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The 2013 Steubenville Rape Case: An Examination of Framing in Newspapers and User-generated Content

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Abstract

Using the lens of medium theory, this content analysis explored the framing of the Steubenville rape case in newspapers and blogs before, during and immediately following the trial. Our findings indicate newspapers focused on social media's role in documenting the rape and the trial of the two assailants. Blog posts, on the other hand, focused on rape victims' rights and social media's role in bringing the case to justice. Of the 78 newspaper articles and blog posts coded, medium type did not make a significant difference in the framing of perpetrators and the actual act of rape. However, there was a significant difference in how the media types framed the case in general. This is a noteworthy finding, as it appears that newspapers were colorblind in their coverage and not as prone to use race frames as indicated in previous studies. Conversely, blog posts offered a platform for discussing issues that were omitted in mainstream media such as women's rights, rape myths and the need for rape awareness/prevention programs for parents and youth.

Introduction

“Huge party!!! Banger!!!!” Trent Mays, a sophomore quarterback on Steubenville’s football team, tweeted in reference to an end-of-the-summer party held in his hometown of Steubenville, Ohio. Later that evening, Mays and his teammate, Ma’lik Richmond, raped a 16-year-old girl, who did not remember the details of the night until she saw photos, text messages and videos posted by attendees (Oppell, 2013). Social media helped to kick off the party. Social media would also lead to uncovering the crime and the conviction of Mays and Richmond a year later. When the story of the Steubenville rape first surfaced, media outlets portrayed the sexual assault as a night of teen alcohol-fueled partying gone wrong; however, the case soon revealed numerous layers and implications for new media and communications studies. Questions arose over Internet privacy, media ethics for user-generated content and compassion in the 21st Century.

Studies of today’s rape culture have generally focused on media framing of the act, victim blaming and gender framing and race (e.g., Benedict, 1992; O’Hara, 2013; Barnett, 2012; Worthington, 2013). Conclusions frequently confirm findings from Benedict’s (1992) landmark study that identified persistent rape myths perpetuated by journalistic accounts, such as the portrayal of survivors according to a “Madonna-whore” dichotomy that invites audiences to interrogate victim behaviors. This frame also includes the representation of perpetrators as isolated examples of abnormal behavior despite evidence their actions conformed to socially sanctioned gender norms.

Other studies (i.e. Brown, Testa and Messman-Moore, 2007, O’Hara, 2012; Durham, 2013) have looked at the situational factors in blaming rape victims including victim attractiveness, dress, alcohol intake and timing of resistance to sexual advances. Brown and Testa’s (2007) study indicated that “exposure to negative social reactions toward a rape victim reduced willingness to provide emotional support to that victim” (Brown et. al., 2007, p. 490-92). Race is also a common topic of analysis. For example, Benedict (1992) found the content of coverage to be racist, class-oriented, sexist and inaccurate. The most common rape story often contained the scenario of Caucasian female victim with an African-American male perpetrator.

More recently, studies have turned to framing of rape on the Web. Worthington (2013), who has written a series of articles on sexual assault, examined news framing of rape on the website of South Africa’s most popular newspaper after the passage of major legislation to reform the treatment of sexual assault from 2008-9. Her analysis of 145 online news stories revealed frames emphasizing male dominance and justice denied. Worthington attributes the publication’s deviation from traditional frames to news values such as drama, conflict and celebrity. Her findings suggest that media philosophy and media organization reputation can be important influences on news framing.

While these articles offer a great foundation for studies on rape and media coverage, there is a gap in the literature on articles that explore how social media and user-generated content have changed the dynamics of media framing of rape—particularly cases that are documented and exposed using social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Research on social media has become particularly important as people use it for “slut shaming,” or “victim blaming,” trends that have become more widespread in recent years (Alaniz, 2013). Teens videotape, photograph and share online the sexual antics of mostly girls who are intoxicated or inappropriately dressed to make fun of them and/or to teach them a lesson (McDonagh, 2013; Roberts, 2013; ABC News, 2013).

In one such example, in September 2012, 15-year-old Audrie Pott of Saratoga, Calif., was raped at a party when she was too intoxicated to defend herself. After passing out at a party, Pott

awoke to find writing all over her naked body. Her male classmates had taken and shared pictures of the entire act. After photos taken by her three assailants circulated at school and online, she took her own life (Lindin, 2013). In another example, Amanda Todd hanged herself in her home in British Columbia after the trauma she sustained in cyberspace carried over to the real world (Kemp, 2013; Lindin, 2013). She made a nine-minute YouTube video describing the incessant bullying and violent attacks she was enduring because three years earlier, when she was 12, a stranger had persuaded her to bare her breasts for a photo that was later circulated online. She committed suicide one month after making the video, in October of 2012.

With the explosion of social media, and extensive use of user-generated content, an environment exists in which individuals readily share personal information about themselves and others (Singer, 2013). It is common for people to document their lives through social media. Once this information is online, it is no longer in the control of the person who posted it (Solove and Schwartz, 2009). Accordingly, the widespread publication of personal information diminishes the individual's ability to protect his or her reputation and control perceptions by others.

Internet shaming and rape is a new phenomenon that deserves a closer look in the academy. This study analyzes differences in how blogs and mainstream media framed the Steubenville rape case, and the changing dynamics of traditional and social media framing of rape.

Review of the Literature

To explore the literature on rape and framing, we look to two streams of literature: (1) medium theory (2) media studies on rape. Meyrowitz (1985) coined the term "medium theory" to describe the incorporation of history and culture in studying media. Medium theory includes the idea that technology is a dominant force through which media influences society and culture. The theory utilizes a variety of approaches to examine how the means of expression of human communication influences the meanings of human communications. This study looks at media frames through the lens of medium theory to assess the extent to which medium (blogs versus newspapers) influenced the framing of the 2012 Steubenville rape case that received national coverage.

