape Case

One of the most high-profile sexual assault cases of the last decade was the Kobe Bryant case. Bryant, star of the Los Angeles Lakers, was accused in 2003 of raping a woman who was working as a desk clerk in a hotel where he was staying³³. The charges against Bryant were dropped by the woman, with no further explanation than that she decided not to go through with the case. However, the coverage of the case was incessant, and was firmly one-sided in its favor of Bryant. For instance, a 2004 article in the New York Times detailed the case, but spent three paragraphs commenting on how the case had negatively affected Bryant and remarking on his poise under pressure: “The degree to which he seemed to keep his cool as an athlete despite the case was noted by fans and legal experts alike. On five separate occasions through the year

³³ Johnson, Kirk. Prosecutors Drop Kobe Bryant Rape Case. New York Times. 2 September 2004.

of pretrial hearings, he made the court-to-court transition – day in court, night on court – and the Lakers won all five games, including three in the playoffs”³⁴. This is largely irrelevant to the content of the trial itself, as Bryant’s performance on the court after the allegations had nothing to do with whether or not they were true. Furthermore, Los Angeles Lakers manager Mitch Kupchak was quoted celebrating the dropping of the charges. “Kobe has handled himself with dignity and professionalism throughout this very trying ordeal”³⁵. This depiction could be viewed as a form of institutional betrayal for the victim, who is hardly mentioned in the article.

There are several problems with the coverage of this case. Bryant is a public figure, and his life was already under more scrutiny simply because it was more accessible to the media, but few attempts were made to detail or even acknowledge the effect that this case had on the woman in question. Though maintaining her privacy was of a higher priority than Bryant’s in order to protect her from media scrutiny³⁶, the woman’s struggles were scarcely mentioned – nor was there further discussion of the reasons that she decided to drop the case.

In an unexpected response to his own case, Bryant released a statement after the trial was dropped, apologizing to the accuser and assumedly attempting to clarify his role in the case. In the statement issued later, Bryant said: “First, I want to apologize directly to the young woman involved in this incident. I want to apologize to her for my

³⁴ Johnson, Kirk. Prosecutors Drop Kobe Bryant Rape Case. *New York Times*. 2 September 2004.

³⁵ *ibid*.

³⁶ Hewitt, Bill. He Said, She Said: Two Reputations Shred as NBA Star Kobe Bryant is Charged with Raping a Teenager. *People Magazine*

behavior that night and for the consequences she has suffered in the past year...

Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did.” This statement could be viewed as a complicating factor in the case – if Bryant truly did think the sex was consensual. However, a large part of the problem with rape culture, which is perpetuated in part by media portrayals of female sexuality as something that is at men’s disposal is the idea that consent can be implied. If there was any confusion about whether or not the woman was in agreement, Bryant should have erred on the side of being cautious and refrained from any sexual activity. It seems like a positive step for the media to print Bryant’s admission, because at first glance it makes him seem more understanding. However, this admission does not really help the victim, but only blurs the lines between consent and assault further.

Multiple articles could be found that focused on Kobe Bryant’s struggle throughout, and transformation resulting from, this ordeal. NBC Sports released one titled “Kobe Bryant Opens Up About How Rape Charges Changed Him”³⁷. The tone of the article, released eight years after charges were dropped, paints Bryant as introspective and pensive, and the writer of the article lets an admiring tone sneak into his writing, stating that Bryant “doesn’t often speak of those times but he did in a fantastic interview on Yahoo [...]”³⁸. Another article published on ABC’S Eyewitness

³⁷ Helin, Kurt. Kobe Bryant Opens Up About How Rape Charges Changed Him. NBC Sports: Pro Basketball Talk. 16 July 2012.

³⁸ *ibid.*

News website, refers to the rape case as “the darkest period of his life,” but makes no mention of the accuser, other than the fact that she exists. The article paints Bryant as a tortured hero. ““It was extremely difficult,” Bryant said. “You have to kind of do some soul searching because you’re fighting numerous battles at the same time, and you’re kind of just trying to figure out your way through this mess”³⁹. The wording of the article, as well as Bryant’s own comments, paints Bryant as a victim who got tossed into a terrible situation. Nothing in this article suggests that Bryant actively sought out the sexual encounter. If Bryant believed that the sex was consensual, a point he brought up when the charges were dropped,⁴⁰ then it is a stretch for him to try and paint himself as the victim in this situation.

The Accuser’s Experience

The woman in this case was 19 years old, and the front desk clerk of the resort where Bryant was staying. After the alleged rape, she reportedly went back and finished her work, then told a colleague about the experience. The colleague encouraged her to report it⁴¹. New York Daily News report describes the encounter in graphic detail.

³⁹ Hartung, John. Kobe Bryant Opens Up About Colorado Sexual Assault Case in Rare Interview. ABC Eyewitness News. 16 July 2012.

⁴⁰ Kenworthy, Tom and O’Driscoll, Patrick. Judge Dismisses Bryant Rape Case. USA Today. 1 September 2004.

⁴¹ Johnson, Kirk. Prosecutors Drop Kobe Bryant Rape Case. New York Times. 2 September 2004.

According to her, Bryant repeatedly asked her, “You’re not going to tell anyone about this, right”⁴²?

