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Framing Feminism: How U.S. and French Media Frame #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc from a Feminist Perspective

Kira Erickson

Western Washington University, kiralericson@gmail.com

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Framing Feminism

How U.S. and French media frame
#MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc from
a feminist perspective

A research project by **Kira Erickson**

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Fall 2018

Just over a year ago, the internet exploded with the hashtag #MeToo. Famous men in Hollywood and the Olympics were exposed as sexually harassing a large number of women. A women's movement was born, and several international spin-offs also originated.

Although [Tarana Burke](#) had been the first to use “Me Too” back in 2007, [actress Alyssa Milano](#) popularized the rebirth of the movement and the accompanying hashtag on October 15, 2017 (Garcia, 2017).

A few days earlier, on October 13, the [French journalist Sandra Muller](#) had created and popularized #BalanceTonPorc, or “expose your pig,” in France in response to the French TV executive who made inappropriate comments to her at a work party (Breedon, 2018).



With the growing influx of news stories covering the #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc movements, women saw overwhelming representation as both sources and subjects. Yet, previous research detailing the lack of representation of women in news coverage shows how unprecedented this was, just in the past few decades.

Looking at print news magazines, coverage of women has been less than that of men, and often contains negative perspectives which overemphasized those with lower social status as primary subjects (Hyun Jun Yung et al., 2007). In more than half of all instances, coverage featured women as victims of sexual crimes (Hyun Jun Yung et al., 2007).

In both movements, women of all social statuses—from movie stars to athletes to nearly anonymous “nobodies”—drew attention when they named the names of those who had sexually assaulted them. Although speaking out about sexual assault may have previously created a framing of a vulnerable victim, nevertheless an empowered survivor emerged. A series of crimes committed against these women by common perpetrators became a cause of solidarity, instead of a shameful scandal in which the individual assaulted became a source of pity.

However, the exposure of sexual harassment in France has not always been supported in the same ways as in the U.S. Actress Catherine Deneuve, along with other prominent women in French society, initially criticized both the #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc movements (Safronova, 2018). The New York Times reported on the translation of a letter Deneuve co-wrote, in which it was insisted, “Rape is a crime. But insistent or clumsy flirting is not a crime, nor is gallantry a chauvinist aggression” (Safronova, 2018).

The tendency for the French to classify sexual harassment as seduction has also been prevalent, and something that has begun to change as the country becomes aware of this problematic grouping. A French professor of feminism, Christine Bard, was interviewed in another New York Times article and offered her viewpoint on French culture and flirtation:

Idealization of seduction ‘à la Française,’ and that anti-feminism has become almost part of the national identity and is seen as a retort to Anglo-American culture . . . The desire to distance ourselves from a ‘puritanism’ which is ‘Protestant,’ ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘feminist’ plays well notably in intellectual milieus, and anti-Americanism has been a constant dimension of anti-feminism in France for more than a century.
(Rubin, 2017)

In terms of reporting, stronger defamation laws in France also discourage people to name perpetrators. Sandra Muller, the French journalist responsible for creating #BalanceTonPorc, came forward about the man who sexually harassed her, but as a consequence is now currently facing a defamation lawsuit (Breedon, 2018). Combined with the French feminist, or anti-feminist culture, reporting sexual assault and harassment is viewed as a riskier venture for women due to libel laws. This may also directly affect the stories being covered in France.

The theoretical concept of framing was applied to my research topic, which examined the ways in which U.S. and French media frame the representation of women through a feminist perspective in print journalism stories from *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* of the #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc movements.

This topic is important because both movements are still so new, and not much previous research exists on them. Exploring the framing of these feminist movements by journalists shows how readers’ perception of them can be influenced.



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Framing

Whenever journalists write stories, no matter how objective they may pledge to be, they are clearly being subjective when selecting the information that will be presented in their work. This is referred to as framing. Framing is “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution” (Entman, 2005, p. viii). Framing can also be defined as “the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences” (Reese, 2003, p. 7).

A journalist privileges certain kinds of information over others during the writing process to get a specific point across to readers. As a consequence of framing, readers will view an issue in a certain way depending on the way the writer chooses to frame it. Leaving information out is just as telling: “If a frame produces ‘omission,’ we ask how that omission is naturalized, made to seem as a logical exclusion or common-sensical irrelevancy” (Reese, 2003, p. 19).

When journalists choose to represent one side of an issue over others, this may allow for biases to reveal themselves. News framing can leave out voices and cast favor on one side of an issue without revealing explicit bias (Reese, 2003). Journalists have a lot of power in determining whose side is represented more favorably, and can even influence readers in this way.