Social media networks have created an avenue by which the public can post messages that reach large audiences with both the details of their everyday lives and personal content of the lives of other people (Knight & Hunter, 2013). Social media tools include interactive social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as blogs, podcasts, message boards, online videos and picture albums and mobile telephone alerts (Taylor & Kent, 2010).

One of the other byproducts of UGC is the implication for privacy or lack thereof. In the Steubenville rape case, witnesses posted details of the rape on Twitter and users retweeted and commented on those posts. In a lapse of judgment, a major television network broadcasted the name of the victim, a blatant violation of journalists' ethical standards and scholars' best practices for covering rape cases. However, a determined crime blogger noted the tweets regarding the rape and alerted authorities of the crime. If not for those tweets and subsequent blog posts, the victim may not have reported her rape.

Blogs

Blogging is another consideration in this study as a blogger is credited with helping to break the case along with a hacker who posted video featuring details of the night's events. Scholars often equate blogging with citizen or participatory journalism (Goode, 2009). In its simplest form, the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary describes a blog as "a Website that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by

the writer.” Stanyer (2006) adds that blogs are the online equivalent of a journal or diary, with regular entries that include video clips and photos.

Media framing

A growing list of researchers has examined media coverage of social problems such as spousal abuse and racial issues from a media framing perspective (see Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Messner & Solomon, 1993; Entman and Rojecki, 1993). Such studies generally support the idea that journalists and editors select, package and disseminate news through organizational processes and ideologies (Watkins, 2001). In their exploration of news narrative structures repeated over time, Bennett and Edelman (1985) argued that most news stories maintain the status quo by presenting social problems within comfortable cognitive frames that disallow the entry of alternative renditions.

The basis of framing theory presumes the prevalent media will focus attention on newsworthy events and place them within a sphere of meaning. In his landmark study, Entman and Rojecki (1993) discussed how journalists embed frames within a text and thus influence thinking. He defined the term by noting that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52).

Framing and rape

As mentioned in our introduction, media studies of framing of rape and violence toward women have traditionally fallen into one of three categories: victim blaming, gender frames, and race. Studies examining news about gender violence frequently confirm findings from Benedict’s landmark study, which identified persistent rape myths perpetuated by journalistic accounts (1992). Survivors most frequently are portrayed within a narrow dichotomy, suggesting either virginal innocence crushed by an unwarranted attack or promiscuous irresponsibility that actually provoked assault with a variety of behavioral choices such as substance abuse, revealing attire, or decisions to venture to unsafe locations (Benedict, 1992).

Other analyses of rape often focus on the dynamics of race and stereotypes. Benedict (1992) found the articles included depictions that were racist, classist, sexist and misleading. The most common covered rape story contained the scenario of Caucasian female victim and an African-American male perpetrator. These stories, which proved statistically inaccurate, reflected and perpetuated the attitude that Caucasian women are more valuable than African-American women. In another study on race, Lule (1995) evaluated the media coverage of Mike Tyson after his sentencing for the rape of Desiree Washington, a contestant in the Miss Black America pageant. He noted that African-American writers reflected on the idea that the African-American community sympathized with Tyson, while showing little sympathy for his accuser. Conversely, the most dominant portrayal of mainstream media was the depiction of Tyson as a savage or decidedly inhuman beast.

Victim blaming is a chief segment of the rape literature. O’Hara (2012) concluded that much of the news media’s coverage of sexual violence frequently portrays brutal rapists who prey on victims depicted either as ‘virgins’ or as promiscuous women who invited the rape (e.g., Benedict, 1992; O’Hara, 2013, p. 247). The victim-blaming frame places culpability on the victim to indicate she is responsible for the action, i.e., she chose to consume alcohol, to dress a certain way and/or to venture into an unsafe area, thus suggesting that she should have known better than to engage in risky behaviors. Such victim-blaming discourse is a staple of sexual assault news (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Weaver et al., 2000; Worthington, 2013).

Another study indicated that rape is more likely to occur when the perpetrators are in a group (i.e. Murnen and Kohlman, 2007). The two looked at sexual aggression in college athletics and fraternities, and concluded that data backed up the association between all-male groups and sexual assault and the idea that sexual violence is masculine. Murnen and Kohlman (2007) argue that athletes commit violence against women because of the sense of entitlement that is instilled in them by universities that pamper them.

Medium Theory: New media rape

More recently, studies have turned their attention to new media platforms. Durham, (2013) found that bloggers and commentators quickly identified the patriarchal and victim-blaming aspects of The New York Times' coverage, resulting in an influential petition and an apology from The Times. Durham's (2013) analysis revealed bloggers and commentators engaged in feminist dialogue, raising awareness of patriarchal frames of sexual violence as well as fostering reformist actions. However, the study also pointed to a continued need for watchfulness and activism around sexual violence and child abuse.

Similarly, Worthington (2013) examined online news about the gang rape of a teenage girl after she left her homecoming dance in Richmond, Calif. Findings suggested frames debated the crime's causes, with a variety of sources offering competing explanations, many of which invoked identity discourses tying intersections of gender, race, and class with place. In contrast to previous research, some framing implicated social structures by referencing gender socialization as a cause of rape. In another study, Worthington (2013) examined news framing of a rape case in stories published on SFGate, the website of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the largest metropolitan daily newspaper in Northern California. Worthington found online media added a fresh perspective of commentary that also included women's advocates representing an anti-rape organization and the National Organization of Women and teachers.