Before dropping the charges, the accuser faced more unnecessary adversity. She had to deal with the revoking of Colorado’s “rape shield” law, which Bryant’s attorneys pressed the judge not to invoke⁴³. A rape shield law is a rule that “limits the ability of the defendant’s counsel to introduce the accuser’s sexual history as evidence during a rape trial and therefore can prevent the accuser from being discredited by information that is not relevant to the defendant’s guilt or innocence.”⁴⁴ These details are not relevant when determining whether or not this was a rape. In this case, all that matters are the details of the encounter that she had with Bryant. This action by Bryant’s attorneys could have caused additional humiliation and distress for the accuser.

On top of going through this trial, she would have also had to deal with the contents of her personal affairs, irrelevant to the details of the case, being exposed by the media, an organization that she may have trusted to protect her. *People Magazine* described the toll that the case took on Bryant’s accuser. “[...] nothing could have prepared the accuser for the attacks on her reputation, with each turn of the news cycle coming at her like a buzz saw. Authorities and the press have not disclosed her name, though her identity is widely known in her hometown of Eagle.”⁴⁵ *People* was one of

⁴² Gittrich, Greg. Brutal Rape Tale Kobe Accuser: He Grabbed Me and Bent Me Over a Chair. *New York Daily News*. 10 October 2003.

⁴³ Reid, T.R. Rape Case Against Bryant is Dropped. 2 September 2004. *Washington Post*.

⁴⁴ Rape Shield Law. (2014). In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

⁴⁵ Hewitt, Bill. He Said, She Said: Two Reputations Shred as NBA Star Kobe Bryant is Charged with Raping a Teenager. *People Magazine*

the few media outlets that highlighted the struggle of the accuser equally with the difficulties that Bryant was facing. This was a positive point for the case in some respects. *People Magazine* wields influence on a wide population, and this perspective could have had reparative effects for the victim. For a “gossip magazine” to have the most conscientious coverage out of all the outlets reporting on this case does not speak well for other outlets, but it is indicative of positive change because, as a mainstream magazine, *People* does have a large effect on the public.

Still, even with *People’s* immense influence, this imbalance reflects the media’s failure to represent victims in a way that would increase their credibility. USA Today also states that the woman, who dropped the criminal case but filed a civil one, moved to multiple different states to avoid media scrutiny⁴⁶. Other articles covering the case focused largely on Bryant’s experience. The articles that did mention the victim barely touched on the problems that this case potentially caused for her, instead choosing to dwell mostly on Bryant’s struggles throughout the case.

When the accuser dropped the case, there was considerable speculation about her reasons for doing so. As with the admission of the Steubenville victim, some media outlets reported that she did not want to go through with the trial simply because of the incredible strain it had already caused her. ““The overwhelming media attention on this case put extra pressure on her as the alleged victim,” said Michelle Anderson, a law professor at Villanova University. “Most rape victims can expect a few grueling

⁴⁶ O’Driscoll, Patrick. Kobe Bryant, Accuser Settle Her Civil Lawsuit. USA Today. 2 March 2005.

days in court, not months of Internet exposure”⁴⁷. This comment exhibits the true potential of the media to cause damage to a victim who is already struggling with the reality of the assault. The accuser’s attorney, John Clune, outlined the emotions she felt that potentially caused her to drop the case. ““The difficulties this case imposed on this young woman in the last year are unimaginable,” Clune said. He added, “For the solace of all the people involved...there is an unwavering desire to see this finished”⁴⁸.

Steubenville High School Rape Case

In 2012 in Steubenville, Ohio, high school football players Trent Mays and Ma’Lik Richmond raped an intoxicated, unconscious girl and posted photos of the girl’s body on social networking websites⁴⁹. The girl testified against them, and was quoted on the stand as saying, “I didn’t want to get myself into drama because I knew everyone would just blame me⁵⁰.” The small town regarded the football team, on which the two boys played, as local heroes. The boys, who were 16 and 17 at the time, will receive one year of juvenile detention, and Mays, 17, was given a year extra because he posted photos on the internet⁵¹.

⁴⁷ Kenworthy, Tom and O’Driscoll, Patrick. Judge Dismisses Bryant Rape Case. USA Today. 1 September 2004.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Marakechi, Kia. CNN’s Steubenville Coverage Focuses on Effect Rape Trial Will Have on Rapists, Not Victims. Huffington Post. 17 March 2013.

⁵⁰ Newman, Susan. Boys to Men – What the Steubenville Trial Makes Clear. Psychology Today. 17 March 2013.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

The case spawned disturbing coverage from CNN that revealed a troublesome national attitude toward rapists and victims. CNN's Poppy Harlow, in covering the case, expressed her sympathies for the boys, stressing how difficult it was for her, and presumably viewers, to see the lives of the boys and their families fall apart. Harlow also noted that the families had to "plead for some forgiveness from the victim's family, as well as from the judge" (Marakechi, p. 1). The language that Harlow used conveyed a tone of empathy for the perpetrators, as well as the implication that they were somehow victims themselves. CNN's Candy Crowley also lamented the destruction of the lives of these athletes and the waste of their potential⁵², which again bypassed the point that their actions affected the life of their own victim.

