

What The Audience Wants:

A study of readers' perception on violence against women reporting in the news media.

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Author and acknowledgments:

This briefing was written by Alessia Tranchese.

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Zero Tolerance is a charity working to tackle the causes of men's violence against women. Too many women in Scotland, and around the world, experience violence from men – most often men they are close to and/or who are in a position of power over them. We believe that men's violence against women is caused by gender inequality, and that it helps this inequality to continue.

Part of Zero Tolerance's work involves working alongside journalists to improve coverage of violence against women in the media. For more information on the Handle with Care media project, or the work of Zero Tolerance please visit www.zerotolerance.org.uk.

Introduction and theoretical background:

This research examines the response of audiences to the representation of violence against women (VAW) in the British press. It follows a separate study (Tranchese, 2013)¹ on the representation of VAW in four British newspapers. After focusing on the production process of media texts, it was felt a further step was needed, in order to give the audience a voice. As a result of the temporal and spatial disjunction between text production and text consumption, direct communication between producer and receiver is not possible in mass communication. It follows that the vast majority of media discourse, including the news, is one-sided and that media audiences are legitimised to only read (or listen or view) what producers offer them. This feature of mass communication inevitably gives rise to questions about the nature of power relations in mass media discourse. With this study we wanted to let readers directly contribute to communication expressing their own views.

We also wanted to understand whether the audience is aware of the preferred meanings, stereotypes and presuppositions offered by media texts to convey a certain "preferred reading" and how they use them to make sense of (and possibly resist) the message encoded in the articles by media professionals. It was assumed that the decoding process is not a passive one and readers can use their cognitive and emotional activities in order to question media messages without necessarily accepting them passively.

By studying audience perception of VAW through the press, we intended to observe whether and how press coverage of VAW contributes to gender stereotyping and whether and how audiences think this representation should change.

¹ The study was carried out by Alessia Tranchese as part of her PhD project at the University of Naples Federico II, Italy. For info, please contact Alessia Tranchese: alessiatranchese@gmail.com

The study:

Three focus groups were conducted, each with four to ten participants. 19 people took part in the study, 14 women and 5 men, aged between 18 and 57.

Participants were recruited through advertisements on local and online newspapers in the Edinburgh area (The Broughton Spurtle, North Edinburgh News) and on social networks. Participants were also sought among students at the University of Edinburgh yet the vast majority of participants were recruited through an online advertisement on classifieds and community website [Gumtree](#). In order to attract participants, incentives in the form of £10 supermarket vouchers were offered in exchange for participation. The groups were intentionally heterogeneous, including different backgrounds and those who did not necessarily have an interest or a deep understanding of VAW. The focus groups were transcribed and the participants' identity was kept anonymous.

During the focus group, participants read six articles, all concerning the same case of rape and murder, that of British teenager, Scarlett Keeling. Scarlett Keeling was raped and killed in January 2008 in Goa, India. At the time, she was on holiday with her family, although the night of her murder the family was away for a trip to a neighbouring state in India. Initially, the local police claimed the teenager had drowned, but following the requests of Scarlett Keeling's mother, Fiona MacKeown, the case was re-opened and further investigation revealed that she had been raped and killed. Fiona MacKeown accused the police of covering up the murder and a few days later she was accused of neglect.

These articles were divided into three batches. Participants were not given any information about the source of the articles and each batch contained articles that focused on a different aspect of the story. The first two paid particular attention to cover-up accusations, the second batch focused on the actions of Scarlett Keeling before her death and the perceived responsibility of her mother and the last article included a long extract from an interview with Scarlett Keeling's mother.

The Daily Telegraph published the first article, while the second article appeared in The Guardian. The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and The Daily Telegraph respectively published the third, fourth and fifth article; the sixth article was taken from The Scotsman. All participants read all of the articles. After reading each batch of articles, participants were asked the following core set of questions by the moderator:

First batch of articles:

1. What strikes you the most about these two articles?
2. Who, according to you, is more responsible for Scarlett Keeling's death, Scarlett, Scarlett's mother, Scarlett's killer, the Indian authorities, Julio and his family?

Second batch of articles:

3. What strikes you about these three articles as compared with the previous two?

Last article:

4. In the light of this last article, if you were to describe the behaviour of Scarlett Keeling, her mother, the perpetrator and the Indian police, how would you describe them?

General Questions:

5. In general, what information do you think journalists should/could not have given and which information was missing from the reports, if any?

6. Where, according to you, could these articles have been published?

7. What message are you left with after reading these articles?

It should be noted that the group situation most likely affected the statements made in focus groups and the significance each group attributed to each batch of questions. Group dynamics seemed to influence participants towards expressing opinions they believed to be socially desirable and towards hedging more controversial opinions. Participants in heterogeneous groups, though, tended to show less interest in working towards achieving group consensus, thus expressing slightly more extreme positions.

FINDINGS

The news influence on readers' focus:

The first question asked for each batch of articles was intentionally very general in order to let the readers talk about their impressions without influencing them. Interestingly, no participant was struck by the absence of the perpetrator in most articles. The attention shifted from victim blaming to the mother's responsibility and drug use in Goa. This was especially prevalent in those groups where there was less awareness of VAW-related issues and there seemed to be more difficulty in distancing from the text. The groups with more awareness tended to be less influenced by the content of the articles by criticising the irrelevant details and the victim blaming narrative.