Worthington (2013) attributes the change to recent reforms in gender violence coverage and online news' increased need to update major stories. Study findings also suggested that frames debated the crime's causes with a variety of sources offering competing explanations that often tied to intersections of gender, race and class. In contrast to previous research, some framing implicated "social structures by referencing gender socialization as a cause of rape" (Worthington, 2013, p. 116). In her conclusions, Worthington encouraged researchers to study social media trends to remain current in the rapidly changing media environment.

Medium theory is concerned with the role that technology plays in changing society, shaping patterns of communication in human relations and bringing change to larger aspects of social organization in society (Deibert, Ronald J. Parchment, 1997). With these goals in mind, our research questions explore the following questions:

RQ₁: How did newspapers and blogs differ in their characterization of social media in the coverage of the Steubenville rape case?

RQ₂: How did newspapers and blogs differ in their framing of the Steubenville rape case?

RQ₃: How did newspapers and blogs differ in the characterization of the perpetrators?

RQ₄: How did newspapers and blogs differ in their characterization of the victim?

Methodology

To address these four research questions, this study examined news coverage of the Steubenville case through content and textual analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Altheide & Johnson (1994) instruct readers to immerse themselves in the data, organize it into categories and ask other researchers and readers to look over their articles and gauge the validity.

Similarly, Squires (2007) suggests a grounded theory approach based in the idea that a researcher must be guided as much as possible by the meanings available in the data themselves rather than shoehorning data into preexisting theoretical models. Through intense interaction with text, one can achieve confidence that his or her analysis makes sense and go beyond mere opinion (Squires, 2007).

Therefore, the textual analysis included reading and identification of the key themes emphasized in the selected sample (Entman and Rojecki, 1993). The primary researcher and two graduate students read the artifacts multiple times and highlighted code words and themes. Cycling through data, the researcher was able to see similarities and differences in the articles and blogs and keep track of thematic elements (Squires, 2007). After compiling the sub-themes, an emergent pattern was created, which provided the evidence for an argument about the nature of news media coverage of rape.

Content analysis

Content analysis helped “identify, enumerate and analyze occurrences of specific message and message characteristics embedded in communication texts” (Frey, Botan, Friedman, Kreps, 1992, p.194; Condelli, L. & Heide, W. (2004). The headline and entire story was the coding unit of analysis. To ensure that the constructed categories were the most appropriate for this study (description of the victim, description of the perpetrators, social media and overall frames), the researchers conducted an initial analysis of themes. An agreement on 40 out of 44 items coded (91% agreement) indicated the themes were sufficiently operationalized.

Once these themes were established, the primary investigator coded the entire sample of newspaper articles and blog posts (n=78). A second researcher, a graduate student, separately evaluated 10% (8) of the units and cataloged them. The intercoder reliability test using Holsti’s coefficient yielded 100% agreement for number words in stories/blogs, 100% for article type, 96.1% for frame, 90% for depictions of perpetrators, 96% for depictions of victim and 98% for depictions of rape. Chi-squares, frequencies, percentages and t-tests were the statistical tests used to answer the research questions. Analysis of the data using the categories is summed up using frequencies, percentages and descriptive statistics shown in four tables to display the findings—one for each of the four areas of comparison.

Sample

To make the research manageable, the researcher confined the study to newspaper articles and blog entries released Dec. 12, 2012 to June 11, 2013 during the period that corresponded with the nonjury trial of the accused rapists and the aftermath of the sentencing. To select the newspaper articles for our sample, researchers conducted a search on LexisNexis Academic using the keywords “Steubenville” and “rape.”

We included the census of the newspaper articles and most blog posts found on Lexis Nexis in our sample.¹ Altogether, the sample included 44 newspaper articles and 34 blogs. The newspapers in our sample were *The New York Times* (7), *The Washington Post* (2), *USA Today* (4), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (20), and the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* (11). National, mainstream newspapers and local papers were included. Because of its proximity to Steubenville—approximately 40 miles—Pittsburgh-area newspapers were considered as local publications.

¹ For the Huffington Post, which had 55 posts, we used a systematic sampling of every 10th blog entry to select the sample of blog posts from the publication. For Jezebel, which had 34 posts, we used a systematic sampling of every over blog post to select the sample of blog posts from the publication. Many of the blog posts were similar in content to other blog posts or only briefly mentioned the Steubenville rape case, but did not focus on it.

Table 1: Number of newspaper articles and blog posts included in sample

Publication	n(Lexis Nexis n)	%
Pittsburgh Post Gazette	20 (20)	26%
Pittsburgh Tribune Review	11 (11)	14%
USA Today	4 (4)	5%
New York Times	7 (7)	9%
Washington Post	2 (2)	3%
<hr/>		
Total newspaper articles	44	
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Jezebel	17 (34)	22%
Deadspin	8 (9)	10%
Nation's Blog	3 (3)	4%
Huffington Post	4 (55)	5%
New York Times Blog	2 (6)	3%
<hr/>		
Total blog posts	34	
<hr/>		
Total in sample	78	100%

The researchers chose The New York Times and Washington Post because these news outlets are considered elite, which means they have the power to influence how other news outlets cover various events (Merrill et. al., 1980).