In March 2013, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC aired a clip of Mays apologizing to the victim by name⁵³. Sexual violence support groups and organizations questioned the actions of the news stations because the girl was a minor and the release of her name was a violation of her privacy. This touches on the paradox between the unfair stigma that comes with being an identified victim of sexual assault, and with protecting a victim's privacy out of respect⁵⁴. I will touch on this in my discussion of media ethics and ways to avoid institutional betrayal. However, while the release of the girl's name was not necessary, there was little other mention of the girl's plight or how she or her family reacted to the event. The girl, in addition to experiencing physical harm, also

⁵² Marakechi, 2013.

⁵³ Fung, Katherine. CNN, Fox News, MSNBC Air Name of Steubenville Rape Victim. Huffington Post. 18 March 2013.

⁵⁴ "Put The Focus on Victims." SART Toolkit: Resources for Sexual Assault Response Teams.

suffered institutional betrayal because the media largely dismissed her side of the story, despite their role as an institution trusted and relied on for its balanced coverage. The media perpetrated institutional betrayal through their failure to represent the girl in a way that gave her human characteristics. In some ways, her portrayal made her appear the antagonist in the story. The Washington Post released a story quoting tennis star Serena Williams commenting that the girl “should not have put herself in that situation⁵⁵.” Additionally, Yahoo! News stated that the victim “forced the town into an emotional situation⁵⁶.” These sort of comments are outright examples of victim blaming, and incorrectly absolve the perpetrators of any blame.

While the perpetrators were convicted in this case, media coverage of the case was still unsatisfactory, and had the potential to cause great further harm to the victim. As we will see in the next case, the level of bullying in written and television accounts of the case was a glaring example of the media’s capability to commit institutional betrayal⁵⁷.

Glen Ridge Rape Case

Years before the Bryant and Steubenville cases took place, a brutal gang rape took place in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. In 1989, four high school boys lured a 17 year-old girl who was mentally retarded into their basement and raped her using foreign

⁵⁵ Boren, Cindy. “Serena Williams Sorry For Saying Rape Victim “Shouldn’t Have Put Herself in that Position. (Updated) “The Washington Post. 19 June 2013

⁵⁶ Strasser, Annie-Rose & Culp-Ressler, Tara. “How the Media Took Sides in the Steubenville Rape Case.” Think Progress. 18 March 2013.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

objects while several of their friends looked on⁵⁸. The boys in question, twins Kevin and Kyle Scherzer, Christopher Archer, and Bryant Grober, were part of the highest social hierarchy at their high school: they were the school's star football and baseball players. The victim, whose mental age was around the age of eight, idolized the athletes and would do anything to please them⁵⁹. Many citizens of the small, wealthy town worshipped them, viewing these sports as their main claim to fame.

Four years after the rape, a court case took place, in which the four main perpetrators were convicted of "conspiracy to commit aggravated sexual assault and aggravated sexual contact" (Laufer, 1994, p. 150). However, the men were acquitted of multiple charges deemed "minor" by the judge, including the charge of oral rape. Three of the men were sentenced to 15 years in jail, but all of their sentences were reduced to seven years. The fourth was sentenced to three years' probation⁶⁰.

This case was different from the others discussed in this paper because the victim in question was mentally handicapped. The way the media handled this aspect of the case speaks volumes about their capacity to betray. In this case, the victim was not only taken advantage of by her assailants, but by the media as well. Ben Tantillo, The vice principal of Glen Ridge High School offered some insight into the media's sensationalizing of the story: "Why did the Glen Ridge story take off? Because, I think, it had everything: a poor, mentally handicapped girl, athletes, a black informer in a high-class white neighborhood. You couldn't have written a better script" (Lefkowitz,

⁵⁸ Laufer, Peter. *A Question of Consent: Innocence and Complicity in the Glen Ridge Rape Case*. Mercury House, San Francisco. 1994.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

p. 276). The *New York Post* published an article referring to the incident as “A town’s dirty little secret that wouldn’t go away” (Lefkowitz, p. 276). The language used in this headline made the rape seem like a nuisance for the town, rather than focusing on the trauma it inflicted on the victim, or even on the outcome of the case itself. Media outlets were not only willing to disregard the girl’s vulnerability, but went as far as to use it to their advantage in writing the story they knew would keep readers interested. In this case, the media shirked their responsibility not only to inform readers without passing their own judgment, but a more basic duty to not inflict harm on its subjects. The articles written about the victim exposed her to harassment and mockery, and, in referring to her as “retarded,” stripped her of her already limited self-esteem (Lefkowitz, p. 289).

Some citizens of Glen Ridge were unsympathetic to the victim’s plight, and saw media coverage of the case as a major inconvenience. “As the investigation dragged on through June, a frustrated citizen complained to the Glen Ridge city council that she was “tired of the publicity”[...]She wanted Mayor Callahan and the council to use their influence to muzzle the press, to keep reporters out of her town. The Glen Ridge Paper responded with an editorial explaining the First Amendment to her and all the other citizens in Glen Ridge who were complaining about their town’s tawdry press clippings. “Many residents,” it read, “upset because they fear the reputation of the town will be tarnished, want the press to go away. They blame the press for sensationalizing the incident. They say the press is blowing the story out of proportion.” ” (Laufer, p. 26).

