#MeToo: A Study on Sexual Assault as Reported in the New York Times

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This study examines the extent to which coverage by The New York Times of the #MeToo movement includes a diverse background of victims of sexual assault and harassment. Source representation in media impacts the public’s perception of social issues and groups represented. This case study tracks demographic coverage of sexual harassment and assault in a high-profile news organization. Data gathered examines The New York Times’ framing of victims and inclusivity of reporting over a two-month period in 2017. Findings suggest that victims most often sourced in #MeToo-related stories are Caucasian females employed in the entertainment industry or in politics. This study determines that The New York Times coverage excludes representation of minorities. However, it must be stated that framing analyses are sometimes small, requiring results to be treated with caution (Matthes, 2009). This study is not an exception, as the sample population is only a portion of what could be potentially analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Tarana Burke started a movement to help young women of color who had become victims of sexual assault (hereafter referred to as ‘survivors’ to protect their integrity). To further the healing process for survivors, Burke dubbed the movement “Me Too,” to emphasize to these women that they were not alone in their experiences (Garcia, 2017). In October 2017, the movement gained national renown on social media. Actress Alyssa Milano encouraged any survivors on Twitter to use the hashtag “#MeToo” to prove how widespread sexual harassment and assault had become (Ohlheiser, 2017).
NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

About 40% of reported assaults garner attention from news media outlets. Of this 40%, the majority involve unusual or high-profile circumstances and people (Pennington, 2016). This selective coverage spreads several misconceptions about assault, ultimately promoting rape culture (Franiuk, 2008). Rape culture is defined as a society that blames victims of assault and normalizes male sexual violence (WAVAW, 2018). Articles that delegitimize rape can sway public and legal perception of victim credibility, often in favor of the accused. Of reported sexual assault cases, only 3% of rapists are sentenced to prison time.

Though #MeToo is not the first instance where sexual assault has garnered attention in the media, it has gained tremendous support (Ohlheiser, 2018). A New York Times article about Ashley Judd’s sexual harassment was likely another influence on the #MeToo hashtag’s popularity. The article detailed Judd being harassed by Harvey Weinstein, her film producer at the time for “Kiss the Girls” (Kantor, 2017). The article also included a handful of other women, each sharing their similar experiences involving Weinstein. Since the expose’s publication, over 50 women have come forward saying that Weinstein sexually assaulted them (Elizabeth, 2017).

Others still came forward with their own stories of sexual violence and harassment, condemning entertainers like Kevin Spacey and Louis C. K. for their actions.

According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, someone in the U.S. is assaulted every 98 seconds. This totals an average of 321,500 victims, aged 12 or older, each year.

WHITE FEMINISM:

a form of feminism that focuses on the struggles of white women while failing to address distinct forms of oppression faced by ethnic minority women and women lacking other privileges (Johnson, 2017). Though sexual assault is not limited to men who work in Hollywood, The New York Times primarily covered accounts of Caucasian women in the entertainment industry being oppressed by men in power (Johnson, 2017).

Such accounts were accepted by the public. However, women of color sexually assaulted by Weinstein did not receive the same accepting response for their allegations. Kenyan-Mexican actress Lupita Nyong’o waited roughly two weeks after Judd and over 40 others came forward before going public about her own encounter with Weinstein. In response, Weinstein—who had not yet commented on allegations—publicly implied Nyong’o was lying (Wang, 2017). This example shows the societal backlash women of color may face by publicizing their sexual assault.

#METOO AND WHITE FEMINISM

For Nyong’o and others, the #MeToo movement has supported white women over women of color. A failure to represent survivors equally frames sexual assault as an issue of white feminism.

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every 98 seconds. This statistic totals an average of 321,500 victims, aged 12 or older, each year. Those most at risk of sexual assault are American Indians, followed by Caucasians, Latinos, and African Americans (RAINN, 2018). This widespread impact of assault across racial identities indicates a need for accurate and representative news media coverage.

**METHODS**

Articles selected for study were published in *The New York Times* during the span of October 1st, 2017 - November 30th, 2017. This two month period was chosen for analysis because of the significant attention the #MeToo hashtag was gaining on social media. Fifteen articles met the search criteria.

*The New York Times* was selected for its national readership and its numerous stories published under the #MeToo movement. Because *The New York Times* has consistently set the standard in news media, a failure to report ethically could have great impact across news organizations (Pennington, 2016).

Articles were accessed through ProQuest Newsstand by searching *The New York Times* archives for the phrase “#MeToo.” Once examined, samples were coded according to the articles’ human sources (classified by gender, race, occupation/industry, and whether they were quoted or mentioned). The source’s position was additionally recorded as survivor, assaulter, movement supporter, assault sympathizer, or neutral. Certain sources may have been classified differently according to the article in question. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron was classified as a movement supporter in an article where he was described as such. In another article, he was labeled neutral when there was no acknowledgement of his affiliation with #MeToo. A total of 182 sources were analyzed.

Articles themselves were also coded based on who was represented. This was done to glean who *The New York Times* frames the #MeToo movement to affect.