Researchers selected blogs using Newstex, an aggregator of more than 3,000 blogs indexed on LexisNexis Academic (Table 1). The blogs in our sample were: Jezebel (17), Deadspin (8), The Nation’s Blogs and (3), Huffington Post (4) New York Times Blog (2). These are premiere blogs that have a niche audience relevant to our study or are spinoffs of well-known parent companies. Jezebel, a feminist blog owned by Gawker Media focusing on women’s interests, reports that it has roughly 10 million monthly views. Deadspin, which focuses on sports, news and commentary, has a self-reported readership of 460 million views overall. The Nation’s Blog focuses on political and social misrepresentations. Both the Huffington Post and the New York Times are offshoots of their parent companies. The New York Times blog has a self-reported circulation of almost 2 million people.

Findings and Discussion

The first research question asked how did newspapers and blogs characterize social media in the Steubenville rape case. To answer this question, we coded various aspects of social media (Table 2). Findings indicated that there was not a significant difference in how the two platforms characterized social media in their coverage of the case. The Anonymous theme made up the largest percentage in this category with 18 or 35.29% of newspaper articles and 15 or 42.85% of blog entries. Content focused on how the 12-minute video leaked by an anonymous cell or “hactivist” group called, “KnightSec,” revealed footage of teens making cruel jokes

about the rape case. Articles and blog entries often discussed the video of “drunk Steubenville high school athletes having a blast making fun of the 16-year-old girl who was raped by beloved football players Trent Mays and Ma’lik Richmond last August.”

Articles and posts included the idea that the video is disturbing and that the speaker identified by the name, ‘misternunya,’ described himself as an independent journalist who posted the video. In the video, one of the onlookers, “Michael Nodianos cracks himself up as he calls the girl ‘deader than’ JFK, OJ’s wife, Caylee Anthony, and Trayvon Martin, amongst others.”

Table 2: Newspaper versus blog mention of user-generated content

Mentions of UGC	Newspapers		Blogs	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Perpetrators arrested/sentenced/charged with threatening victim on Twitter	4	7.84%	2	5.7%
Photos/texts of victims released on Facebook	6	11.76%	4	11.4%
Photos/texts of victims released on YouTube	9	17.64%	4	11.4%
Photos of Victim Released on Instagram	2	3.92%	1	2.85%
Blogger helped break case	6	11.76%	8	22.85%
Anonymously released video/asked for public apology	18	35.29%	15	42.85%
Perpetrator’s cousin makes cyber threats via online media	6	11.76%	1	2.85%
n=78 $\chi^2=4.73$ df=6 p-value=.58 p < .05	51	99.97%	35	99.90%

YouTube was the second most popular user-generated content mentioned by newspapers with 9 (11.76%) total. Conversely, the role of bloggers was the second most popular category for blogs with 8 (22.85%) total and the third most popular for newspapers with 6 (11.76%) total. Instagram was the least popular social media platform for both media platforms with only a small percentage of the sample mentioned it.

Both newspaper and blog entries in our sample indicated via Twitter posts, videos and photographs revealed the two assailants had sexually assaulted Jane Doe for several hours while other partygoers watched. Newspaper articles and blog posts also focused on how the sexual assault made local news—even after various students had deleted the various Instagram photos and tweets of the victim, who was from across the Ohio River in Weirton, W.Va. After learning of the video and images, the rape victim came forward with allegations of being drugged and gang-raped by the two high school football players who were from Steubenville, a town of 19,000 in eastern Ohio (Broderick, 2012).

Many of the artifacts in our sample cited other blogs and tweets in their coverage of the sexual assault. Newspaper articles were more likely to frame social media as having a role in the rape and in trying the victim before the case reached the courtroom. For instance, reporters discussed how the case originated in user-generated content and highlighted efforts by Goddard, a 45-year-old Web analyst and crime blogger (Macur & Schweber, 2012). According to many articles, she heard about the case early on and rushed to investigate it herself because she had little faith that the authorities would do a thorough job. Goddard took screenshots of posts, photographs and videos before posters removed them and posted them on her site, Prinniefied.com.

Likewise, blogs mentioned Goddard's role in breaking the case. A December 17, 2012, Jezebel blog entry titled, "We Wouldn't Know About the Steubenville Rape Case If It Wasn't for the Blogger Who 'Complicated' Things," attributed the publicity of the Steubenville case to Goddard. The blog entry concluded that without the social media angle, the Steubenville rape would have just been another story about a young woman raped by athletes while she was unconscious from drinking too much alcohol.

Later, media coverage turned to protests regarding the handling of the case and the perception of a cover-up. During this phase, blog entries cited tweets. According to one blog entry, hundreds of people turned out in the small town to support the victim. Several attendees live tweeted comments such as: #OccupySteubenville[19] was priceless. I hope any other rape victims feel comfortable coming forward. Witnesses should come forward. Elizabeth (@ElizabethRumson) December 29, 2012[20]. Live tweeting—and the posting of other user-generated content—is noteworthy as social media provide an idea of what was going on at the rally. They also served as abbreviated news stories for people who were not able to attend the event. Once again, social media played an important role in the Steubenville rape case.

After the trial ended, blog topics ranged from coverage of sexual assault on college campuses, to rape in New Delhi, and analyses of how mainstream media covered the trial. The Huffington Post blog, in particular, analyzed media's coverage of the case. Blog posts focused on how patriarchy dominates media's framing of rape. One entry asserted that Poppy Harlow, a CNN Reporter, was 'outraged' over Steubenville rape coverage criticism. It included the following excerpt (Poppy Harlow, CNN Reporter, 'Outraged' Over Steubenville Rape Coverage Criticism, 2013, para. 1):

CNN's coverage of the Steubenville rape trial verdict was met with an onslaught of criticism this week after network reporters stressed the impact the decision will have on the rapists, not on the victim. According to sources who spoke exclusively with The Wrap, the criticism is taking its toll on reporter Poppy Harlow.