The comment from the “frustrated citizen” exemplifies the issue that many victims grapple with when trying to speak up for themselves. Trials of this nature are certainly grueling and unpleasant, but if the primary concern for citizens is not learning the truth but that “the reputation of the town will be tarnished,” this speaks volumes about the way we view people who report sexual assault, as well as how much we value the status quo, even if it means sweeping possible injustices out of our own consciousness. The media did still report the story in detail, despite the concern of the citizens. This shows conscientiousness on the part of the media, and an example of a positive way to handle these cases. The media acknowledged the displeasure of citizens, but reported the story despite that opposition. The Glen Ridge Paper said, in response to citizens’ complaints about the news coverage: “Keep in mind, we don’t make the news. We just report it.” (Laufer, p. 26).

Yet the positive aspects of media reporting in the Glen Ridge case were far outweighed by poorly executed coverage. Lisa Marie Petersen, a reporter for *The Record* (a New Jersey newspaper), found her way into the victim’s high school and interviewed her. According to the book *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb*⁶¹, the victim felt uncomfortable talking about her experience. Yet Petersen persisted, and managed to get the victim to talk about her experience. The story captured the victim admitting that the sex was non-consensual. “Some of it was force, some of it I allowed... because they wouldn’t think I’d like them [if I didn’t]” (Petersen, 1993). Not only did the reporter publish this information that the victim said

⁶¹ Lefkowitz, Bernard. *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb*. Random House, New York. 1997.

she was uncomfortable with sharing⁶², but they portrayed her in a way that she found upsetting. “The story went on to say that [the victim] was upset by the way the press had depicted her as retarded. As a result of all the media attention, [the victim] supposedly told *The Record* reporter, students at her high school were “teasing” her.” (Lefkowitz, p. 289). The media coverage of the victim in the Glen Ridge case was damaging: First, reporters took advantage of her limited mental capacity and her desire to please people in order to extract information from her⁶³. Second, any privacy that the victim previously had was now gone. “It had a profound effect. Now more kids knew who [the victim] was.” (Lefkowitz, p. 289). Media outlets betrayed the victim because they used information about her that she did not know would be published. As Lefkowitz states, she “had no idea of how journalism worked.” (Lefkowitz, p. 289). Petersen’s actions exemplified the ways in which the media can commit institutional betrayal – exacerbated by the decision to capitalize on her intellectual disability.

Discussion of the circumstances under which rape takes place began to appear in mainstream media a few decades ago, in relation to the Glen Ridge rape case. “In 1982, *Ms. Magazine* published its first article on acquaintance rape. The article dealt with research conducted on the events at Kent State University by clinical psychologist Mary Koss beginning in 1978 “[...]. The Glen Ridge rape was no fluke; it followed a pattern Dr. Koss and her fellow researchers found among misguided student athletes throughout the United States.” This article acknowledges the frequency of rape within athletic groups. This is an important subgroup within which to observe rape culture because of

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

the regularity with which rape takes place in these circles. The reasons for this, as previously outlined, include the cultivation of an “us versus them” mentality. Many sports teams teach their members to treat anyone not in their group as an outsider. These groups encourage their members to exert power over outsiders in any way they can⁶⁴.

University of Oregon Rape Case

In a case that is still developing at the University of Oregon, three basketball players were accused of gang raping a woman three different times in one night⁶⁵. The girl reported the incident to her father, who informed the University of Oregon Police Department. The UOPD then reported the incident to the Eugene Police Department. A police report, along with several news articles, were released a couple of months later. The men, as of now, have been suspended from the team but are not being tried, because according to the Eugene Police, there is not sufficient evidence to prove that this encounter was nonconsensual. Media coverage of this case began about two months after the incident took place, when the official report was released online⁶⁶. The initial articles by official University of Oregon media outlets, including *The Emerald* and GoDucks.com did not acknowledge the sexual assault, but just that three players were being suspended and not participating in team activities. Ideally, these outlets would have reported on the assault right away, but it is unclear whether or not this is an

⁶⁴ Laufer, Peter. *A Question of Consent: Innocence and Complicity in the Glen Ridge Rape Case*. Mercury House, San Francisco. 1994.

⁶⁵ Eugene Police Department. Incident Report. Incident Case Number 12-04131. 28 April 2014.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

instance of IB, because at the time of these articles, preliminary information was still being released about the case.

Some media outlets have been fairly responsible in their coverage. *Eugene Weekly*, a local newspaper, published an article about the case with the following disclaimer: “*This story contains details of an alleged sexual assault that may be triggering to some readers and rape survivors. EW uses the word “alleges” not to indicate doubt in the survivor but as a legal term for when no charges have been proven in a court of law.*”⁶⁷ This is exactly the kind of step that a media organization can take to prevent itself from committing institutional betrayal. While *Eugene Weekly* acknowledged that no legal action had been taken against the players, their disclaimer let readers know that they were not devaluing or discrediting the claims of the victim.

