Sex Crimes and the Media
Tanya Serisier, School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast

https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.118

Published online: 25 January 2017

Summary

In media representations the term *sex crimes* most frequently refers to rape and child sexual abuse, although it can include a wider range of acts such as exhibitionism and voyeurism. While the majority of these crimes receive little media attention, certain sensational sex crimes are prominent topics in news and entertainment media. Media attention tends to focus on violent crimes committed by “dangerous” strangers, largely defined as poor men of color, and crimes committed against white and middle-class victims. These representations provide a distorted image of the reality of sex crimes, which most frequently occur in private settings, by someone known to the victim. Media coverage has also been criticized for focusing on the actions and responsibility of victims, suggesting that victim behavior, such as drinking, flirting, or being in the “wrong place at the wrong time” precipitates sexual violence. Again, these representations vary significantly according to race and class, with white and middle-class victims more likely to receive sympathetic coverage, particularly if their assailant is from a lower-class or more marginal racial or ethnic background.

The emergence of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s, however, has led to some changes in media representations of sex crimes. Subsequent decades have seen an increase in sympathetic reporting around victims and increased reporting of crimes perpetrated by acquaintances and family members. There has been a growth in feminist voices and views in media reporting, as well as increased focus on the responsibilities and failings of criminal justice systems. Recent years have seen several examples of media coverage or “rediscovery” of previously ignored allegations against celebrities. Sex crimes have become a highly controversial and contested area, and media coverage reflects this, sometimes supporting progressive social and cultural change and sometimes providing a vehicle for “backlash” sentiments. Social media has been a driver of changes in the media landscape around sexual violence in recent years has provided a new forum for survivors to disseminate their stories but has also been marked by online harassment and abuse.

**Keywords:** rape, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, sexual violence, media, rape myths, social media, pedophilia, institutional abuse
Silence and Sensationalism

Sexual violence has historically been a taboo topic, marked by silence and denial. At the same time, sensationalized reporting of a small number of cases of sexual violence has been a feature of media reporting at least since the inception of mass newspapers (Benedict, 1992; Block, 2001–2002). As Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver (1991) put it in their important text on rape and representation, sexual violence in Western societies particularly, has been marked by a “profoundly disturbing pattern” of “obsessive inscription—and obsessive erasure of sexual violence.” In other words, fascination with sexual violence often masks deep-seated silences about the most common conditions under which sex crimes occur and the effects on their victims. Surette’s “law of opposites,” where media representations of crime are almost directly opposite to statistical realities, is particularly true in the case of sex crimes (Surette, 1998). While media representations typically depict attacks by violent strangers, that the vast majority of crimes of a sexual nature are committed by intimates or acquaintances. These crimes are largely hidden; extremely unreported, and often not recognized as crimes at all (Soothill & Walby, 1991).

The disproportionate focus on sex crimes committed by strangers is accompanied by significant differences in the extent and nature of media coverage given to crimes committed against victims of different races and social classes. Far more media attention is given to middle- and upper-class victims, and to victims from dominant racial and ethnic groups, while sexual assaults against victims from lower-class or minority ethnic backgrounds are largely ignored. At the same time, mainstream media tend to over-represent perpetrators from lower-class and minority racial and ethnic backgrounds, reinforcing stereotypes of ethnic and lower-class male criminality and misrepresenting the realities and dangers of sexual violence.

While media reporting can function to raise awareness of sexual violence and draw attention to the problem of sex crimes, the distorted picture portrayed by much of the media is also linked to widespread misunderstandings or “myths” that surround sexual violence. These myths can lead, on the one hand, to the trivialization, denial, and silencing of the experiences of many victims, and, on the other, to moral panics around stranger danger and pedophilia and racist depictions of men of color as sexual predators.

Representations of Rape

Rape, or sexual assault, is the most archetypal of sex crimes, and the one most subject to media misreporting. Media responses to rape have historically been dominated by what have come to be known as a series of “rape myths.” These myths, as summarized by Helen Benedict (1992) include: that rape is essentially no different from, and no more harmful than sex; that assailants are motivated by lust; that assailants are usually black and lower-class; that women provoke rape; that only “loose” or promiscuous women are victimized; that women frequently lie about being raped; that only women are raped; and that women cannot be perpetrators of sexual assault. Taken together, these myths produce a distorted understanding of sexual violence that sees some types of rape as more harmful or “real” than others, and that reinforces gender, racial, and class stereotypes to deny legitimacy to certain victims and falsely label minority ethnic and lower-class men as more prone to commit sexual violence.
“Real Rape” Versus “Simple Rape”

Following Susan Estrich’s (1987) foundational work, media representations of sexual assaults can be divided into two main categories, “real” rape versus “simple,” rape. “Real” rapes, also referred to as “stranger rapes,” are the cases that dominate media coverage, as well as criminal justice prosecutions and convictions, although they are estimated to comprise approximately 10% of all sexual assaults. These are rapes committed by strangers, in public places, frequently involving physical assaults or the use of weapons. The perpetrators of these crimes are portrayed as stereotypical criminals: poor and racial minority men, or “psychopaths.” “Simple rapes,” or “acquaintance rapes,” approximately 90% of all sexual assaults, are committed by acquaintances or intimates, occur in private spaces such as the home, and are far less likely to include physical assaults or the use of weapons. Simple or acquaintance rapes are generally committed by “normal” men and are common across all socioeconomic and ethnic groups.

Prior to the late 1970s, and the beginnings of feminist activism around rape, media representations of sexual violence were almost solely cases of “real rape.” The terms “date” and “acquaintance” rape began to appear in media sources as public awareness of the prevalence and existence of this form of sexual violence increased. However, “real rapes” continue to be over-represented in both news and entertainment media, and to be prone to highly sensationalist reporting that magnifies their violent elements (Cuklanz, 2000; Estrich, 1987). This representational bias reproduces is that the reality of rape is an assault committed by a stranger lurking in a dark alley.