Depiction of rape

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines rape as forced sexual intercourse and emphasizes that force can include physical or psychological coercion (Barnett, 2012). The words used to describe sexual assault can change an individual's perception of a rape case (Table 3). In the case of the Steubenville sexual assault, the two assailants digitally penetrated the victim. It is also important to note that this was not the first time the victim was digitally penetrated that night, according some of the eyewitness reports.

Newspapers and blogs in our sample tended to remain objective when it came to describing the act. The overwhelming majority of the artifacts in our sample described the act as "rape" with 33 (62.26%) of newspapers using the term and 22 or (70.96%) of blogs using the term. The second most popular term was "sexual assault" with 11 (20.75%) of newspapers using the term and 5 (16.12%) of blogs using the term. These differences between newspapers and blogs were not statistically significant. The term 'digital penetration' was also common with 7 (13.20%) of newspapers and 2 (6.45%) of blogs using the term. We thought this noteworthy, as the actual act was digital penetration. While people might question the cruelty of "digital penetration," in Ohio, there is no ambiguity in what constitutes rape (Ohio Revised Code, n.d.). "Digital penetration" is rape. This term emerged after Anonymous released video footage detailing the assault and Jane Doe described the night's events at trial.

Table 3: Characterization of rape by newspapers and blogs

Characterization of Rape	Newspapers		Blogs	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Rape	33	62.26%	22	70.96%
Sexual Assault	11	20.75%	5	16.12%
Digital Penetration	7	13.20%	2	6.45%
Oral Sex	2	3.77%	2	6.45%
n=78 $\chi^2=1.57$ df=3 p-value: .67 p < .05	53	99.98%	31	99.98%

Twitter posts, videos, and photographs circulated by some individuals who attended the parties suggesting that the perpetrators had sexually assaulted the unconscious victim over several hours while others watched (Macur & Schweber, December 17, 2012). In one photograph posted on Instagram by a Steubenville High football player, Jane Doe is shown looking unresponsive as two boys carry her by her wrists and ankles. Twitter users wrote the words “rape” and “drunk girl” in their posts. Comments in the Anonymous video included, “She is so raped,” he says. “Her puss [sic] is about as dry as the sun right now.” Later in the video, one of his friends says, “That’s not cool bro” and “That’s like rape. It is rape. They raped her.”

Citizens carried out the theme of rape using hashtags and Twitter posts. Almost immediately, the hashtag “#rapeapologist surfaced on Twitter along with a petition demanding CNN apologize to the rape victim and her family, prompted by www.change.org. Citizens accused CNN of portraying the perpetrators in a sympathetic light. A response on Twitter declared, “@PoppyHarlowCNN, those boys destroyed their own lives when they committed a violent crime called rape” (Sciullo, 2013).

Media Frames

Research question three asked how did newspapers and blogs differ in their framing of the Steubenville rape case? Newspaper articles split 50/50 in their framing of football players as either All-American athletes with a positive or negative connotation with 12 (35.29%) newspaper articles and 3 (12%) of blog entries using this description (Table 4). This finding was statically significant. Newspapers had a similar number of negatively framed articles that discussed football players—12 (35.29%). All-American football framed negatively was the most popular theme for blogs with 10 (40%) of the posts containing this frame The idea of a cover-up was the second most common frame in blog posts with 8 (32%) of the posts containing this frame.

Table 4: Frames in newspapers and blog

Frames	Newspapers		Blogs	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
All-American Football-positive	12	35.29%	3	12%
All-American Football-negative	12	35.29%	10	40%
All-American Football-neutral	4	11.76%	0	0
Rape cover-up by officials/coaches/friends of players etc.	6	17.64%	8	32%
Victim/slut-shaming discussed as societal concern	0	0	4	16%
n=78 $\chi^2=12.76$ df=4 p-value .01 p < .05	34	99.98%	25	100.00%

When we began the study, we were not aware the “All-American” athlete frame had both positive and negative connotations—which led to a change in our codebook to reflect the true nature of the articles and blog posts. Negative articles characterized the assailants as having a “lack of morals and values.” Articles with a positive tone focused on their hero status and their contributions to the football team.

A *New York Times* piece led with the idea that the party was to be the last big night out before many of Steubenville’s high school students left the “decaying steel town,” bound for college (Macur and Schweber, 2013, para. 3). The article continued that for others, it was simply a way to “cap off a summer of socializing before school started in less than two weeks.” The paragraph ended with the idea that the football players had a bright future. “For the lucky ones on the Steubenville High School football team, it would be the start of another season of possible glory as stars in this football-crazy county.”

Blogs were more likely to frame the football team negatively. For instance, they discussed how football perpetuates a rape culture. A Huffington Post blog entry stated that this “hypermasculine, gender exclusive environment that young men are widely encouraged to excel in, often at the expense of their education,” fosters incidents such as the Steubenville rape (“American Football Culture and Sexual Violence,” 2013). The article included this excerpt (“American Football Culture and Sexual Violence,” 2013, para. 10):

Just look at the teenage football players involved in the horrific Steubenville rape case. In a town where the high school football team is lauded as if it were a college or professional team, these boys displayed an ignominious understanding of sex, boundaries, and their own power in the world. They not only raped and dragged around a passed-out young woman, but some were recorded boasting about it—the assault seemingly proving their manhood. Extremely disturbing, yes, but are we surprised?

Allegations of a cover up

The case led to allegations of a cover-up to protect the well-liked Steubenville High football team (McDonagh, 2013). Articles that included this frame encompassed the idea that the coach was standing by his players. A *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* article discussed how the attention brought allegations of a “cover-up against police authorities and ridicule of the town for what some consider unhealthy hero worship of Steubenville High’s wildly popular and successful Big Red team” (Togneri, 2013, para. 10).