Overall, the coverage of the case so far has been complicated. The victim is under scrutiny, and her actions throughout the night have been described in detail. This includes her conversations with the perpetrators earlier in the night, her alcohol consumption, and her apparent consensual sex with one of them the next morning⁶⁸. Yet there seems to be just as much, if not more, focus on the way the University has handled the case. Both UO president Michael Gottfredson and UO Basketball coach Dana Altman have come under fire for their decisions throughout the process. Gottfredson has been sharply chastised for his initial inaction when he first knew about the case. He

⁶⁷ Mortensen, Camilla. *Who’s Responsible? UO rape investigation a case of institutional betrayal?* Eugene Weekly. 15 May 2014.

⁶⁸ Greif, Andrew. Oregon President Maintains Investigation Into Basketball Players Was Handled Properly. 14 May 2014. Oregon Live.

says that he kept out on the orders of the Eugene Police Department⁶⁹. Dana Altman has faced a barrage of criticism for allowing two of the accused, Dotson and Artis, to play in the NCAA Tournament after the events occurred⁷⁰. Altman spoke at a press conference on May 9th, 2014, where he faced an intense interrogation from members of the media (Oregon Live, 2014). He was repeatedly questioned about his decision to sign Brandon Austin, one of the accused who transferred from another school after facing allegations of sexual assault there. According to Altman, “I spoke with the family and I had every confidence after speaking with them and checking his high school background and that there was nothing that would prevent him from joining the team”⁷¹. This comment came under fire not only from journalists at the press conference, but members of the University community as well⁷². This information gives a different view of the media because it displays media outlets’ criticism of Gottfredson and Altman, rather than solely focusing on the victim. While this is not a direct motion by the media to advocate for the victim, the apparent effort to hold other parties accountable (including the institution in which this assault occurred) hints at the media’s attempts to refrain from committing institutional betrayal.

Dr. Jennifer Freyd addressed the issue in an ESPN podcast discussion, “Outside the Lines.” She discussed the potential for institutions in this position to truly

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Kingkade, Tyler. University of Oregon Allowed 3 Basketball Players Accused of Gang Rape To Play March Madness. 9 May 2014. Huffington Post.

⁷¹ Greif, Andrew. Oregon Coach Dana Altman Speaks About Rape Investigation: Full Transcript. 9 May 2014. Oregon Live.

⁷² *ibid.*

influence the societal climate toward sexual assault. “Universities are in a position, and especially in cases like this that are high profile, with athletes, where we have great potential to make positive change by being extremely accountable [...]”⁷³. She adds that while institutional betrayal is a possibility, something much more positive can come of the incident if the University of Oregon tempers their reaction to fit needs of the situation. “It’s not too late for Oregon to do the right thing – I hope that instead of institutional betrayal, Oregon will show institutional courage.”⁷⁴ This case is still unfolding, and while it still remains to be seen how this case will be handled, Freyd’s comments provide somewhat of a road map for how institutions can position themselves to make a positive change in the way they handle sexual assault. This was another example of the media’s improvement in their coverage of sexual assault: by having discussions about the subject, and bringing experts like Freyd onto mainstream sports channels, media outlets like ESPN are showing efforts to learn how to deal with these types of situations, and avoid committing institutional betrayal in the process.

Conclusion of Case Studies

As we have seen with Kobe Bryant’s accuser’s decision to drop the case⁷⁵, as well as the Steubenville victim’s hesitation in coming forward⁷⁶, it becomes clear that society’s acceptance of a situation could influence sexual assault survivors’ decisions to

⁷³ ESPN: *Outside the Lines* Podcast. Oregon Basketball Rape Allegations. May 2014.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Kenworthy, Tom and O’Driscoll, Patrick. Judge Dismisses Bryant Rape Case. USA Today. 1 September 2004.

⁷⁶ Newman, Susan. Boys to Men – What the Steubenville Trial Makes Clear. Psychology Today. 17 March 2013.

come forward. In this vein, the media, which plays a pivotal role in the way society views social issues, can strongly influence public opinions of sexual assault perpetrators and survivors. It can commit institutional betrayal because the survivor can be influenced in their decision to pursue or drop a case not because of the transpiration of events, but because they want to avoid the stress that comes not only from the case itself, but the way they will be viewed in society afterward. Media images contribute heavily to these views⁷⁷ and the impact a media has on a victim's ability to carry out a case can be a form of institutional betrayal. The portrayal could be biased, blame the accuser, or open them up to threats and harassment. In any of these scenarios, the coverage could prevent the victim from feeling safe to pursue charges.

⁷⁷ Kitzinger, J., & Skidmore, P. (1995). Playing safe: Media coverage of child sexual abuse prevention strategies. *Child Abuse Review*, 4(1), 47-56.

The Victim's Perspective

Media focus tends to fall heavily on perpetrators, but it is crucial to consider the viewpoint of victims as well. The reaction of the public when a victim does decide to come forth by name is a significant indicator of society's acceptance of such situations (Newman, 2013). The way the media handles coverage of a victim's decision to speak up can have a positive impact, or a devastating one.

As I mentioned prior to my discussion of the cases above, this is not a one-to-one analysis of victim perspectives against perpetrator statements or official cases. There are a few reasons for this. The most obvious one is that there is simply not as much information about the victims in the official court cases as is released about perpetrators. This can be approached from a few different angles. On the one hand, victims may already experience trauma in being assaulted, and can experience even more should they choose to take their case to court. They run the risk of retraumatization from hearing the events of their assault discussed and dissected repeatedly, and being asked questions about the details of their attack can cause further emotional distress for some victims.