This stereotype has significant effects on women’s fear of rape, with many women believing that they are significantly more at risk of stranger rape than is statistically the case. This fear, fueled by media misrepresentation, often leads women to modify or alter their behavior. Common measures undertaken by women due to fear of rape include avoiding being out alone at night, carrying personal alarms or security measures, and avoiding public transport (Gordon & Riger, 1991). Fear of rape has also been connected to wider fears of criminality and the growth of “law and order politics” (Bumiller, 2008). Highly publicized cases of “stranger rape” can act as signal crimes, distilling social anxieties and leading to calls for tougher sentencing legislation or increased policing powers (Innes, 2014). These measures, however, do little to protect against the far more statistically common risk of assaults committed by acquaintances or intimates.

In contrast to the sensationalist reporting of stranger rape, acquaintance rape is rarely deemed newsworthy, and, when it is reported, is frequently depicted as “sex” rather than “violence.” This can involve the selective use of language, such as describing rape allegations as “sex scandals,” and using words like “sordid” or “sleazy” rather than “violent” or “coercive,” “had sex with” rather than “penetrated,” or “stripped” rather than “removed clothes” (Benedict, 1992). Media narratives also tend to emphasize the victim’s participation in the “lead-up” to the assault, minimizing the act and any associated elements of coercion of violence (Lees, 1996b; Sanday, 1996). In practice, this means that media narratives generally echo the version of events provided by the alleged assailant, giving far less credence to the narrative of the victim (Lees, 1996a). These tendencies were seen in media reporting of the date rape allegations against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange by two Swedish women. Their complaints were widely questioned and even ridiculed in some reports, including a Huffington
Post blog by feminist author Naomi Wolf (2010), who mocked the allegations as similar to a man not noticing his partner’s new haircut, and claimed that they amounted to little more than Assange acting like a “narcissistic jerk.”

**Representations of Victims**

Whether sexual violence against women is considered newsworthy is dependent not only on the distinction between “real” and “simple” rapes but also on the actions and social status of the victim. Crimes against middle- and upper-class women, and women from dominant racial and ethnic groups, are far more likely to receive media coverage than crimes against women from marginal social groups. Even where rape cases are reported on, the actions, character, and personal history of the victim are scrutinized in a way that is not seen in any other crime, with victims represented as deserving or underserving based on both their actions and their social status.

The majority of rape cases receive no coverage at all, and this is especially true for victims with low social status. This has led commentators to describe some groups of women, including indigenous women, women from racial minorities, and sex workers, as socially “unrapable” because crimes against them are never recognized or treated as such (Los & Chamard, 1997). This pattern was evident in the long-term media neglect of epidemic rates of sexual violence committed against indigenous women in Canada. The issue, and the media’s complicity in ignoring it, became news only after campaigning by the Native Women’s Association of Canada led to a Royal Canadian Mounted Police report into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (RCMP, 2014). While the release of this report generated significant attention in the short-term, media analysis suggests that when violence against indigenous women does receive media attention, most often driven by community protest, it is generally followed by a return to neglect and silence (Drache, Fletcher, & Voss, 2016).

Even when sexual assault is reported on, analysis suggests that media representations of victims are often highly unsympathetic. In one of the first major studies of media representations of rape, Helen Benedict (1992), argued that victims are divided into two categories. A small number are presented as “virgins,” or “innocent” victims sullied by depraved monsters. The majority, however, are represented as “vamps,” responsible for driving men to extremes of lust through their provocative looks and behavior or generally loose morality. Benedict (1992) developed a set of criteria that lead to women being treated as “vamps” by the press. Women are more likely to be represented as vamps if they are from a more marginal social class, race, or ethnicity than their assailant, or they are perceived to be young and/or pretty, and therefore to be more sexually “desirable.” They are also judged on their actions, with women defined as “vamps” if they are assaulted while socializing, especially if they are out late and drinking, or engaging in any other behavior that deviates from traditional feminine roles in the home, or respectable activities such as work or exercise (Benedict, 1992; Bumiller, 1998).

Media treatments of “vamps” frequently includes disclosure of their sexual history, alcohol and drug use, or any other behavior deemed to denote that they are untrustworthy, unreliable, or irresponsible. Their actions leading up to and following the assault are particularly scrutinized, with media accounts commonly inferring that they are to blame, even if only
partially, for the violence committed against them. This may involve implying that a victim has “provoked” assault through wearing revealing clothing, acting flirtatiously, or acting in ways that could be interpreted as a precursor to sex, such as inviting a man home for a drink. Actions such as these are taken to mean either that the victim did actually consent to having sex or that “she should have known” that sexual violence was a possible outcome of her behavior. In these cases, the victim is portrayed as “guilty,” even if only of stupidity (Bumiller, 1998). Even very young victims of violent assaults can be treated as vamps, such as in the case of Leigh Leigh, a fourteen year old girl raped and murdered while attending a party in a small town in Eastern Australia in 1989. Despite her youth, media accounts consistently portrayed her as precocious and sexually promiscuous, producing distorted accounts of her personal history and misrepresenting her clothing and behavior on the night of the assault (Carrington, 1998).

In contrast to “vamps,” rapes committed against the small proportion of victims who are portrayed as “virgins” are responded to with highly emotive and outraged reporting. “Virgins” are almost exclusively middle class, members of dominant ethnic groups, in respectable occupations or full-time mothers, and victims of violent stranger rapes. They must also be considered to be “innocent” of any “irresponsible” or “provocative” actions, as such behavior can see them redefined as “vamps.” The requirement that women be completely “innocent” in order to receive sympathetic media coverage means that even these exceptional cases contribute to and reinforce wider patterns of victim-blaming (Serisier, 2005b). An example of this kind of coverage, as well as the precarious status of the “victim” label, can be seen in media treatments of Jill Meagher, raped and murdered in Melbourne, Australia, in 2012. The case received extensive and overwhelmingly sympathetic media coverage that emphasized Meagher’s respectable public status as a married woman working for the national public broadcaster. Even though she had been out drinking and socializing before her assault, much of the coverage emphasized the short walk between the bar and her home. However, her “folly” in walking home alone, even a short distance, was frequently discussed, including in an interview between Australian feminist blogger Mia Freeman and English writer Caitlin Moran (Freeman, 2012).