Judge Thomas Lipps, who presided over the trial, described his decision not to move the trial to another venue as a tactic to show transparency, “it is important to have open proceedings to address rumors and opinions about the case that have sprouted on social media and elsewhere” (Ove, 2013, para. 2-3). His comment was in response to accusations by bloggers and online activists who accused local officials of “a cover-up, asking why more students have not been charged and suggesting that justice has been trumped by the prestige of the popular high school football team.”

Depictions of perpetrators

Research question three asked how did newspapers and blogs characterize the perpetrators. In contrast to articles that used frames, non-biased articles described the perpetrators with objective adjectives, such as students and 16-year-olds. Other articles that did not frame the perpetrators, simply described them as two “high-school athletes” with no further elaboration. Both newspapers and blogs mostly identified the boys as football players with 37

(88.09%) newspaper articles and 20 (62.50%) of blog entries using this description (Table 5). The term ‘rape crew’ was also used to describe the boys in two blog posts 2 (6.25%).

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette featured this example of the objective coverage that we found in our sample “a nonjury trial of two Steubenville High School students raping a 16-year-old West Virginia girl last summer will be open to the public, an Ohio judge ruled Wednesday” (Ove, 2013). Rather than describing the victim as intoxicated and the boys as football heroes, Ove (2013) described the party and the trial. The article included the following quote, “Malik Richmond and Trent Mays, both 16, are accused of attacking the girl after an alcohol-fueled party in August in Steubenville (para. 4).” Conversely, other articles in our sample characterized her as either drunk, inebriated, passed out, etc.

Table 5: Description of Perpetrators

	Newspapers		Blogs	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Steubenville High School football players	37	88.09%	20	62.50%
Steubenville High School students	1	2.38%	1	3.12%
Boasted about posts	2	4.76%	3	9.37%
Apologized	1	2.38%	2	6.25%
Sobbed	1	2.38%	2	6.25%
Rape Crew	0	0	2	6.25%
Drunk Football Players	0	0	2	6.25%
<i>n</i> =78 $\chi^2=10.63$ <i>df</i> =6 <i>p</i> -value=.10 <i>p</i> <.05	42	99.99%	32	99.99%

Other posts discussed the boys’ behavior during the rape and the trial period. A few discussed that one of the boys sobbed after the judge sentenced him. Another blog entry focused on how CNN handled the court case and appeared sympathetic toward the perpetrators. In an in-depth New York Times article, a reporter described an assailant’s home and interviewed family members and friends who depicted him as an All-American athlete. The article included this flattering description of Mays’ athletic achievements: “two shelves filled with athletic trophies could be seen inside a second-story room.” The same article included an excerpt from Adam Nemann, Mays’ lawyer, who described the case as unusual because the police collected no physical evidence or testimony from the girl who asserts she was raped (Macur and Schweber, 2013).

Nemann also discussed the question of consent. He said, “was she conscious enough to give consent or not? We think she was. She gave out the passcode to her phone after the sexual assault was said to have occurred” (Macur and Schweber, 2013, p. para. 30). The assailant’s lawyers also discussed the disadvantage that social media created for his client because so many people discussed the incident online through blogs and on Twitter. He described the case as an uphill battle because people formulated opinions based on what they see on social media. “In a small community, it exponentially snowballs out of control. I think the scales are a bit unbalanced.”

However, he countered that the online photographs and posts could ultimately be “a gift” for his client’s case because the victim had posted provocative comments and photographs on her Twitter page before the incident. He added that those online posts “demonstrated that she was sexually active” and showed that she was “clearly engaged in at-risk behavior” (Macur and Schweber, 2013, p. para. 55).

Victim framing

Research question four asked how did newspapers and blogs characterize the victim. In contrast to articles that used frames, non-biased articles described the victim with objective descriptors, such as student and 16-year-old (Table 6).

Table 6: Newspaper versus blog depiction of victim

Victim identified as:	Newspapers		Blogs	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
16-year-old girl/teen/student/victim	28	42.42%	22	57.89%
W. Virginia teen/girl/student	16	24.24%	3	7.89%
Unconscious/incapacitated/ drunk/inebriated victim/girl/student	17	25.75%	7	18.42%
Jane Doe	5	7.57%	6	15.78%
n=78 $\chi^2=6.81$ df=3 p-value: .08 p<.05	66	99.98%	38	99.98%

Differences in how newspaper articles and blogs framed the victim were not statistically significant. Both platforms mostly identified Jane Doe as a 16-year old with 28 (42.42%) newspaper articles and 22 (57.89%) of blog entries using this description (Table 6). West Virg. Girl/resident was the next most popular term for newspapers with 16 (24.4%) using the term. Three (7.89%) of the blog entries in our used West Virg. teen/girl/victim as a descriptor. Conversely, adjectives describing the victim as intoxicated and/or unconscious were the second most popular theme for blogs with 7 (18.42%) of posts using it. Worth noting is media rarely depicted the assailants, who had also been drinking the night of the event, was rarely revealed in articles. Rounding out the top three descriptors for newspapers was unconscious with 17 (25.75%) of posts using the term. Worth noting is some reporters mentioned their publication’s policy of not identifying sexual assault victims. In only a few articles were more details about the victim and circumstances of the rape offered.

Slut shaming/victim blaming

Also noteworthy is the ‘slut-shaming/blaming’ frame was not as common as we initially anticipated when beginning the study. Slut shaming and victim blaming were most often mentioned to discuss tendencies by the media or society to blame the rape victim for her attire and behavior (Benedict, 1992).