Cultural Differences

There are cultural implications for framing as well: “The frame metaphor draws our attention to this structure—how the principles of organization create a coherent ‘package’ by combining symbols, giving them relative emphasis, and attaching them to larger cultural ideas” (Reese, 2003, p. 17). This is important in identifying the differences in how the U.S. and France frame feminism in their news stories. Different cultures directly affect the way the same issue of women’s movements is framed in two different countries.

Cross-cultural differences in framing also account for differing perspectives. Very little literature was found on the way the French frame news stories, partially because “framing” itself is an English term. The Worlds of Journalism Study reports on the ideologies of journalists in different countries, giving an idea of what they value most. For example, France and the U.S. are remarkably similar in that their journalists both prioritize the following categories in their top five roles: report things as they are, let people express their views, and provide information people need to make political decisions (Hanitzsch et al., 2017; Vos & Craft, 2016).

For journalists in the U.S., “91.4 percent said they had ‘complete’ or a ‘great deal’ of freedom in deciding what aspects of a story to emphasize” while only 67.5 percent of journalists in France said the same (Hanitzsch et al., 2017; Vos & Craft, 2016). This editorial freedom directly affects the extent to which a journalist frames a news story.

Framing Feminism

When applied to women’s movements, framing has the power to win or lose followers. Frames affect public support of movements, but conversely they can cause opposition from those who want to see the movement fail (Bronstein, 2005).

Both #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc were movements with feminist attributions, in which women felt empowered to come forth about the sexual abuse they had suffered at the hands of employers, co-workers, friends, spouses, partners and more.

The framing of women as feminists in movements has taken on many forms throughout the years. Feminist research addresses how a story containing sexism, such as gender-related myths, can affect bigger decisions and greater society. These frames “impact social policy decisions and reinforce commonsense assumptions that privilege men in the social hierarchy” (Hardin & Whiteside, 2010).

Several tropes about women as specifically feminists exist in news coverage. These can be relayed to different ways of framing women in the media, since they have been so heavily used in many other academic studies that follow print coverage of women’s movements. Feminists have been “othered” and labeled as “social deviants” (Van Zoonen, 1992; Ashley & Olson, 1998). They have also been framed as struggling to obtain their goals (Terkildsen and Schnell, 1997). Often, the subject of feminism isn’t reported on enough and coverage will address a woman’s appearance, trivializing her (Rhode, 1997).

Frames of demonization, personalization and trivialization, goals, victimization, agency and site of struggle function to package an image of a feminist. These six frames have been used in content analyses of women in electronic media and of newspaper articles of third wave feminism (Lind & Salo, 2002; Bronstein, 2005).

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For this study, *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* were selected because they occupy similar positions of prestige and politically they represent a neutral, or centrist viewpoint in their respective countries of the U.S. and France.

The database Nexis Uni was used to access print articles of both *The New York Times* and *Le Monde*. The timeframe of the search for stories covered one month after the origin of each hashtag. For *The New York Times*, the search began with October 15, 2017, when Alyssa Milano encouraged people via Twitter to use the #MeToo hashtag. For *Le Monde*, the search began with October 13, 2017, when Sandra Muller created and used the #BalanceTonPorc hashtag on her Twitter.

Within these time frames, a search for stories containing #MeToo in *The New York Times* yielded 22 results and a search for stories containing #BalanceTonPorc in *Le Monde* yielded 13. All stories labeled as opinion or op-ed were excluded, on account of containing bias. Week-in-review stories were also not considered, for they contained excerpts of larger and more important stories on the movements. In addition, a passing remark in coverage of a different event or a music review was not enough to warrant coding. The story's main purpose had to center on the movement.

Each article was coded for Lind and Salo's amalgamation of the six frames of feminism: demonization, personalization and trivialization, goals, victimization, agency and site of struggle. Headlines and body text were analyzed for the presence of these frames. More than one frame could occur.

Frames were identified based on language that occurred throughout the stories. For example, stories containing explicit recounts of sexual assault were coded as having a victimization frame. Stories detailing women coming forward about the perpetrators of these crimes were coded as having an agency frame. It was possible for these two frames to co-exist in numerous stories.

The subjects of these stories, the women themselves, were coded through the six frames of feminism. Stories which did not center on the women were coded through an "other" frame.

The content analysis was mainly qualitative, and largely subjective based on my own coding and perception of the frames.