The nature of media reporting contributes to the ongoing stigma surrounding rape victimization and the reluctance of victims to speak publicly. In recognition of this stigma, several jurisdictions prohibit public identification of rape victims, and many media organizations have similar internal policies in place. Critics, argue, however, that such policies do little to alter the stigmatizing nature of media coverage and may even contribute to the stigma surrounding victims of rape. Additionally, in practice, prohibitions against naming victims are frequently ignored, particularly where victims are represented as “vamps” (Benedict, 1992). The issue of naming and public identification of victims has become an increasing problem with the growth of social media, and the difficulties of regulating content on web-based platforms (Salter, 2013).

**The Myth of False Allegations and Lying Victims**

Perhaps the most damaging feature of media reporting of rape victims is the persistent myth that false allegations of rape are relatively common, with acquaintance rape victims presented as particularly likely to misrepresent their experiences (Cuklanz, 1996; Gavey & Gow, 2001).
Despite their statistical rarity, false allegations feature prominently in both news and entertainment media, for instance being a relatively common plot device on police procedurals and other crime dramas (Cuklanz, 2000). Taken collectively these stories function as “cautionary tales” that act to fuel doubts and disbelief about women’s narratives generally and prevent women from speaking out about their experiences of violence (Larcombe, 2002).

The myth that false allegations are common is also bolstered through media over-reporting of acquittals or decisions to drop charges against alleged perpetrators. These cases, particularly when they involve allegations of “simple” rape, or allegations made by women deemed to be unreliable men, are consistently reported as evidence of false allegations even though it is well-known that “credible” rape cases frequently fail to secure convictions (Lees, 1997). This could be seen in a highly publicized Australian case in 2004 when a woman made accusations of gang rape against members of the Bulldogs National Rugby League Team. After the decision was made to not proceed with the investigation on the basis of insufficient evidence, the case was widely reported as a “false allegation” despite this description being rejected by police and prosecutors (Waterhouse-Watson, 2013).

The sensational nature of much media reporting around rape, and media preference for dramatic stories that fit a pre-existing narrative, can lead to errors and retractions. These retractions frequently position the victim as deceptive rather than highlighting errors in the original reporting. A prominent example of this was the 2014 Rolling Stone magazine story “A Rape on Campus,” about sexual violence at the University of Virginia. The reporter, aiming to highlight the problem of campus sexual violence, chose to focus on a particularly brutal and graphic account given by a single woman, referred to as “Jackie,” rather than looking at the issue more broadly (Eredely, 2014). After inconsistencies in the account were revealed by the Washington Post, Rolling Stone retracted the story, initially blaming the victim’s dishonesty. A later report commissioned by the magazine, however, found that poor reporting practices and lack of editorial oversight were to blame for the flaws in the original story (Coronel, 2015).

Representations of Offenders

The dominant media image of the rapist is a marginal male driven by sexual desire; a dangerous stranger lurking in the bushes (Jewkes, 2015). Entertainment media especially reproduce the psychotic stranger stereotype, with high numbers of violent or homicidal serial rapists featured in genres such as television crime shows (Horeck, 2004). This imagery is in stark contrast to the statistical reality that rape is most commonly committed by “normal” men from the same social sphere as, and usually known to, their victims.

The more “respectable” a man is deemed to be the less credence allegations against him are likely to be given, particularly if the woman making the allegations is deemed to be less respectable or have a lower social status (Benedict, 1992). A well-known example of this was the media coverage of the 1991 William Kennedy Smith trial in Palm Beach, Florida. Smith, a doctor belonging to the prestigious Kennedy family, was accused of sexual assault by Patricia Bowman, a woman he had met at a bar. Media coverage of Smith before and during the trial emphasized his profession, good looks, and “gentle” nature, ignoring or minimizing the
existence of prior allegations of sexual assault. In media interviews following Smith’s acquittal a number of jurors claimed that their decision was heavily influenced by their conviction that Smith was not the kind of man who would commit a violent sexual assault (Sanday, 1996).

In rape cases involving “respectable” men like Smith media scrutiny is generally reserved for victims. The defendant’s sexual history is rarely raised, and if it is, his “reputation” as a “womanizer” may be used to discredit the victim’s account, implying she “should have known” what was to come. It is rare to the point of nonexistent to see media coverage that questions why a sexually experienced man was unable to accurately read the signals of his potential sexual partner and determine that she was unwilling to have sex. Similarly, the behavior of men in terms of drinking irresponsibly is rarely raised except to provide mitigating circumstances for the allegations against them. In short, defendants are frequently presented as sexual innocents, unable to accurately read situations or respond to all but the most blatant of signals (Lees, 1996a).

This phenomenon of excusing and erasing sexual violence by assailants who do not fit the stereotype of rapists can extend even to cases involving violence, clear non-consent, and group sexual assault or gang rape. This blindness has been witnessed in several countries when sports stars have been accused of violent or group sexual assaults. For instance, allegations of gang rape made against footballers in Australia in the early 2000s were frequently referred to as “sex scandals” in the news media, with the alleged victims portrayed as “groupies” who had invited the assaults, or as women who were making false claims after being rejected. Deb Waterhouse-Watson (2013) has described the footballers as possessing “narrative immunity,” meaning that their high social status meant that victims’ stories would simply not be believed, no matter how many allegations were made.

There have been some signs of change in recent years, with a small number of prominent cases in different jurisdictions where respectable men have been subject to media scrutiny and condemnation. In general this mainstream media attention has followed in the wake of social media activism or reports by new, online media sources. In March 2016, Javier Fernandez, of Veracruz, Mexico, gave an interview to a local news agency about the sexual assault of his daughter by a group of young, privileged men. The assault, which occurred after the men abducted his daughter from a party, occurred in January 2015 and, according to the family, had resulted in inaction on the part of the Mexican authorities. Following social media activism by the family, the case, which, came to be known as “Los Porkys de Costa de Oro,” achieved widespread media coverage across Mexico, and prompted official action (Segura, 2016). Similar levels of media outrage were seen in the United States in June 2016 after a former Stanford swimmer who sexually assaulted an unconscious woman was given a six-month sentence because of the judge’s concern about the “severe impact” of a longer sentence. Again, the sympathetic coverage began only after the victim released her Victim Impact Statement to Buzzfeed news (Baker, 2016). The letter was read aloud on CNN and in the House of Congress, while communications from Brock Turner, the swimmer, and his father, which have attempted to minimize his responsibility, have been subjected to large amounts of criticism and ridicule in both mainstream and social media.