Participants noticed that when the articles focused on different aspects of the story, this diverted attention from facts to speculation. Despite this they thought the actual problem was not the violence per se, but that of drug use, or police corruption, the two issues that were included in the news article:

It's almost as if the second article is trying to distract from the actual fact that a person has been murdered. Coz when I read the first article I thought "that's a shame really, it's not right, they should do some proper investigation" and then you read the second article and it's like "hang on a minute, why was she out drinking at 4 in the morning, why did her mother let her stay with an obviously foreign person", it's really distracting from the actual fact. The very last sentence or second last, they say police are paid to turn a blind eye to the drug tourism

and that's probably more the issue here, rather than debating whether or not the person should have gone out (p12b)².

There was evident difficulty among participants to move away from the texts and look at them in a critical way. When the articles treated the violence as part of everyday life that should be dealt with using common sense or with a law-and-order approach, participants struggled to criticise this view. It could also be reasonably suggested that in an everyday situation, where participants and the public in general are not invited to actively critique news articles with members of a women's rights organisation, the level of awareness and critical stance is significantly lower than during the focus groups, leading to an easier acceptance of the message sent by the media. As one participant pointed out:

"[...] I try, I'm sure like, you know, everyone tries their best to be as discerning as they can, when they read stuff like that, but often when you are not in the right frame of mind, you are tired, you just hear something, especially since everything in here, every sentence and words seem to make you think in a certain way. [...] Or like, where I work, at lunchtime, everyone always sits at tables and there is always newspapers and some people read newspapers and something like this definitely must be because it's Goa and you get loads of people picking up, the media (p17c)."

The news can influence readers' opinions and attribution of responsibility:

Participants' perception of responsibility and salience changed according to the change of focus in the articles. For example, after reading the first five articles, that were perceived as more judgmental and biased, most participants stated that they would not have behaved like the victim's mother. Additionally, readers tended to share the 'common-sense' narrative of the articles, especially in regard to this idea that women should not "take risks" and the "backwardness" of countries such as India.

"I disagree with parents being, erm, I think that the mum was really foolish to have gone away or whatever, I disagree, I think that in foreign countries, I have not been to India but it seems, morality, is like just/ it's not given the same amount of respect it's given in the Western world. I did go to Nigeria for a while and it's kind of similar over there (p8b)."

Many comments were about what the victim (or her mother) should or should not have done in order to avoid what happened, especially because of their foreign location. These comments are rooted in an understanding of rape as a sexual crime rather than as a crime of domination and power with no geographical boundaries. One of the participants noticed that this view allows

² The names of participants were replaced by a code indicating an identification number and a letter (a, b and c) to refer to either the first (a), the second (b) or the third (c) focus group in chronological order.

the reader to look for the causes of the violence in the circumstances rather than in the actions of the perpetrator, who is left out of the discussion.

"[...] certainly my impression is the authorities first and foremost and then/The second one [second article], because I don't kind of like the style of the second one, but the impression you get from it is, the locals and Scarlett herself and her family are responsible and I didn't even think once about the killer. I've only added that in because you mentioned the killer. That's at the very bottom. It wouldn't even occur to me to think about him being responsible (p1a)."

Focusing on details concerning the victim and her behaviour also creates fertile ground for victim blaming. Often with a lot of hesitation and hedging, some readers embraced this understanding of rape. Although these opinions are also the result of people's knowledge and personal experience, it may be argued that the information and details found in the articles validated them.

"If you go to a foreign country, you should be aware of the customs and how you dress and how you behave and certain things like that, but you can't force people to do that, murder shouldn't be ok in any country, and shouldn't be disguised by press or police. There are kind of two sides to the story, but it's very distracting in the second article (p7b)."

On the other hand, after reading the last article, an interview with Fiona MacKeown, the victim's mother that was perceived as more sympathetic towards her, some participants showed a change in attitude towards the mother. This change was most likely brought about by the change in perspective within the article, which contextualised the mother's actions. According to participants, in the final article, it was possible to see what the victim's mother had thought when she had "left" her daughter. Considering the readers' reactions, it seemed that the contextualisation helped them in relating and identifying with the mother. One of the participants also observed that the use of quotes also made a difference, since in the previous articles only short chunks of her statements had been extrapolated and inserted into the articles, out of context. The use of longer quotes made it more difficult to manipulate what she said.

"Yeah, I also think that the first articles you have more the perception like "how dare she's leaving her daughter" and all that and then with the last one is more that part and then also when she also admitted "I feel responsible for being naive and too trusting" that's kind of suggests that yeah, it could have happened to me, if you've got the/it's family. It's a bit more fair to the mother (p7b)."

