

Problematic
discourses: sexual
violence and women
press correspondents
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Just days after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, CBS issued a press-release confirming the sexual assault of its Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent Lara Logan at Tahrir Square. Certain segments of media commentary were problematic in the way they constructed sexist misrepresentations of women who choose to report from dangerous conflict zones and culturally insensitive stereotypes regarding Muslims.

I contend that the treatment of sexual violence towards female foreign correspondents using frames that assign blame, or the token 'she deserved it' approach, are the consequence of patriarchal journalistic culture inherent within a predominantly Western, ethnocentric and male-dominated mainstream press.

By conducting an in-depth analysis of two of the most controversial and salient examples of online mass media content as well as the discussions that emerged within the comment boxes, (as per the reactions above), I illustrate how the popular social and media discourses about sexual violence towards women and the sexual division of labour were simultaneously challenged and sustained.

The scope of this essay was deliberately limited to two articles, not only because it was a more manageable task but because much of initial coverage during the first week was formulated in response to these articles (Williams 2011; North 2011; Marcotte 2011). First, the pervasiveness of patriarchy within journalism will be identified before assessing its dual implications for newsroom culture and the media's representation of women. This will be followed by a brief explanation and justification of the methods

used, before the teasing out of the frames, representations and discourses within the respective articles.

To claim the existence of patriarchy within journalism is to open a metaphorical can of worms about whether the perception of male hegemony is merely the result of scholars a priori establishing that ‘gender matters’ (Steiner 2005, p. 42). While there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women securing jobs in journalism, the fact remains however, that white Western men dominate global newsrooms as producers, owners and subjects (Cruteau and Hoynes 1992).

The most comprehensive study on gender stratification in journalism to date, The Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media recently confirmed how men still occupy 73% of the top management positions worldwide (Byerly 2011). Scholars establish how male-dominated work environments have direct empirical implications for women journalists, who feel obligated to report using the institutionalized tone of the dominant gender, whilst also being subjected to sexualisation as the minority ‘Other’ (Goward 2006, p. 6; Tuchman 1979, p. 32). More overt effects of the masculine organizational culture upon the day-to-day experiences of women have been documented in ethnographic research, where the journalists interviewed revealed how they were encouraged to straighten their curly hair to appear more ‘authoritative’ (Cooper 2008) and expressed concerns about discriminatory hiring practices that favour ‘safe and attractive women’ in the boardrooms (Carter et. al. , 1998 p. 305).

While it is facetious to imply that all women journalists experience the impacts of unequal gender hierarchies homogeneously, the pervasiveness of a macho newsroom ethos is a global phenomenon that suggests how gender is far from irrelevant in structuring how journalists are socially conditioned to work (Steiner 2005, p. 42). Not only does male hegemony at the executive level impact newsroom culture, but it retains subsidiary effects upon the representation of women within mainstream media.

Since the introduction of the ‘ framing’ paradigm in the 1990s, the idea that media rhetoric shapes how audiences understand and interpret norms has refocused gender research on the ways in which media content constructs images of women and femininity (Fursich 2010, p. 114). One-dimensional portrayals of women as temptresses or objects ‘ symbolically annihilate’ women by depriving them of their humanity and reducing them to a single ‘ feminine’ characteristic (Tuchman 1978).

Already a wealth of literature exists articulating how such misrepresentations reinforce women’s unequal status, with consequences ranging from the trivialisation of sexual violence in American culture (Malamuth & Check 1981), the maintenance of gender-segregated occupational stereotypes (Massoni, 2004) and the influence of flawed rhetoric upon the decision-making of powerful social actors (Fursich 2010, p. 116).

Critical discourse scholars consequently advocate the deconstruction of these representations wherever and whenever they occur, as a means to undermine what is offered as ‘ common sense’ within the misogynic media matrix (Bamburac 2006, p. 31). With that imperative in mind, attention

should now be directed towards the specific representation of the Logan assault and those online articles which were most salient during the first week of coverage.

In accordance with Normal Fairclough's (1995) method of critical discourse analysis, the formal elements of these articles will be identified, before interpreting what discourses are being facilitated by the article and its readership and the implications of these narrative strategies for the practice of women correspondents in situ.