In both of these cases media coverage worked to draw attention to the relative impunity granted to “respectable” offenders. However, these cases remain relatively isolated examples, with attention granted to them due to strategic advocacy through social media on the part of
victims and their supporters. In both cases, the victims have shared the relatively high social status of the perpetrators, and the fact that the victims were either abducted or unconscious means that they are represented as “real” rather than “simple” rapes.

“The Myth of the Black (or Muslim) Rapist”

Race is a central element in media representations of rape, with media coverage tending to represent men of color as more likely to commit sexual violence. In the United States, for instance, a long-standing feature of media reporting of rape has been the “myth of the black rapist,” a construction of black men as primitive, predatory and particularly threatening to white women (A. Davis, 1983). Prior to the 1930s American newspapers covered rape cases only in which the victim was white and the perpetrator black (Benedict, 1992; Block, 2001–2002). Sensationalist media reporting of rape allegations was used to justify the widespread practice of lynching, the extra-legal killing of black men by white crowds, often with the covert support of law enforcement. Media reports of these cases framed white women as the property of white men, thus locating the outrage of the cases in a challenge to the dominant racial order rather than in the gendered violence committed against the victim. In turn, extensive media coverage of lynchings, frequently including graphic imagery of dead bodies, helped to reinforce the threat of violence these attacks represented to all black people as well as cement the link between this violence and the supposed threat that black men posed to white communities and to white women (Allen, Lewis, Litwak, & Als, 2000).

This myth is heavily associated with some of the most famous miscarriages of justice in U.S. criminal history, such as the 1931 Scottsboro, Alabama, trial of nine African American youths for allegedly raping two white women. The nine youths were convicted (in the original trial and later retrials) by all-white juries despite the recantation of one of the victims and a lack of supporting evidence. The case received extensive coverage nationally and internationally, with Southern U.S. media representing it as the defense of white womanhood against the threat of black rapists, and Northern and international media generally presenting it as a racist miscarriage of justice enabled by the false allegations of two low-class women of dubious morality (Goodman, 1995). In a common pattern, both types of coverage relied on rape myths, either portraying black men as dangerous predators or white women as opportunistic liars.

Frequently compared to Scottsboro is the 1989 Central Park Jogger case in New York City. A young, white investment banker was brutally raped and physically assaulted while jogging in Central Park. She was found severely injured and comatose the next morning. On the same night a group of African American and Latino teenage boys had harassed and assaulted several other people in the park. Five boys were arrested, charged, and ultimately convicted. The primary evidence was videotaped confessions, which were mutually contradictory, unsupported by physical evidence, and claimed by the youths to result from coercion. The case received extensive international coverage, most of which, despite the paucity of evidence, presumed the youths’ guilt, with “the Jogger” represented as an innocent “virgin” and the teenage suspects described in highly racialized and animalistic terms such as “wolf pack.” Several media outlets also included features on the criminality and sexism of the Harlem communities from which the boys came. These depictions were almost directly reversed by African America media, which portrayed the “jogger” as a “vamp,” and published her name, with both portrayals again relying on competing rape myths (Benedict, 1992). The
convictions were vacated in 2002 when Matias Reyes, already serving a life sentence for other violent crimes, confessed to the crime and DNA evidence proved him to be the assailant (Duru, 2004).

The persistent portrayal of black men as sexually predatory sits at the intersection of racial conflict, myths of “real rape,” and stereotypes of black criminality in American media and popular culture, feeding the growth of penal populism and racially targeted “law and order” campaigns. In the 1988 U.S. presidential election campaign, the Republican candidate, George H. W. Bush, played on these fears to accuse his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, of being “soft on crime.” Dukakis had been governor of Massachusetts in 1986 when Willie Horton, an African American prisoner, was released on a weekend furlough scheme. Horton escaped and, before being recaptured, raped a white woman, in an incident that generated extensive media coverage and calls for tougher prison regimes. Bush ran a series of attack ads during the campaign that, although they did not name Horton, clearly referenced the event, blaming Dukakis’s “revolving door” attitude toward prison for rising crime rates. The ads had an immediate impact on opinion polls and are considered to have played a role in Bush’s victory (Bumiller, 2008).

In the aftermath of the 2001 September 11 attacks, the growing incidence of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in Western countries has seen the increase in similar representations of Muslim men as sexual threats to white women. The early 2000s saw a series of exaggerated and sensationalist media accounts of Muslim youths targeting white women for sexual violence in Sydney, Australia. The language of these reports frequently depicted the perpetrators in highly racialized terms and relied on stereotypes of Muslim men as misogynist and as seeking to curtail the freedoms of Western women (Poynting, Noble, Tabar, & Collins, 2004; Serisier, 2005a). These depictions of Muslim men as rapists intersect with wider fears of Muslim men as criminals and terrorists. They also function to depict rape as a problem of ethnic and racial “others” rather than endemic to society as a whole (Serisier, 2006).

Continuing Taboos

Media representations of sexual violence tend to almost exclusively focus on cisgender male perpetrators and female victims, ignoring male victims, female perpetrators, transgender victims and perpetrators, and same-sex sexual violence. Some commentators argue that male victims are currently in a similar position to female victims prior to the birth of the feminist anti-rape movement in the 1970s: subject to invisibility and harmful myths, including that men cannot be sexually assaulted against their will and that sexual victimization is evidence of homosexuality or emasculation, with the topic even remaining a subject for humor in mainstream media forums (Mardorossian, 2014). Critics argue that media reliance on and commitment to traditional narratives of gender and heterosexuality means that stories of male rape remain largely unrepresented and unpresentable (Cohen, 2014).

The primary exception to this is male-on-male rape in prison, which has received increasing media attention in recent years, particularly in the United States. This recognition has been largely driven by prison reform advocates and human rights organizations such as Human
Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2001). However, this limited media focus reinforces understandings of the phenomena as exceptional, occurring only among deviant, criminal populations (Mardorossian, 2014).