When articles included the term ‘slut,’ it was usually in reference to Jane Doe’s response to the sexual assault in text messages, “I wasn’t being a slut. They were taking advantage of me.” One example of a negative portrayal included: “The victim had a crush on (Trent) Mays, the quarterback of Steubenville High’s wildly popular ‘Big Red’ football team. She looked forward to saw him at a party on Aug. 11, witnesses testified.” However, victim blaming was illustrated in some of the articles that offered details of her drinking. For instance, many articles and blog posts included this description of the trial, “a 16-year-old girl was so intoxicated from drinking blue slushes spiked with vodka that she could not consent to sex with two high school football players charged with raping her after a night of partying, prosecutors said Wednesday (Ove, 2013, para. 1.”

A *New York Times* article discussed the dichotomy between people’s feeling about Jane Doe and the perpetrators. In the article, Nate Hubbard, a Big Red volunteer coach, voiced harsh, suspicions (Macur and Schweber, 2013, para. 3). “The rape was just an excuse, I think,” said the 27-year-old Hubbard, who is No. 2 on the Big Red’s career rushing list. “What else are you going to tell your parents when you come home drunk like that and after a night like that?” said

Hubbard, who is one of the team's 19 coaches. "She had to make up something. Now people are trying to blow up our football program because of it (Macur and Schweber, 2013, para. 3)." In an effort to provide both sides of the story, the article discussed how some people accepted the "account of sexual assault, and were weary of what they called the protection and indulgence afforded the football team." The article stated that the people who were critical of the football team and its protected status, real or perceived, did not want to be identified for fear of retribution from Big Red football fans.

Referring back to the literature (Worthington, 2013; Durham, 2013), our findings indicated that blogs provided a platform to introduce some different frames—particularly on advancing women's rights and curbing gender violence. For instance, to counteract the victim-blaming frame, blogs often discussed it and offered solutions for stopping it. In a New York Times blog post that focused on a similar rape incidence, the author discussed how victim blaming is exemplified on social media. Tweets from teenagers across the country "had no trouble placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of an unconscious girl, showing that what happened in Steubenville certainly did not happen in a vacuum. One came from a parent, shown holding her own child even as she condemned someone else. As parents, we owe it to ourselves and our children to look at the uncomfortable truths surrounding this case and figure out how to ensure it doesn't happen again (Schulden, 2013, para. 5)."

In fact, many blogs and newspaper articles discussed the rape culture; however, Jezebel, Huffington Post and The Nation's Blogs were more likely to discuss women's rights than the other publications in our sample. A January 4, 2013, Nation's Blog piece described "America's rape problem" and attacked media's coverage of sexual assault. "We live in a country where media is revered as The New York Times finds it necessary to describe an 11-year-old gang rape victim as 'wearing makeup and fashions more appropriate to a woman in her 20s.'" The blogger stated that while the public response to the widely covered Steubenville case has largely been supportive of the victim – "thanks in part to pictures distributed online by partygoers that show the girl clearly unconscious - there has also been the standard victim-blaming."

Conclusions and Implications

Referring back to the literature review, medium theory often focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium with an emphasis on how communication technologies transform the political, social and cultural configuration of society. The Internet holds much opportunity to spread information and to reach a large audience as a forum for activism (Royal, 2003). Web coverage, community and grassroots efforts may have helped to level the playing field when it comes to garnering support for rape victims.

Several implications emerged from this analysis of blogs and newspapers. First, while not statistically significant, blogs and newspapers differed in their depictions of social media. Blogs focused on rape victim rights, rape culture, previous media frames, and one blogger's role in mainstream media's coverage of the case. Conversely, newspapers focused on social media's role in this case, the Steubenville football team, the trial and circumstances surrounding the party such as alcohol and unsupervised teenagers. Newspapers often framed social media as a tool that fueled the 'mob mentality' mentioned in our literature review.

One explanation for the difference in how blogs and newspapers framed the case differently is the tenets of journalism and news values, as revealed by Worthington (2013) in her study findings on rape and gender violence. Responsible journalists try not to inject their own biased opinions into stories. Conversely, blogs implicitly focus on a person's opinions as mentioned in the review of the literature. In addition, one of the key news values in the news industry is to lead with something that is odd—in this case, it was the role of social media. The

social media angle helped it pass the news value test. In other words, without the social media angle, it is a nonstory because girls are raped all the time. What made it national news is students videotaped the rape and used social media to broadcast it for the world to see.

Sourcing and attribution is another key difference in blogs and newspapers. Traditional journalistic norms require that journalists include sources for assertions made, which is one reason newspaper reporters were more likely to focus on the role of social media in the coverage of the Steubenville case. Newspaper reporters included actual tweets and hashtags verbatim in their news reports. This type of coverage gave the article credibility. In addition, newspapers offered more in-depth research information and details on a topic versus blogs, which are shorter and more conversational in tone. Bloggers, on the other hand, do not have to include secondary sources as blogs are understood to be based on the opinions of the writer.

Media as part of the story

While social media was the primary focal point of articles and blog entries, traditional media also became a part of mainstream and social media coverage of the case. FOX News, CNN, MSNBC and a local station revealed Jane Doe's name on the air (Fung, 2013). In its attempt to present fair and balanced reporting, commentators accused CNN of portraying the assailants as All-American athletes who had never been in trouble before. Many of the blogs and newspapers in our sample addressed these oversights (Fung, 2013). Traditional news outlets responded that they addressed the many questions raised by citizen journalists and creators of user-generated content such as releasing the name of Jane Doe. The Washington Post underscored this sentiment with this excerpt, "The Washington Post in general does not name juveniles accused of a crime, but because of the widespread publicity surrounding this case, it is naming the defendants."