Simone Wilson's article for the Los Angeles Weekly (Feb 15, 2011), entitled 'Lara Logan, CBS Reporter and Warzone 'It Girl,' Raped Repeatedly Amid Egypt Celebration' approached the assault using reversal tactics popular in media stories about rape, where responsibility for the sexual violence is diverted from the perpetrators – who are notably absent in the headline- to the victim (Hoagland and Frye 2000, p. 206). Looking at transitivity within the copy, Logan is initially discussed in the passive voice, ('... was brutally and repeatedly raped'), before the text underscores her active role in the lead up to her assault, ('... er ballsy knack for pushing her way to the heart of the action,"... but she went back again,'). This implies that Logan is not completely blameless since she 'broke the rules' by returning to Egypt and thus lost all the 'protection' afforded to women by patriarchal Western culture (Hoagland and Frye 2000, p. 206). The choice of the sentence-initial 'it girl' in the headline is ill-chosen as a gendered term reserved exclusively for young, attractive women who receive intense media coverage disproportional to their personal achievements.

The term has been recycled from a previous article about Logan in the New York Times (“ War Zone ‘ It Girl’ 2005), suggesting how intermedia-agenda setting establishes a powerful conceptual scaffold upon which to perpetuate stereotypes about Logan that obscures her extensive journalistic experience (Meraz 2009, p. 682). While Wilson’s emphasis of Logan’s physical attractiveness using a photograph of Logan in a low-cut dress and repeated references to the reporter’s ‘ shocking good looks,’ capitalizes upon the visual appeal of a ‘ pretty girl in a flak jacket’ to attract advertising revenue (Steiner 2005, p. 0), it also indirectly validates Logan’s sexuality as essential to interpreting the assault and, as has been proven in experimental research, increases the audience’s attribution of blame and responsibility to the victim for the crime (Tieger 1981). It has been established thus far that emphasizing the physical attractiveness and sexual history of a sexual assault victim in the media can detrimentally affect the way society conceptualizes and ‘ talks about’ sexual violence (Stanko 1991). The article’s accompanying comment box was consequently analysed as a litmus test of public opinion and a microcosm of these pre-existing social responses.

After surveying the 945 anonymous comments, a taxonomy of discourse was found. The majority of opinion repeatedly challenged the titillating and sensationalist representations posited by Wilson. Consider Whoa, who expressed discomfort with the text’s ‘ victim-blaming’, ‘ shaming’ and ‘... the repeated discussion of her looks and sex life (JH and 248 more liked this)’. Forming an overwhelming minority were commenters who expressed chauvinistic or negative emotions and views towards woman, like Cc411’s

assertion that Logan deserved to be blamed as a 'war coverage fame whore' (15 people liked this).

Finally, there was a significant number of commenters engaging in the a more subtle kind of benevolent sexism, or protective paternalism, which it is claimed is easier for women to adopt since it appears to positively support 'women's' values (Bamburac 2006, p. 27). Interestingly, those commenters who advocated that women correspondents should be excluded from warzones for their personal safety all justified this position in similar ways. Instrumentalizing the rhetoric of '... it's a just simple fact of reality' (SomeChick), '(it's) good ole common sense' (Sympathizer), '... oin the real world' (Guest), these appeals to the logic of the real world confirmed how patriarchal ideology is disguised within aspirations to maintain the unequal status quo (Conway et. al. , 1996).

Ultimately, it is benevolently sexist and chauvinist commentaries which catalyse and sustain the popularity of a media backlash discourse against victims and depoliticize the censure of women for engaging in risk-taking behaviour atypical of the female gender norms of passivity and dependence (Hoagland and Frye 2000, p. 3). As former war correspondent Hilary Andersson (2003 p. 22) confirms, women reporters in conflict zones are held to a different standard of accountability because of their entry into the masculinist, gendered space that is war, especially by the media who comment 'on our attire, our hair, our personal histories and oh yes, our abilities'.

Feinstein (2003, p. 24) adds that female war journalists subsequently develop unique characteristics, such as a resistance to the emotional consequences of trauma which in conjunction with the media's tendency to blame the victim in incidents of sexual assault, only encourages silencing for women who have experienced sexual violence whilst on assignment (Matloff 2007). Not only were the capabilities and inculpability of Logan called into question in the next article, but her assault became the site for the intersection of gender and cultural politics in the media as well.