Female perpetrators of sexual violence are also largely absent from media representations of sexual violence. Where they are reported, it is frequently as a “novelty,” downplaying the seriousness of the harm involved. The primary context in which media coverage of female sex offenders occurs is cases of female adults and young males, most commonly teachers and students. Where these cases occur they tend to be presented in ways that minimize their seriousness and that over-write narratives of romance or sexual experimentation on the part of adolescent males (Gavey, 2005).

### Child Sexual Assault

Child sexual abuse was, prior to the 1970s, deemed to be rare and the province of “perverted” strangers. In the 1970s, however, feminist activists began to draw attention to the prevalence of child sexual abuse alongside their campaigns around adult sexual assault. Since that time, the issue of child sexual assault has been subject to highly sensational reporting around the danger of “pedophilic” strangers. In many ways this mirrors the media misrepresentation of rape, with the emphasis on “stranger danger” obscuring the fact that the vast majority of perpetrators are family members or close acquaintances of the victims (Furedi, 2013; Jewkes & Wykes, 2012).

### Representations of Victims

As with media representations of rape victims, victims of childhood sexual assault tend to fall into two categories. Media representations of victims of childhood sexual abuse committed by family members or acquaintances have, historically, shared many features with representations of victims of acquaintance rape. There are strong traditions of victim-blaming, with children frequently portrayed as participating in or even initiating sexual conduct with adults. Often referred to as the “Lolita” myth, these representations depict young girls as sexually precocious and seductive, with their adult assailants unable to resist their advances (J. E. Davis, 2005). “Sympathetic” media reporting of incest and child sexual assault victims occurs more frequently when the perpetrator is a stranger, and these representations are, like representations of real rape, highly sensational. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse are also frequently depicted as incurably “damaged” by their experience, a pattern of representation that increases the stigmatization of survivors (Alcoff & Gray, 1993).

### The Recovered or False Memory Debates

The early 1980s saw the development of moral panics in several jurisdictions, including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, around claims of widespread sexual abuse, frequently involving ritual or satanic elements, at child-care or day-care centers (Furedi, 2013; Jenkins, 1998). These allegations were frequently made through therapeutic interventions with children who, it was claimed, had repressed these traumatic incidents until they were uncovered by therapists. The allegations, which at their most severe alleged that
there were widespread and well-organized rings of Satanists using day care and other businesses as fronts to abuse children and that millions of children had been abducted for these purposes, generated extensive and sensational media coverage (Best, 1990).

By the mid-1980s these claims began to attract organized opposition from those accused, with advocacy groups claiming that child abuse was becoming a “witch-hunt” and alleging victims were experiencing “false memory syndrome” where therapists suggested or implanted memories in their patients (Nathan & Snedeker, 1995). They accused therapists of unethical practices and law enforcement of the denial of due process, claiming that there was a “hysterical epidemic” of false allegations. The conflicting positions generated further coverage, with the Denver Post winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1985 for showing that claimed figures for missing and abused children were not borne out in official statistics and were greatly exaggerated (J. E. Davis, 2005). By the end of the decade the most extreme claims had faltered under a lack of evidence, and many of the cases resulted in acquittals or unrelated convictions.

The issue of repressed and recovered memories continued to occupy media coverage through the 1990s in what came to be referred to as the “memory wars.” Activists and allied therapists claimed that recovered memory therapy was revealing a hidden epidemic of child sexual abuse. In response, the False Memory Foundation was formed by accused family members and sympathetic therapists who disputed the validity of recovered memories. They asserted that their children were being manipulated into making false allegations by unethical therapists and political activists intent on destroying the family. The conflict, and associated legal actions, generated extensive coverage, with graphic allegations of abuse against otherwise respectable families coming to light in lawsuits by children against parents and, later, stories of duplicitous and manipulative therapists told by “recanters,” who had withdrawn their allegations of abuse, being told in malpractice suits against therapists. As recovered memories therapy declined in use, in part due to the extensive litigation it generated, it also faded from media attention (J. E. Davis, 2005).

**Media Constructions of “Pedophiles”**

By the mid-1990s media representations of child sexual abuse became increasingly dominated by the figure of the “pedophile,” understood as an individual with an incurable and uncontrollable desire for sexual contact with children. While the recovered memory controversy had, at least in part, focused on incest and familial abuse, from this point on the danger of child sexual abuse became firmly located outside of the family, in perverted and pathological strangers who were imagined to lurk in parks, near schools, and anywhere else that children congregated. The combination of extensive media coverage, misrepresentation, and extreme moral outrage surrounding pedophilia has led several researchers to describe it as the most significant moral panic of the contemporary era (Furedi, 2013; Jenkins, 1998; Jewkes & Wykes, 2012). Exposés of released pedophiles have also become a feature of tabloid media reporting, at times connected to protests or vigilante actions in specific communities, with many released sex offenders facing difficulties in finding long-term accommodation and employment.
Mainstream reporting infers that gay men, and others who are seen to deviate from normative heterosexuality, including single and childless men, are more likely to be pedophiles, despite statistics indicating that the majority of convicted sex offenders are heterosexual and many are married or in marriage-like relationships (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012). Representations of child sexual abuse can also be racialized in ways that mirror media treatments of adult sexual assault by men of color. In Australia, for instance, while child sexual assault by white perpetrators may generate outraged and fearful coverage it is generally understood as resulting from individual pathology. In contrast, the repeated “discovery” of high rates of child sexual abuse in remote indigenous communities is represented as implicating the community as a whole, stigmatizing all indigenous men as potential child abusers, as well as being used as a rationale for increasingly repressive policing measures, most strongly represented in the ongoing Northern Territory Emergency Intervention (Behrendt, 2007).

The moral panic that exists around perpetrators of child sexual abuse misrepresents the realities of child sexual abuse, deflecting fears away from the real sources of the danger, within the family, and onto pathological strangers in the public sphere. Some commentators argue that this represents a denial and deflection of feminist critiques of the family (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012) while others see feminism as complicit in constructing and perpetrating this panic (Furedi, 2013). What is not disputed is that this fear of deviant strangers has also had profound effects on many professions that deal with children, such as teachers and medical professionals, and also on the social organization of childhood, particularly in middle-class families. Because of the fear of dangerous strangers, contemporary children are more closely supervised, spend less time outdoors, and have a more restricted engagement with the public sphere than at any point previously in history (Jenkins, 1998).

