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## Review

# Enduring themes and silences in media portrayals of violence against women

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## SYNOPSIS

We investigate the power of the media to reinforce or transform public opinion about violence against women. We ask if media portrayals of the issue are essentially conservative messages communicated through a veneer of 'objectivity' using simplistic narratives. Our literature review shows that the media frames family violence, sexual assault and sexual harassment using a recurrent theme of mutuality of responsibility for the violence. This contradicts the feminist understanding of these harms as gendered and reflective of male dominance, sexism and misogyny. Such narratives could impede and delay feminist aims of protecting women from violence and improving access to justice. While the internet and social media enable activists and others to challenge myths and stereotypes, they also create new forums for the perpetuation of violence against women. Continuing engagement with the media is necessary to ensure community understanding of violence against women and the harm that media portrayals may cause.

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## Introduction

Violence against women is an enduring social problem of concern for victims, advocacy groups, law-makers, scholars and the wider community. While a daily struggle in the lives of some and an ongoing professional consideration for many, the issue is often brought to wider public attention through various media, including newspapers, television, films and, increasingly, online and social media. It is therefore critical, as is our aim in this paper, to interrogate the role of media in potentially reinforcing or transforming public opinion and policy responses in relation to violence against women.

Violence against women is an issue that emerges on the news media and public agenda sporadically, typically driven by specific events such as a man killing his estranged partner and/or his children, high-profile sexual assault, intimate homicide, and sexual harassment legal matters. From a radical feminist perspective, the transformation of societal attitudes about sexual assault, sexual harassment and family violence is essential as conservative messages which reinforce patriarchal gender norms may contribute to the limitations and inefficacy of legislative reform. As Naffine and Owens (1997: 7) write: 'If feminists are to change law, then it is vital that they deal with the implicit as well as the explicit sexing of the legal subject.' It is equally vital that they deal with the role of media in these processes. Media stories are told within a gendered societal landscape through the cultural images of masculine and feminine and, from a feminist perspective, are susceptible to influence by unconscious gender biases.

The paper considers the role of different media in maintaining a social narrative about violence against women that negates the feminist perspective of gendered and sexist harms and reinforces myths and stereotypes. It also considers the potential for media to provide and facilitate challenges to this narrative. First, we examine ways of conceptualising the influence of media in terms of telling people what issues to think about and *how* to think about those issues by presenting them within certain frames (Cohen, 1964; Gamson, 1992). We are conscious that media messages are not simply a 'one-way' dialogue and diverse audiences will likely filter, interpret and appropriate them differently, including on the basis of their personal experience. However, in taking a feminist perspective, we engage the question of whether media messages about violence against women are essentially conservative and therefore perpetrators of the patriarchy.

By drawing upon studies examining the portrayal of family violence, sexual assault and sexual harassment the paper identifies the actual and potential role of media in reflecting, shaping and challenging public opinion, through the use of particular language and framing techniques.

## Conceptualising media influence

There is a vast body of literature on the intersections between mass media, politics and audiences. While there seems to be a consensus among media theorists that the mass media has a political dimension, and affects audiences in some way, there are differing views concerning the extent and nature of media influence. Media can serve as well as subvert authority (Street, 2011). A key aspect of media influence derives from its capacity to create a dominant 'reality' that reinforces dominant power

relations, exposing people to events and experiences which are 'beyond the confines' of their own life space (Heath, Gordon, & le Bailly, 1981: 49) and through this 'second hand reality' shaping their beliefs and perceptions of events (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signoriell, 1980). Critical here is the way in which media logic becomes central in the definition of social issues and the practices of other social institutions (Altheide & Snow, 1979) in such a way that the reality that is presented in the media is taken-for-granted as representing the way things are and/or what is to be done about them. For example, Street (2011: 11) observes that:

Power relies on our 'common sense' view of how the world is and how it works; threats and authority depend on how we perceive those who make those threats or claim that authority. These thoughts, the unexamined assumptions of our routines, help us to know our place and our identity. And they are daily disseminated through news and current affairs, situation comedies and blockbuster movies.

Television in particular has been understood as cultivating the taste sensibilities of its audiences virtually from birth (Gerbner et al., 1980). It is also believed to convey socially and politically conservative ideas through processes of abbreviation and simplification. Scheuer (2001: 10) argues that television is a primary agent of the 'sound bite society' in which complex political issues are reduced to meaningless sound bites, fostering 'a society that thrives on simplicity and disdains complexity'. To Scheuer, society is not just dumbed down, but locked in a vicious apathy that is 'anaesthetized to violence' and uninterested in 'the more complex human tasks of cooperation, conceptualization and serious discourse' (Scheuer, 2001: 8). It is not our intention to generalise such effects across different media and genres but rather to provide a context in which to understand the findings of the studies reviewed in this paper. We also suggest that, while newer media forms have expanded the range of voices contributing to public discourse, many of the same concerns directed at newspapers, television and talk radio have translated, and perhaps even been amplified, in the context of internet and social media platforms.

News media representations determine the parameters of public debate by framing events in a coherent 'narrative' in which some actors and their motivations play a role while others are marginalised or ignored (Street, 2011). A number of theorists have used the concept of framing to analyse the role of news media in shaping public opinion and policy on a range of socio-political issues (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997). Framing involves selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient so as to invite audiences to see issues, actions and events in one particular way and not others (Entman, 1993). The emphasis given to information in a story and its subsequent salience among audiences, result from its prominence, repetition, or association with culturally familiar language and symbols (Gitlin, 1980). Several factors influence how journalists frame an issue, including 'social norms and values, organisational pressures and constraints, pressures of interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists' and media organisations (Scheufele, 2000: 307).

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