In the age of the internet and the 24-hour news cycle, protecting the privacy of victims becomes a priority because victims have enough to deal with without having to constantly defend themselves and their decision to stand trial to anonymous strangers, who read articles about the cases and feel that they need to share their opinions about the case with the victim, be they positive or hostile. In keeping with this situation, it is

important to maintain the victim's privacy because so much else in their life may already be undergoing change and scrutiny⁷⁸.

However, the lack of information released about the victim can also be seen as a problem, because then the media tends to focus all their energy on the story of the perpetrator. Some media consumers may view this as imbalanced reporting. While there is a marked difference in the level of information released about perpetrators versus victims, the most important thing to keep in mind when reading about, or reporting on, sexual assault is this: an increased amount of information about one party does not inherently make them more supportable, and it is pertinent to be mindful of the circumstances into which the victim places themselves should they choose to go public. Having made these statements, I will now examine a situation where a victim chose to come forward, and media responses to the statements.

Dylan Farrow's Story

Nicholas Kristof, a columnist for the New York Times, spoke out in support of Dylan Farrow, adoptive daughter of Mia Farrow and Woody Allen. Farrow was allegedly sexually molested by Allen as a child, and, after Allen was honored at the Golden Globe Awards in January 2014, Kristof wrote a letter in support of Farrow, criticizing society's willingness to "lionize an alleged molester." (Kristof, p. 1). Farrow herself stated that for years, she was traumatized by the actions Allen committed, and that "the torment was made worse by Hollywood." Farrow, growing up in the spotlight, describes the increased trauma she faced through having to see Allen hero-worshipped

⁷⁸ Hewitt, Bill. "He Said, She Said: Two Reputations Shred as NBA Star Kobe Bryant is Charged with Raping a Teenager." *People Magazine*

by an entire nation. “Most found it easier to accept the ambiguity, to say, “who can say what happened,” to pretend that nothing was wrong. Actors praised him at awards shows. Networks put him on TV. Critics put him in magazines. Each time I saw my abuser’s face – on a poster, on a t-shirt, on television – I could only hide my panic until I found a place to be alone and fall apart.⁷⁹” Farrow’s panic describes the betrayal she felt not only by her father, but by the industry of Hollywood and the news media. This is an example of the institutional betrayal that media organizations can commit. Farrow points out the stress that she felt upon having to see her perpetrator portrayed as a hero by the media. The betrayal was continual for her, because even after she came out with her accusation, media outlets still continued to “lionize” Allen, focusing on his accomplishments while highlighting the holes in Farrow’s story.

Media reactions to this admission varied widely. Scarlett Johansson, an actress who has worked with Allen, criticized Farrow for using her name in the letter, citing the behavior “irresponsible” because she “knew nothing about it.”⁸⁰ The Huffington Post, however, parsed apart Allen’s reaction to Farrow’s letter, and criticized it line by line⁸¹. The divided reactions on this issue touch on society’s uncertainty about whether or not they want to believe victims.

Farrow’s declaration is unique not because sexual assault survivors do not speak up, but more because of her high profile as the child of famous actors. The handling of

⁷⁹ Farrow, Dylan. An Open Letter from Dylan Farrow. 1 February 2014. On the Ground: Nicholas Kristof Blog.

⁸⁰ Moran, Lee. “Scarlett Johansson Addresses Woody Allen Controversy, Calls Dylan Farrow Letter “Irresponsible.” New York Daily News. 17 March 2014.

⁸¹ Duca, Lauren. “A Close Reading of Woody Allen’s New York Times Op-Ed.” Huffington Post. 8 February 2014.

Farrow's case brings up the issue of fame and culpability in sexual assault. Farrow's letter was run on the personal blog of New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof. While Kristof is a highly recognized journalist, Woody Allen published a rebuttal to Farrow's letter in the New York Times itself. The implications of this are worth looking at: why does Allen, an alleged child molester, get to state his case in an established national newspaper, while Farrow's case is on someone's personal blog? What does this say about our society's acceptance of perpetrators versus victims? Do we absolve people because of their social and cultural status?

Doing it Right: Positive Media Coverage

Humanizing Perpetrators: An Alternate Viewpoint

Another point of view on how to deal with sexual assault in the media comes from the Poynter Institute's Kelly McBride. An ethicist for the journalistic institution, McBride proposes that crucifying outlets like CNN and Fox News for their insensitive reporting of the Steubenville case is pointless and actually does no good for the victim. "Portraying all rapists as monsters and refusing them any sympathy creates a dynamic in which it's impossible to acknowledge how many ordinary and common rapists live among us."⁸² McBride brings up an interesting, and less recognized, point of view. The majority of rapists are people known to the victim, and often are close friends or family members⁸³. Her acknowledgement of the frequency of rape does open the door for a more candid discussion about the places and institutions in which rape takes place – something that is difficult to acknowledge. It is tempting to assume that all rapists are strangers, or people who have a criminal background – yet this is not the case⁸⁴.