These shifts, accompanied by the growth in computer-based leisure technologies, have led to significant Internet usage among children and young people, with it being the only unsupervised leisure time that many children have. This relative lack of supervision has seen public concern and media reporting shift to focus on the dangers of cyber-pedophilia and online grooming. Researchers differ widely in how serious they believe the threat of online sexual abuse and child pornography to be, but there is a relative consensus that it is represented by media as a significant social threat. Representations of cyber-pedophilia continue the pattern of misrepresenting child sexual abuse as predominantly a problem of “stranger danger” (Jewkes & Wykes, 2012).

The fear of cyber-pedophilia has generated calls for harsher policing and greater Internet surveillance, as well as new markets for child protection software. The cultural fascination and revulsion with child sexual abuse has also intersected with popular punitiveness to produce demands for public exposure and shaming. Perhaps the most extreme example of this was the highly controversial and now-defunct U.S. reality television program To Catch a Predator, which screened on NBC from 2004–2007. The show was a financial and investigative alliance between the network, local law enforcement, and the online volunteer organization “Perverted Justice,” whose members engage in “sting” operations, posing as children and seeking to identify and entrap online child sex offenders. The show would set up a camera-equipped house that potential perpetrators would be invited to before being confronted by the show’s host and dramatically arrested by local law enforcement. Described as “public humiliation” for entertainment, the show was eventually canceled after being linked to one suicide (Kohm, 2009).
Institutional and Historic Abuse

The new millennium has also seen media attention on the dangers of pedophilia shift from a focus solely on marginal individuals and groups to media exposure of the existence of child sexual abuse within powerful institutions. Driven predominantly by survivor activism and the continuing high news values of child sexual abuse, the first prominent cases of institutional abuse concerned historical allegations of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and in residential care institutions. Beginning with investigative reporting carried out by the Boston Globe, media reporting has revealed widespread abuse and systemic cover-ups within the Catholic Church, with bishops and archbishops arranging payments in exchange for confidentiality agreements, organizing transfers for accused priests, and, frequently, enabling them to continue offending (Keenan, 2012). These revelations have led to highly publicized public inquiries in several jurisdictions, including the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Ireland.

Other institutions have also faced scrutiny in the past decade. In 2011 an investigation into multiple allegations of child sexual abuse against Jerry Sandusky, a star football coach at Pennsylvania State University, received extensive coverage internationally, including the fact that the university had taken no action, despite concerns being reported by an assistant coach in 2002 (Klein, Tolson, & Longo, 2013). In 2012, what has become the largest public scandal ever about child sexual abuse emerged in the United Kingdom, with the public exposure of the recently deceased entertainer and BBC personality Jimmy Savile, and the complicity of the BBC in erasing and ignoring decades of allegations against him. When Savile died in 2011 he was a celebrated national figure, despite the existence of several allegations against him. In December of that year a BBC Newsnight documentary on the allegations was cancelled while a BBC Christmas special later in the month included extensive tributes to Savile. Other media began to report on a BBC cover-up and in October 2012 ITV broadcast a documentary, Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile. Following the documentary, a police investigation resulted in hundreds of allegations being made against the presenter and an internal investigation and several resignations at the BBC. Savile was transformed from national treasure into an icon of public hatred with numerous public tributes, including Savile’s cemetery headstone, removed from display (Furedi, 2013).

In September 2012 the Times (U.K.) newspaper published an investigation into alleged sexual abuse in the Rotherham local council area, revealing that police were aware of widespread sexual abuse of children by men from South Asian backgrounds, including members of the council. The newspaper reported that despite longstanding awareness that large numbers of children were at risk police had taken no action. In keeping with tendencies to focus on race in cases where perpetrators come from minority backgrounds, much media coverage highlighted the findings of one council report that police had been reluctant to act due to the perpetrators’ race and “misplaced political correctness,” despite this comment being disputed by police and other internal investigations. It is more likely that, as other commentators have argued, the abuse was ignored because the victims were largely poor and from minority backgrounds, and therefore didn’t meet the criteria of ideal victimhood (Casey, 2015). In the changing climate of media appetite for institutional child abuse stories, however, the ensuing investigations and subsequent charges were extensively covered by media outlets.
Sexual Offenses Online

Online sexual crimes include harassment or cyberstalking and “revenge porn,” the production or dissemination of sexually explicit images and videos without consent. Many prominent women on social media platforms such as Twitter report receiving daily threats and sexual harassment. This phenomenon first attracted widespread media attention in relation to the “gamergate” phenomenon, where a number of well-known women in the online gaming community were targeted with threats and harassment, ranging from “doxing”, the public release of personal and identifying information, to the distribution of materials containing their faces doctored onto sexually explicit images and videos. The issue was widely reported, even inspiring an episode of the television series Law and Order: SVU. While the controversy centered on the gamer subculture, it became symbolic of broader issues of online misogyny, and sparked debates about the extent to which it is particular to Internet culture, or simply a product of wider cultural misogyny (Mantilla, 2015). Online and social media spaces have been largely regulated by corporate platform providers, such as Twitter and Facebook. However, in recent years, many jurisdictions have begun to introduce targeted criminal legislation (Henry & Powell, 2016).

The growth of social media has seen a growing phenomenon of perpetrators sharing images and video of sexual assaults through social media. The best known example of this practice, which often involves adolescent victims and perpetrators, have been seen internationally, is the notorious 2012 Steubenville, Ohio, case. In this case members of a high school football team assaulted an unconscious girl, sharing video and commentary on the rape as it was occurring. In the face of allegations of a “cover-up” by local law enforcement, the hacker collective Anonymous publicly released some of these materials, and threatened to release personal information of the perpetrators and investigators (C. L. Armstrong, Hull, & Saunders, 2016). In 2013, 17-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons, committed suicide in Canada, following ongoing bullying and harassment after a video of her being gang-raped was shared online (Burleigh, 2013). Another prominent case occurred in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, when a young woman was drugged and raped by a group of up to thirty men who shared the assault on social media. The case has provoked mass protests against rape culture in Brazil as well as widespread criticism of mainstream media for picking up on the story only after it was shared widely on social media, and for early stories by prominent media outlet O Globo focusing on the girl’s background and history of drug use (BBC, 2016; Barem, 2016).