In response to this oversight, Poynter Institute quoted Lauren Wolfe, director of the Women's Media Center "Women Under Siege" project: "What I'm so furious about, after the act perpetrated on this young woman, is our media's take (Sciullo, 2013). Mainstream media, of course, reflects society—so in this case, they reflect rape culture. But shouldn't we expect more from the media? Aren't there such things as news judgment and context and analysis?"

Framing of race

Secondly, race was not an issue in the articles in our sample as we anticipated based on the literature review. Based on our review of the literature, we thought race would be highlighted more frequently in this case in which both a black and white male sexually assaulted a female e.g., Benedict, 1992; O'Hara, 2013; Barnett, 2012). However, race was rarely, if ever mentioned. This may be a signal of the evolution of rape coverage and possibly the various studies on rape have permeated the newsrooms. Another explanation of the colorblind coverage may be because there were two perpetrators of different races—the race frame was neutralized. We also attribute this in part to the uniqueness of this case and the many different angles for the press and citizens to cover. News values include proximity, conflict, uniqueness, celebrity, timeliness, etc. This case included many of these angles so there was no need to focus on race.

Education

Thirdly, blogs urged parents and educators to be proactive in addressing privacy and social media concerns such as the ones that emerged in the Steubenville case to prevent similar cases from occurring in the future. In October 2013, both assailants were sentenced to at least a year in juvenile jail. Mays was sentenced to an additional year in jail on a charge of the illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material, to be served after his rape sentence is completed. This

sentencing brought closure to a high-profile case that unfolded after an onslaught of text messages, social media posts, online photos and video clips unveiled the sexual assault of an underage and unconscious female (Welsh-Huggins, 2013).

Teenagers who do not fully understand the legal consequences of sending sexually explicit text messages are finding themselves labeled as convicted sex offenders for the rest of their lives. Solutions are diverse. Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, encourages parents to concentrate on making their kids aware of the potential legal and emotional implications of sexting (“Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults,” 2008). Conversely, Hasinoff (2013) advocates for laws that lessen the severity of punishment for sexting. She encourages legislators and legal authorities to think of consensual sexting as a creative form of self-expression. She argues that new media researchers must facilitate a shift in common sense by examining how and why teenagers and adults sext (Hasinoff, 2013).

Compassion and civility

Professors and parents might also encourage students to challenge people who practice Internet shaming. Students must be willing to speak up and to criticize people for their ideas and not the individual themselves. We encourage educators to teach units on compassion and empathy to help people think of how they might feel if they were on the receiving end of shameful content. Compassion is “the emotional response generated by the suffering of others and then wanting to act on it by helping” (Taylor, 2013). Empathy is defined as the ability to imagine walking in the shoes of another (Vanderbilt University, 2009). Compassion and empathy for the rape may have compelled bystanders to stop the sexual assault instead of recording it and sharing it via social media. Goleman (n.d.) states “with compassionate empathy” individuals not only understand a person’s predicament and feel with them, but they are also spontaneously moved to help, if needed.

Social media policies

Fourthly, social media policies might also be useful in preventing future cases. People often have a morbid curiosity for events that are disturbing. A good journalist remains empathetic while retaining his or her professionalism. This raises the question of how to draw new boundary lines of privacy with the existence of the Internet and social media. Although privacy is a personal right that should be protected, how can we prevent future atrocities without putting a face to these crimes? Professional journalists who are trained in these areas have an understanding of the importance of following these guidelines. However, creators of user-generated content often do not. A New York Times blog post discussed how to keep from raising rapists or children who will not only stand by and allow a violating assault to occur, but end up blaming the victim as well? Much of the change needs to come from how we frame the way we discuss rape” (Schulten, 2013, para. 5).

Conclusions

Using the lens of medium theory, this analysis used a mixed-method approach to explore the framing of the Steubenville rape case in newspapers and blogs. Social media became a double-edge sword in the case. On one hand, content of the victim’s rape was recorded and disseminated using social media. On the other hand, the Steubenville rape case would have likely gone completely unnoticed if it not been for a concerned blogger who began posting tweets and pictures of the events on her page and sharing it with the public.

Unfortunately, women are raped every day in America. It is not unusual for the crime to involve young people or athletes, but what set this particular crime apart was the involvement and impact of social media. In the end, citizen journalism played a role in how the media covered the case because part of the role of a journalist is to answer questions that other sources might bring up. In this case, they had to address the release of the victim's identity on social media and the gory details of her sexual assault.

The literature on rape suggests that victim blaming and the perpetrator's race are the primary topics in rape literature. However, our findings indicate that race, while previously, a big factor in the coverage of rape, was not prominent in the articles and blog entries coded. This is a significant finding, as it appears that newspapers were colorblind in their coverage and not as prone to use race frames as indicated in previous studies, while blog posts offer a platform for discussing issues that are left out of mainstream media such as women's rights, rape education, etc.

Medium type did not make a significant difference in how the perpetrators, case and actual act of rape were framed. However, there was a significant difference in how the media types framed the case in general. Findings are important because of social media, average citizens have a tool to share their thoughts on a much grander scale than ever before. New media, specifically, user-generated content added an element of novelty. We will likely see more in the future of this trend. We hope this analysis of newspaper articles, blogs, implications and solutions will help educators, parents and students navigate the terrain of social media, shaming and privacy in the 21st century.

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