While McBride's article stops short of showering the perpetrators with sympathy, though, she does suggest that we "instead, draw attention to the good coverage."⁸⁵ This suggestion is valid, as media coverage can be a healing outlet for the victim if executed properly, as I will discuss later on. However, ignoring the negative

⁸² McBride, Kelly. Why Railing Against CNN for its Coverage of the Steubenville Rape Case is a Waste of Time. Poynter Institute. 19 March 2013.

⁸³ Becker-Blease, K.A. & Freyd, J.J. (2006). Research participants telling the truth about their lives: the ethics of asking and not asking about abuse. *American Psychologist*, 6(3), 218-226.

⁸⁴ McBride, Kelly. Why Railing Against CNN for its Coverage of the Steubenville Rape Case is a Waste of Time. Poynter Institute. 19 March 2013.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

coverage, or the coverage that obviously supports the perpetrators, is still an issue. In covering stories like these, members of the media have to exercise caution because as news outlets, they are attempting to report from a neutral stance. Therefore, the ideal situation would be to provide coverage of a rape case that is rooted in the facts of the case. It could be argued that speaking up in support of the victim is also problematic for media outlets. Through the lens of journalistic reporting, telling a story with as little bias as possible takes the highest priority. There are different ways of showing sympathy for one party. While media outlets do not always show overt sympathy for either side, it is fairly easy to fall into the trap of allowing covert indications of bias slip into journalistic writing. In order to get around this problem, journalists can acknowledge both sides of the story, even if simply by stating that they have more information on one party. For example, if a news outlet was reporting on the Kobe Bryant case, if they reported that Bryant was stressed out by the trial, they could acknowledge how the victim was doing as well. If the victim did not respond to them, they could mention that they had attempted to reach out but that she could not be reached for comment. Although some victims do try to maintain an anonymous profile, acknowledging them equally with the perpetrator can make a difference.

Alternatively, media outlets could take a cue from *Eugene Weekly* and place disclaimers on their stories that pertain to particularly contentious or sensitive cases⁸⁶.

McBride also points out the deficiencies that news media displays when covering rape – one of which is sensationalizing it. "The other problem is that rape is an

⁸⁶ Mortensen, Camilla. *Who's Responsible?: UO rape investigation a case of institutional betrayal?* Eugene Weekly. 15 May 2014.

absolute epidemic in our society, particularly rape among children and teenagers.” Yet, she said, “we only cover it when we have a breaking news incident that is almost atypical... the very cases we choose to cover distort the issue.”⁸⁷. This goes back to the point of covering “high profile cases.” Those are the ones that have the most coverage because they are the most shocking to us – when societal heroes commit heinous acts, it is far more upsetting, but also more intriguing to follow. No one is surprised when someone who we expect to be a criminal commits a crime. There are also a multitude of rapes committed by people who are not seen as “rapists” – college students, family members, community leaders, and others – but we do not hear about those in as much detail as we do cases about people who have higher societal status or are famous for some reason. Sensationalizing rape does indeed draw away from the ubiquity of sexual assault.

How the Media Can Properly Handle the Topic of Sexual Assault

In Freyd and Birrell’s book, *Blind to Betrayal* (2013), the authors interview Sean Bruyea, a former Canadian Air Force officer in the first Gulf War. Bruyea suffered from depression and PTSD, and was subsequently discharged from the service without any aid or benefits. The negative impact that serving left was severely worsened by the betrayal he felt from the Air Force’s failure to provide him with help for his condition. He began a campaign, standing up to a proposed bill to limit ongoing care for injured and disabled veterans. The government was unresponsive to his work, but he found that newspapers and TV stations across the country ran stories in support

⁸⁷ Kopp, Craig. More Media Fallout in the Steubenville Rape Case. WUSF News – University South Florida. 25 March 2013.

of his cause, condemning bureaucrats and their negligence of the well-being of military veterans. Bruyeya said that while the betrayal will always affect him, he received an unexpected wealth of support: “The media became an ally. It became a friend and a compassionate advocate for not just me but for the very individuals I was trying to help: injured soldiers and their families. This was an incredible shift for a country that does much to ignore its veterans except during Remembrance Day. Almost every editorial board of every major daily newspaper in Canada condemned the privacy violations. Newspaper, radio, and TV carried the story over a six-week period.” (Freyd & Birrell, p. 152). In Bruyeya’s case, media coverage was liberating because outlets dealt with it in a way that took seriously, and validated his struggles. While Bruyeya’s case is not one of sexual assault, we can draw from the way the media handled his case, and apply it to how we should aspire to address sexual assault in the news. The Poynter Institute published an article debating the merits and dangers of naming victims in articles, and provided a set of guidelines for journalists to adhere to in order to report on sexual assault more responsibly. These guidelines included:

“Use clear language when reporting on rape [...] Words and sentence structure matter in stories about rape.”

“Describe charges of sex without consent as rape, not anything less [...] sometimes writers minimize the trauma of rape by describing it as sex or intercourse if the rape doesn’t involved the kind of physical violence that requires medical attention.”

“Be careful about details that could imply you are blaming victims. Describing what a girl was wearing, or how she made a choice, can be perceived as assigning blame.”