In addition to cases of clear abuse or victimization, many jurisdictions also prosecute consensual sharing of sexual imagery by young people under child pornography laws. The primary example of this is “sexting” or the sending and receiving of sexually explicit images or videos over mobile technology or social media. This practice is reported to be popular among young people, including those below the age of sexual consent, with media reports in Australia, for example, highlighting the existence of the phenomenon among girls as young as 9 or 7. Media reports almost universally portray sexting as a danger for young women, linking it to cyber-pedophilia, and to permanent damage to young women’s “digital reputation” and future romantic and employment opportunities. While some researchers similarly highlight the danger and potential damages of sexting, others believe the public discourse around it constitutes a moral panic (Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012). Critics of these discourses have highlighted that the panic itself
reinforces and re-inscribes sexual double standards where sexual behaviors are seen to be dangerous for girls and to give them the reputation of being “sluts” or easy, while the behavior of boys is rarely discussed or scrutinized (Albury, Funnell, & Noonan, 2010).

Instead, young men are primarily portrayed as being “in danger” of being criminalized or placed on sex offender registers. Legal inconsistencies mean that in many jurisdictions, 16–17 year olds are legally able to consent to sexual activity, but if they film or take photos of themselves they are considered to be producing child pornography and distributing this pornography if they send or receive these images. While some justify this distinction on the basis of the permanence of digital images others question why adolescents who are considered able to have sex are, in a mediatized world, shut out of the digital economy of sexual behavior (Sacco, Argudin, Maguire, Tallon, & Cyberlaw Clinic, 2010). The issue of sexting, despite the disagreements around it, makes clear that legal and social understandings of the intersections of sexuality, socializing, and technology are likely to increasingly become sites of social debate and contention.

“Rape Culture”

The term rape culture is frequently used to describe the various ways in which Western societies normalize, deny, and excuse sexual violence against women and children (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005). Popular culture and entertainment are a key part of this phenomenon, which Nicola Gavey (2005) describes as the “cultural scaffolding” of sexual violence. Debates about rape culture incorporate discussions of the role of mainstream popular entertainment in defining violence and coercion as romantic or sexy, as well as long-standing debates about the cultural effects of pornography, and the “pornification” of popular culture.

Pornography and the Feminist “Sex Wars”

The late 1970s saw pornography, and its connection to “rape culture,” become a contentious issue among feminist academics and activists. In this period, pornography began to achieve wider and more mainstream circulation in the form of magazines such as Playboy and the mainstream success of the film Deep Throat, starring Linda Lovelace (Duggan & Hunter, 1995). Partly due to this increasing cultural visibility, a polarization arose between feminists about the relationship between pornography and sexual violence. This conflict would become a key element of the “feminist sex wars” of the 1980s, which began in the United States, but which have led to ongoing conflicts between feminists on this question.

Many feminists involved in anti-rape activism, looking to explain the normalization of rape, pointed to the objectification of women within pornography, with activist Robin Morgan (1980) famously declaring “pornography is the theory, rape is the practice.” These anti-pornography feminists, the most prominent of which was the group “Women Against Pornography” based in New York, opposed pornography on the grounds that it was both causally related to violence, and inherently objectifying and degrading to women. They therefore sought to restrict the production and sale of pornography, at times allying with conservative and religious groups who opposed pornography on grounds of public morality and obscenity (Duggan & Hunter, 1995).
These views were directly opposed by feminists and queer activists who, while often accepting the sexism and even misogyny of mainstream pornography, opposed the arguments and practices of groups like Women Against Pornography on a number of grounds. Allied in groups such as the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) and the Lesbian Sex Mafia, queer and “pro-sex” feminist groups argued that moves to ban or censor pornography contributed to Western understandings of sex in general as “dirty” or “taboo” and “deviant” sexual acts, such as publishing or viewing pornography as particularly harmful (e.g., Califa, 1994). They argued that such attitudes contributed to the conflation of sex and non-consensual violence within Western cultures as well as playing a role in the sexual repression of women and the demonization of sexual minorities. Secondly they argued that the sexism seen in pornography was symptomatic rather than causal of misogynist attitudes to women and sexuality, pointing to the existence of progressive feminist and queer eroticism. Finally, many opposed censorship itself, arguing that reliance on prohibitionist policies would not solve the problem of sexism or violent pornography (Duggan & Hunter, 1995).

This conflict was highly influential in public policy debates in the United States and Canada. In 1983, anti-pornography feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon drafted the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance (commonly known as the Dworkin-MacKinnon Ordinance). The ordinance was inspired by Linda Boreman (publicly known as Linda Lovelace) who, in 1980, revealed that she had been violently coerced into making the famous film Deep Throat and that the film depicted real acts of sexual violence. The ordinance defined pornography as a civil rights violation, allowing women to seek damages for harms related to its production or consumption. It was introduced in several local jurisdictions in the United States but ultimately ruled unconstitutional. Parts of it, however, were incorporated into the Canadian Supreme Court ruling, R. v. Butler (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). The ordinance was supported by some feminists and religious and political conservatives but strongly opposed by civil rights activists, LGBT activists, and “pro-sex” feminists, with jurisdictions seeking to implement the legislation experiencing protests both in favor and against (Duggan & Hunter, 1995). In 1986, Republican president Ronald Reagan announced a Commission on Pornography (commonly known as the Meese Report) (United States, 1986). The report heard from feminists such as Boreman, Dworkin, and MacKinnon, as well as many others, ultimately finding that pornography was harmful and linked to organized crime. While the findings were welcomed by anti-pornography feminists, the report was heavily criticized their opponents for being inaccurate and biased (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Califa, 1994).