Framing permits scholars to “Describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993). By emphasizing a perceived reality, frames influence media consumers’ understanding of circumstances, how the problems came to be, possible effects, and how the problems may be resolved (Entman, 1993). The way information is presented, whether intentional or not, affects the reader’s impression and opinions. Researchers analyze frames used to identify biases shown in communication, focusing on presented images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages (Matthes, 2009).

**RESULTS**

From a sample of 15 articles, five (33.3%) presented sexual assault as an issue prevalent in the entertainment industry, three (20%) focused on the movement as international, two (13.3%) profiled a specific instance in higher education, and two (13.3%) showcased safety measures being taken to prevent
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sexual assault. The remaining articles (20%) were equally divided, giving focus to sexual assault as an issue in politics, the restaurant industry, and the advertising industry.

A total of 182 sources were divided evenly, with 48.9% being female and 47.8% male. Racial demographics, however, were not so equally distributed. Caucasian sources comprised 70.3% of the total group, easily the most often used in news stories. Other representation included African American at 7.1%, Middle Eastern at 3.9%, Latino at 2.8%, and Asian sources at 1.1%. The unaccounted 14.8% of sources were not disclosed.

Assault survivors were the most frequent article sources at 31.3%, with #MeToo supporters comprising an additional 19.3%. Assaulters constituted 23.1% of sources, but assaulter sympathizers made up a minimal 4.4%. The remaining 22.6% were neutral sources.

White females were the most common demographic of assault survivors and movement supporters. White males were the most common demographic of assaulters, neutral sources, and assaulter sympathizers. People of color were not the most common demographic represented in any category.

DISCUSSION

These results indicate that The New York Times’ coverage of the #MeToo movement focuses on white individuals more than any other racial group. By framing sexual assault as an issue affecting white people more than people of color, The New York Times is exhibiting white feminism. Such preference in news media organizations may cause a white habitus, or, “A racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, emotions, and their views on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This biased framing breeds a sense of exclusivity among white society while promoting negative views on people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In this way, a framed #MeToo article can further spread misinformation about sexual assault and race.

Results additionally indicated that The New York Times’ stories focused on privileged groups of people, regardless of source race. None of the examined articles focused on sexual assault in poor or lower-class communities. The two cases portraying sexual assault in higher education were the only stories to focus primarily on people of color. While sexual assault is not limited to any one sphere, the emphasis on political and entertainment industries frames sexual assault as an issue only affecting people of color. A lack of diverse representation influences whether individuals are comfortable sharing their stories of sexual assault; if a survivor does not see themselves represented in coverage, they may be too discouraged to share their story.

ADDITIONAL POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON SURVIVORS

The problems survivors face do not end with assault. Society places a responsibility on women to shield themselves against sexual violence, leaving survivors with a sense of blame attached to their assault (Miller, 2012). Because survivors (both male and female) are six times more likely to have attempted suicide than those without a history of assault, there is a need for media outlets to provide accurate and careful coverage. Survivors who report assault often experience fear, shame, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Campbell, 2008). If these feelings are exacerbated through unethical coverage, it can not only undermine legal sentences, but cause fatal results (Tomasula, 2012).
ROOM TO IMPROVE

There is a harmful correlation between high-profile cases of sexual assault and inappropriate media coverage. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics calls upon journalists to minimize harm when reporting (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). Despite this guideline, previous research indicates journalists do not follow the code when covering sexual assault (Franiuk, 2008).

News organizations have the power to help or hinder cultural integration and representation. “Media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs...they can provide images for interpreting the world whether or not the designers are conscious of this intent” (Gamson, 1992). When covering sexual assault stories, journalists must be aware of how they frame the information and take care not to contribute to rape culture. In following the Code of Ethics, journalists can make an effort to minimize harm and provide survivors with a safe space to share their stories.

Journalists can also improve race representation in news media coverage by providing accurate framing and context (Entman & Rojecki, 2010). As a result, news consumers will begin to hold media to a higher standard of accountability.

It is not sufficient to simply avoid bias as an effort to be objective; journalists must also focus on accuracy and reader comprehension. By including additional context beyond the incident in question, journalists provide audiences with a heightened understanding of relevant social issues (Entman & Rojecki, 2010).

CONCLUSION

More research is necessary to determine how sexual assault is covered in national news media organizations. Coverage of sexual assault cannot be improved without reflecting on what has already been published. This study contributes to previous research on news media organizations’ representation of people of color, establishing white individuals as the most represented group in The New York Times’ #MeToo coverage. This is only a starting point for future research on representations of race and gender. Subsequent case studies should seek to explore content from other media sources, create a narrowed analysis on the individuals used as sources, and expand their key phrase for finding additional content. Speculations should continue on why Caucasian demographics tend to be the focus of media coverage.

To make survivors feel comfortable coming forward, The New York Times and news organizations of all levels should follow the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics when covering stories about sexual assault. News outlets should also take note of who is represented in stories as an effort to minimize harm. Being aware of whose voices are/are not present in stories on sexual assault can help ensure accuracy.

Both journalists and readers have the power to implement change in whose stories are told. Encouraging audiences and news media organizations to be critically aware can lead to a conscious and continued effort to provide equal representation. This self-awareness creates the potential to increase trust and communication between producers and consumers of coverage.