Awareness and resistance:

Some participants showed awareness of the preferred reading that the articles were trying to convey. They were aware of certain patterns and/or stereotypes that the media uses to represent victims of rape (e.g. victims' involvement with

alcohol, sex, nights out before the violence). Some of the participants thought that the strongest message in the articles was that rape is more common in developing countries than in the UK and that foreign men are the ones who rape. Other felt drugs and the perceived drug culture in Goa played a central part in the articles' narrative, thus portraying the Indian state as a sort of lost paradise and a dangerous holiday destination for British citizens. This was also perceived as a form of racism and denial of (or distraction from) problems that exist in Great Britain (and in the rest of the world). Some participants mentioned that these could all be ways to distract attention from the violence of this crime and the perpetrator responsible.

In general, participants did not feel that the articles could be helpful in educating people about rape or tackling rape culture. In fact, they felt that the articles should have explained and investigated rape and misogynist culture across societies, rather than promoting rape myths, along with racism and victim blaming, although they did not always identify and/or resist these narratives.

"I feel that they play on the stereotypes of what a lot of times a rape victim is. She is herself to blame or it's moving somehow the blame away from the perpetrator. No I don't think, it doesn't really give you any understanding of why this happened or how did it kind of on a larger scale make sure that this doesn't happen again (p11b)."

"So [rape] is not about, you know, foreigners going over, doing drugs and then getting raped, it's about women getting raped and, like, why is that happening? While it's not any of the reasons that we've been given here. [...] [it's] some sort of cultural misogynist thing that makes men believe that they have the right to sexually assault women. And that's the problem and that's never mentioned once. And, again, it's a problem in Britain, it's a problem there, but it's just they're trying to make an exceptional thing (p17c)."

CONCLUSION

The analysis revealed that by including circumstantial details and personal opinions, the media have the power to influence readers' views and divert their attention away from the actual events. The type of information given in an article, the perspective in which stories are told and the way sources are used impact on the way readers perceive and process the news. For instance, although readers in the focus groups tended to recognise stereotypical representations of race and gender, these distracted them from the rape and murder. Furthermore, when the press gave a voice to the victim's mother, participants did show a stronger sense of empathy and understanding.

Most participants expressed a sense of disagreement with the amount of irrelevant details provided by the articles and the lack of contextualisation of the problem. Readers felt that the press selected certain information, facts and sources, while willingly leaving out others that may have balanced the report. This way of reporting left readers to draw their own conclusions and concentrate

on superficial factors without stimulating or triggering a deeper analysis of the problem and a more balanced attribution of responsibility. By making irrelevant factors the main focus of an article, the press managed to divert the attention and blur the line between rape causes and circumstantial factors.

Participants with more awareness of issues related to gender-based violence tended to focus less on the articles and their content and more on the wider context of gender discrimination. Moreover, they often resisted the dominant discourse concerning rape in the news. Members of the more heterogeneous groups tended to express more controversial and judgemental opinions, possibly thanks to the support and agreement shown by other group members.

Unsurprisingly rape myths and victim blaming narratives seemed to influence the opinions of those who had little understanding of VAW, thus these participants were more vulnerable to being distracted by circumstances and trivial detail rather than by facts.

This project represents an effort to understand to what extent media representations influence readers' judgments and ask readers what kind of representations they would like to read in the news. The recommendations included in this report are based on readers' suggestions and a selection taken from Handle with Care, a guide for media professionals produced by Zero Tolerance.

How reporting of VAW could be improved according to participants:

- Journalists should use fact-based, rather than opinion-based statements when reporting. They should not base their assertions on personal beliefs, but on actual evidence. This would help reduce personal bias and contribute to a fairer attribution of responsibility (by reducing victim blaming, for example).
- Sources should be transparent, balanced and contextualised. Journalists should specify who their sources are and should not extrapolate small quotes that may be easily manipulated. Moreover, journalists should not only include sources supporting one point of view, but they should give voice to several perspectives.
- Reporters should provide accurate information. Details included in the news reports should not be “salacious”, “intrusive”, “irrelevant” or “confusing”.
- Reporters could raise awareness of the potential role of bystanders in violence prevention.

Handle with Care Guidance for Media Professionals:

The following recommendations are a selection taken from Handle with Care, a guide for media professionals produced by Zero Tolerance. The full guide can be found online at zerotolerance.org/handlewithcare

- Journalists should refer to national and international statistics where

possible to place individual incidents in a wider social context and provide the 'bigger picture' that readers, viewers and listeners need to make sense of the story.

- Journalists should carefully choose language when reporting on violence against women and always avoid implying the survivor is to blame; portray perpetrators as real men; and portray survivors of violence as real women.
- Journalists should conduct all contact with survivors of abuse or violence with respect for their experience, dignity and safety.
- Journalists should highlight the gendered nature and root causes of violence against women in all reporting.
- Journalists should report on rape and sexual violence using data and evidence about the current pattern of victimisation and avoiding myths and stereotypes.
- Journalists should avoid implying that alcohol use is a cause of violence against women and instead name the real causes and challenge misconceptions about the links between violence against women and alcohol.
- Journalists should respect the privacy and dignity of abuse survivors at all times.
- Journalists should tell the real story and be careful about selecting a narrative when reporting on violence against women as part of another social issue.

For more information about this report, please contact Zero Tolerance on 0131 556 7365 or info@zerotolerance.org.uk