“Avoid dwelling on gratuitous or salacious details about sexual assaults [...] some rape victims [...] felt revictimized when journalists described private parts of their body in news reports.”

The Poynter Institute’s guidelines directly address the problem of insensitive and careless media coverage of sexual assault. They provide a basic set of rules that all journalists can adhere to in order to decrease the magnitude of the problem. Following these rules can help refrain from perpetrating institutional betrayal.

This leads us to ask: how can we actively fix the way we handle these situations? Institutional betrayal can occur when media outlets oversimplify complicated issues. In order to avoid institutional betrayal, journalists and other media professionals need to actively work to acknowledge the complex nature of these situations. Part of being a journalist is consistently grappling with difficult questions and finding ways to explain them clearly without oversimplifying them. An example of a difficult scenario is the ongoing investigation of rape accusations against three basketball players at the University of Oregon. The accuser did admit to having consensual sex with another athlete on the basketball team the day after the alleged rape took place⁸⁸. A way to responsibly report on this situation would be to acknowledge the facts, but to clarify that those pieces of information are completely separate from the rape case, and acknowledge that the accuser’s prior or future sexual encounters have no bearing on whether or not the incident in question constitutes rape.

⁸⁸ Eugene Police Department. Incident Report. Incident Case Number 12-04131. 28 April 2014.

Overall, a good place for journalists to start is to take seriously claims of sexual assault, rather than instantly trying to poke holes in accusers' stories. This step could encourage media consumers to change the way they initially view accusers.

Future Directions for Research

Throughout this review, I have found at the way that the media deals with sexual assault leaves much to be desired. My observation of media handling of this sensitive issue gives me a lot of concern about the value we as a society place on victims. I worry about the ease with which we dismiss people who have the courage to speak out about being sexually assaulted, especially given the scrutiny they face in doing so. However, having conducted this research, I am encouraged by the changes that are beginning to take place in mainstream media. The Glen Ridge Case, 20 years ago had few people protesting the portrayal of female sexuality and the victim. Yet with current cases of sexual assault, it has become far more common to see public support of the victims. This signifies a positive change, and is an encouraging sign that we can change mainstream perceptions of sexual assault victims.

I would like to continue researching the way the media impacts sexual assault survivors, and I believe there are many ways to do so that will eventually effect positive change in the way we help survivors. My first goal is to change the way we view sexual assault – I would like to pursue trauma research in an effort to shed light on the flawed way we view survivors – I hope to change the societal mindset that automatically looks for ways to poke holes in survivors’ stories. I would like to conduct interviews with survivors in an effort to help them feel comfortable and safe about sharing their experiences, should that be cathartic for them. I look forward to continued work with survivors and with the organizations that support them.

In terms of specific additions to this research, I would like to pursue the case of the University of Oregon basketball players. As of the writing of this paper, the

report was only released a week and a half ago. Investigations are still taking place, and as of now, the accused players have not been convicted. I would be interested to see how the case progresses, as well as the reaction of the University to this case, and whether the case

I am curious to see whether media portrayals of sexual assault will influence institutional policies regarding sexual assault. I would be interested in pursuing a study that examines media coverage of specific institutions' policies of sexual assault. I would observe whether increased scrutiny could encourage institutions to be more conscientious about their handling of sexual assault cases.

Throughout this thesis, I focus on high-profile cases that received a lot of media coverage. The majority of these cases featured athletes as the perpetrators. I would like to address the cases that receive less coverage. Athletes and high-profile individuals who are accused of sexual assault often receive more support from the public, but they are also under more scrutiny. I would be interested to explore the cases where the perpetrators are not well-known. I would answer the question of whether all rape cases deserve equal coverage.

Along with research related specifically to institutional betrayal, I would like to examine media portrayals of feminism. It is important to note the changes that have taken place in the way society views the concept of feminism. Susan Faludi's *Backlash* examines (Faludi, 1991) the obvious marketing ploys that many companies used to play on feminism – branding certain products as “feminist” in order to encourage women to buy them. Faludi notes that she herself turned down many offers to “place my feminist seal of approval on brands of blue jeans, high heels, even breast implants” (Faludi,

1991, p. xiv). This approach completely bypasses the point of feminism, and takes the control away from women – if the point of feminism is to treat men and women as equals, why should one of the premises of “feminism” be that women need these certain products to be feminists? As Faludi points out, feminism has been twisted to neglect the basic goal of equating males and females. This is problematic not only in daily practice, but also when dealing with cases like the instances of sexual assault. If we cannot even recognize the dismissive nature of our treatment of feminism in things like advertisements and consumer culture, how can we expect people to treat cases of sexual assault with more gravity?

Conclusion

In my studies as a Psychology and Journalism major, I have become aware of the way these two fields impact each other. By demonstrating the media's role as an institution that people depend on, I hope to effect change in not only the way news outlets operate, but to alleviate the trauma that sexual assault survivors experience. Damaging media portrayals of sexual assault can exacerbate trauma outcomes, committing institutional betrayal (Smith and Freyd, 2013) of victims who relied on the media to provide a truthful portrayal of their case. However, I believe that by shedding light on the flaws in the way the media portrays sexual assault and its victims, I can take the first step to change the way we, as a society, expect to discuss the problem of sexual assault.

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