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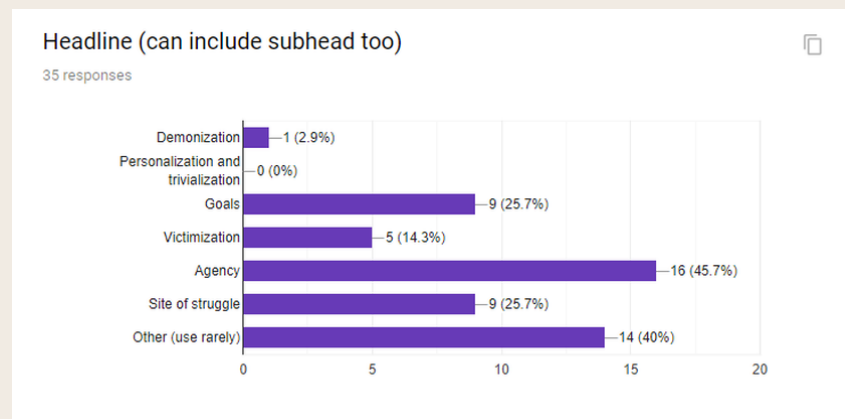
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Results

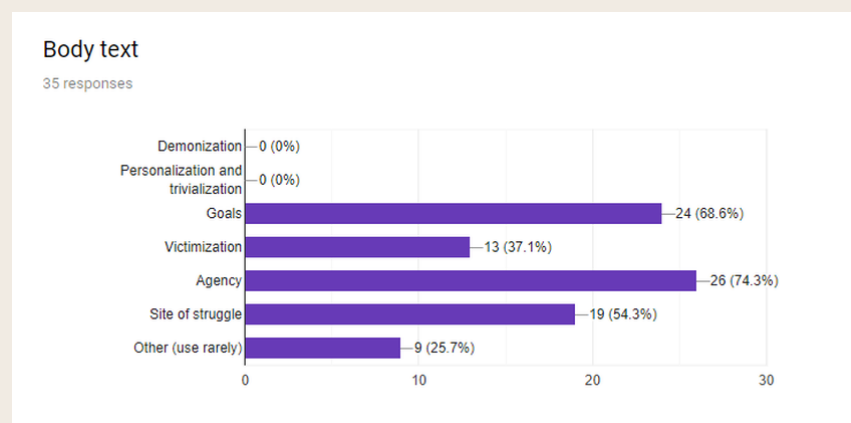
Out of all six frames, the agency frame was by far the most common in both headlines and body text of the 35 stories analyzed. It accounted for 45.7% of the time in headlines and 74.3% in body text. Goals was a close second in the body text (68.6%), but tied with site of struggle in the headline category (both 25.7%).

The site of struggle frame was also popular, coded 54.3% of the time in body text. This was due to the workplace language surrounding most of the pieces, where sexual harassment was most likely to happen.



Although there is occurrence of victimization frames when sexual violence is mentioned (14.3% in headlines, 37.1% in body text), this was outweighed by the framing of a strong woman who takes control of her story, seen via the goals and agency frames.

The personalization and trivialization frame, one of the more negative frames, never occurred in neither headlines nor body text. When talking about sexual harassment and assault, appearance was never even a factor. There was one occurrence of the demonization frame however, in the headline category.



An “other” choice was used fairly often—40% of the time in headlines and 25.7% of the time in body text. This was utilized whenever a story could not be coded under the six frames of feminism. This happened when the subjects of stories were not the women speaking out against sexual harassment in the workplace, but those who were guilty of such action. These were men-centered stories.

Analysis & Discussion

My thesis is as follows: Although U.S. and French media differ due to ideologies of objectivity, which is represented by more concrete facts in shorter pieces by *The New York Times* and in more opinionated, exposition-style pieces in *Le Monde*, they have similarities in framing of news stories. Framing from a feminist perspective illustrates that the goals and agency frames are used the most in both countries’ stories, but there is a lack of a frame which addresses non-feminism, or masculinity, and men in men-centered stories covering both of these women’s movements.

The French stories tended to focus more on the power struggle between man and woman, boss and employee. Aside from larger word counts, these stories also had more editorial freedom. [One story describing the passion of men, *la pulsionnalité*](#), contained blatant opinion and felt more like a philosophical work than a news story.

The effects of #BalanceTonPorc were emphasized, rather than the actual movement itself. And although it had been billed as France’s version of the #MeToo Movement, stories from *Le Monde* containing #MeToo were much more numerous than ones searched under #BalanceTonPorc. And perhaps the success of the movement in France was dulled by those claiming their jokes were a form of seduction, not sexual harassment.