Originally posted on Salon. com, Debbie Schlusel's (Feb 15, 2011) vitriolic commentary entitled, ' How Muslim's Celebrate Victory: Egypt's " Peaceful, Moderate, Democratic" Protestors' , was especially salient in the way it simultaneously denigrated Logan's request to be treated as a usual sexual assault victim and granted her right to privacy whilst simultaneously attacking the liberal media's supposed protection of Islam, '... of course CBS has no further comment... if they were Christians or Jews, well then there would be comments galore.

Like Wilson, Schlusel implicates Logan's conduct as to blame for her assault, though the rhetoric of culpability appears in more explicitly chauvinistic terms, ' So sad, too bad Lara', ' No one told her to go there. ' However, unlike Wilson who did not provide a socio-cultural context for Logan's attack, Schlusel situates the assault as a natural consequence of Egyptian ' savages' gaining the freedom to express '... what Islam is all about' following collapse of Mubarak's dictatorship.

Thus, she is framing rape and sexual violence as endemic to Islam and Egyptian culture, despite offering no official sources to confirm the religious affiliations of Logan's perpetrators. What Schlüssel's misrepresentation achieves is the construction of misogyny and gang rape as culturally predisposed traits rather than the result of social, economic and political processes that devalue women as property and secondary citizens in the control of men (O'Toole & Schiffman, 1997).

Despite this, the topos of the 'violent Muslim' as an intellectually and morally regressed individual has been so entrenched in European discourses, particularly since 9/11 that its mobilisation in this instance was irrepressible (Poole and Richardson 2006, p. 120) much like the attribution of blame to women victims of sexual assault. Given the slant of Schlüssel's commentary, the reactions in the comment box assumed a distinctly more Orientalizing flavour and were rife with distortions, exaggerations and oversimplifications about 'the Muslims' and 'their' attitudes towards women.

Take for example Max's comment: 'A blond hot american in a place with 100 muslim men... What do you aspect [sic] will happen?' and junglesiren's remarks that, '... a display of cleavage is considered an open invitation for sex... and in a muslim country it's a practical demand,' which constructs the dramatic meta narrative of 'lady fair' being threatened by 'dark forces,' in the literal sense of the word (Libler, 2010 p. 560). In accordance with the typical mass media representations about Islam of the past decade (Allan 2010, p. 2), the antagonisms between the 'West' and 'Muslims' discursively constructed as two static, monolithic and essentially irreconcilable entities which is conveyed in an increasingly emotional and alarmist tone, '...
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American citizens have NO idea how fast the Muslim population is growing and pushing their laws into our country' (Flyer5).

Like rhetoric of blame which encourages women to stay silent about their assault, discourses implying that women correspondents, '... shouldn't report in a hostile non-White country,' (LissetteChildlessandMiserable)

problematically sustain the practice of denying women correspondents plum assignments on the basis of their perceived sexual vulnerability and visibility in certain countries (Conboy 2006, p. 304).

This is not to downplay the fact that men also experience the threat of sexual violence, but since women are positioned subordinately within the traditionally male environments of war reporting, the risk of gender-based violence being used against a woman occurs more frequently and is a constant source of additional job stress (Feinstein 2003, p. 24). When one considers the instrumental role of women correspondents retain in attaining narratives from the female victims of sexual violence in war situations, who for cultural reasons, are not comfortable discussing these issues with men (Saunders, 2003), the need to expose and challenge gender stereotyping is apparent.

Initial media coverage of the Lara Logan assault demonstrated how patriarchal discourses are inherent within and were facilitated by the misrepresentations of women in the mainstream press. The circulation of narrative strategies that blame the victim and offer inaccurate stereotypes of Muslims by both journalists and commenters alike were shown to retain significant effects upon the ways in which the sexual assault was perceived.

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The fact that such mediated discourses are not simply reflecting the external 'reality' but actively contribute towards the construction of certain societal attitudes and responses to the sexual violence of women correspondents confirm how an inappropriately worded headline or the inclusion of an unrelated detail can have very real consequences for the practice of women correspondents in male dominated work environments and the perpetuation of the sexual division of labour.