In comparison, stories from *The New York Times* took more of a formulaic approach which most of the time centered the accusers in its coverage of #MeToo. Often it started out with a famous name being dropped, whether victim or perpetrator, and then firsthand accounts from the victims themselves, which was uncommon in *Le Monde*.

The two most popular frames in both publications, agency and goals, align with the outcome of the study done by Bronstein (2005) which looked at the media’s representation of third wave feminism. When framing feminism in the most recent international movements of women exposing their sexual predators, it would appear to be that most women come forward with the intention of generating change in their industry.

However, both publications would sometimes choose to center men in their stories. The gray zones of sexual harassment were explored among [a group of young men sitting around a café table](#) in France, just as they were in [white collar workplaces around the U.S.](#) This type of story would feature men questioning whether they had ever gone too far with a joke, or accidentally sexually harassed someone at the “boozy Christmas work party.”

And then both publications also had at least one story in which the very opposite end of the spectrum was illuminated. *Le Monde* had a story covering a [French masculinist group through a Q&A with an anthropologist](#) who studied them. *The New York Times* followed a [psychologist who studied men with sexually violent behaviors](#), rapists, and tried to figure out their motives.

To deal with this male-centric, anti-feminism coverage which does not fall under any of the six frames of feminism, I propose a new frame which responds to the complexity of these stories which center both the accusers and accused within an international social movement which can also be classified as a feminist one. A Meninist frame, defined as focusing on the motives and stories of men who don’t exactly subscribe to feminist framing, would better solve the issue of not knowing where to group these other subjects in a story.

Bronstein (2005) invented a new frame herself when she was researching third wave feminism, dubbed Feminism Lite, for “friendly and approachable feminism.” Similarly, my creation of the Meninist frame would be for, quite simply, abrupt toxic masculinity.

Conclusion

Overall, the coverage in *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* was respectful, and tried to put the stories of women at the forefront of the conversation on sexual harassment and assault. The goals and agency frames created the picture of strong women with a cause to root for, versus a standard victimization frame by itself applied to those affected by sexual violence, which causes the framing of a weaker person.

Legal framework can also dictate the framing of a news story. French journalists feel that they have less editorial freedom than their American counterparts. In France, more severe libel laws prevent women from speaking up about their aggressor, and most importantly, from naming them. This could be why *Le Monde* featured less stories with accusations against prominent figures, and tended to handle the issue of sexual harassment and assault with kid gloves.

Additional research on the spinoff “Me Too” movements in other countries and their cultural differences may illuminate more surprising framing.

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As we are rapidly nearing the two-year mark of the origin of “Me Too,” it is time to evaluate how the movement has evolved. Movements are seldom static, usually shifting and changing with the current times. In this section, I am exploring the present-day forms of #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc, as they are in the spring of 2019.

Le Monde has published only seven articles containing #BalanceTonPorc in 2019. The most recent, published May 30, details [the hearing of Sandra Muller](#) and the man she accused of sexual harassment, the French TV executive Eric Brion.

[Another article expresses the importance of trans visibility](#), pointing out the success of #MeToo, #BalanceTonPorc and other spin-off movements which have created a platform for women to unite against their perpetrators, oppose the patriarchal society and gain agency.

In a third, [Catherine Deneuve defends her stance on both movements](#), simultaneously acknowledging the hostile reactions she received because of it.

While these sparse articles may not seem to indicate growth in #BalanceTonPorc, it is important to note that #BalanceTonPorc was tweeted nearly one million times during the year following Sandra Muller’s initial tweet on October 13, 2017 (Oppenheim, 2019). And in 2018, harsher laws were enacted against cat-calling and street harassment (Oppenheim, 2019).

The New York Times has taken a different approach in its recent coverage of “Me Too.” In fact, there are 862 results which appeared in Nexis Uni for #MeToo in 2019, as of June 12, 2019. The sheer vastness of the publication’s reporting indicates “Me Too” is still just as prevalent now as it was in the fall of 2017.

Just during this past month of May alone, there are stories of [campaigns within the McDonald’s Corporation](#) against workplace harassment and [Netflix series and films which grapple with the reality of the #MeToo Movement](#). There are even stories within the realm of academia, detailing [the struggle for survivors to remain anonymous in recent sexual assault lawsuits](#) happening in university settings.

It is possible *The New York Times* has much more resources than *Le Monde* to perform this extensive coverage, which could help explain the gap in coverage. However, both publications clearly haven’t lost sight of #MeToo or #BalanceTonPorc, as more stories continue to be published.

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