These debates about the relationship between pornography and sexual violence have been enhanced by the growth in pornography available online. Anti-pornography feminists claim that the Internet has seen not only the exponential growth of pornography but also an intensification of its harms and effects through the construction of violent niche markets for rape pornography and even “snuff” films that depict women being murdered as part of sex (Jeffreys, 2009). Supporters of the existence of pornography continue to argue that the problem lies with sexism and violence rather than explicit depictions of sex, pointing to a parallel growth of online independent, feminist, queer, and other “non-exploitative” forms of pornography (Attwood, 2010).

Recent years have seen this debate extend to concerns about the sexualization or “pornification” of contemporary culture and a corresponding cultural “normalization” of pornography. As in the 1970s, some feminists argue that we are seeing not only a growth of explicit sexual imagery but the mainstreaming of the highly sexist attitudes to gender roles
and sexuality common in pornography, and that this is having a detrimental effect on sexism, as well as leading to increased likelihood of sexual coercion (Dines, 2011). These concerns are frequently explicitly linked to fears around child pornography and sexual assault, with commentators frequently arguing that girls are being pressured to dress and act in sexual and sexually provocative ways at increasingly young ages. This is seen to be driven through media but also through corporate advertising and marketing, with products such as Bratz dolls, bikinis, and “sexy” clothing for pre-pubescents a subject of academic and official concerns, with inquiries in jurisdictions such as Australia into what some have labeled “corporate pedophilia” (Rush & La Nauze, 2006).

**Entertainment Media**

The role of popular entertainment products, such as books, movies and music in promoting “rape culture” through the romanticization and eroticization of non-consensual sex is also highly debated. “Romance” genres are particularly criticized for perpetuating myths that women say no when they mean yes and that, at least sometimes, women like to be forced into sexual encounters. A classic example is the so-called “stairway scene” in the film *Gone with the Wind*, often described as the “most romantic film of all time.” The scene opens with Rhett and Scarlett, the romantic protagonists, fighting at the bottom of a staircase when Rhett picks Scarlett up, and carries her, struggling, upstairs to the bedroom. The scene then cuts to the next morning where Scarlett wakes up in bed with a large smile. Similar examples can be found in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the most popular romance novel ever, including scenes in which the heroine, Anastasia, explicitly says “no” to sex before being ignored by the hero, Christian Grey, and then going on to have “earth-shattering” sex (Serisier, 2015). This book, along with romance genres more generally, has also been accused of normalizing wider patterns of abusive behavior. Research on romantic comedies has found, for example, that after watching films such as *There’s Something about Mary* or *Love, Actually*, women were less likely to identify behavior that fits the legal definition of stalking as harmful or problematic (Lippman, 2015).

Popular music can also be criticized for promoting non-consensual sexual interactions with the 2013 Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams single, *Blurred Lines*, for example, criticized, and banned from many university and student union venues, for including lyrics such as: “I know you want it.” There are debates, however, about the harm of these texts, with some authors arguing that they are presented as fantasy and research showing that readers and viewers are able to differentiate between behavior that is appropriate for “fantasy” and behavior that would be desirable in real life. Some critics of romance genres particularly, have argued, both that the appeal of these texts to their predominantly female audience cannot be simply attributed to internalized sexism or “false consciousness”, and that, rather than simply being “harmful” the texts illuminate and explore the contradictions of women’s sexual and romantic lives within a society structured by systemic gendered oppression (Modleski, 2008; Radway, 1991; Serisier, 2015).

Depictions of sexual violence, a common feature of film and television, have also been criticized by activists and academics, especially as explicit depictions of this violence have become increasingly common in recent decades (Horeck, 2004). Entertainment media is even more likely than news media to limit representations of rape to “real rape,” although, in
keeping with a low amount of cultural diversity in mainstream entertainment media generally, both victims and offenders tend to be white. Film and television have also been accused of eroticizing violence against women through the inclusion of highly graphic and sexualized representations of rape and other forms of gendered violence. Even television shows with a feminist orientation, such as the well-known British police procedural Prime Suspect or the more recent British series The Fall, have been criticized for these kinds of “titillating” depictions (Brunsdon, 1998; Hughes, 2014). Several authors argue that the extreme end of this eroticization of sexual violence is found in the figure of the “beautiful dead woman,” a trope often described with reference to the character Laura Palmer of Twin Peaks, whose death opens the series (Bronfen, 1992; O’Sullivan, 1996). The image most associated with the series is a close-up on Laura’s dead, but heavily made-up face.

Entertainment media, has, however, at times helped to disseminate feminist approaches to rape. Lisa Cuklanz (1996) argues that “feminine media forms,” which are aimed primarily at women, have been an important site of the popularization of feminist views around rape. She refers to the inclusion of themes of date and marital rape in television “Movies of the Week” in the 1980s in ways sympathetic to feminist understandings. Similarly, the 1998 film The Accused, starring Jodie Foster and Kelly McGillis, attempted to confront rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes. Based on a real case, the film features Jodie Foster as Sarah Tobias, a working-class woman raped in a bar by several men. The film insists on Sarah’s right to justice despite the fact that she had been drinking and flirting with her assailants prior to the assault. While publicizing the film, Kelly McGillis, who played the prosecuting attorney, spoke publicly about being a rape survivor. The film has, however, been criticized for erasing the allegations of racism against the Portuguese American perpetrators in the original case, in what some argue is an ongoing failure in mainstream feminism to deal with issues of intersectionality and sexual violence (Horeck, 2004).

Celebrities and Sexual Violence

Historically, media treatments of allegations of sexual violence by celebrities have been to either ignore or discredit alleged victims. However, the 2010s have seen a number of new and historical allegations of rape and child sexual assault against celebrities receive significant attention, leading to debates about appropriate social and cultural responses, and the relationship of the allegations to celebrity and recognition for artistic and sporting achievements.

In 2014, Dylan Farrow (2014) published an open letter in the New York Times detailing her allegations of child sexual abuse against Woody Allen. While the claims were not new this was the first time Farrow had spoken publicly about them. The letter was published in response to Allen receiving a lifetime achievement award at the Golden Globes, and accused Hollywood, and by extension audiences, of being complicit in Allen’s violence by treating it as irrelevant to his professional accolades. The letter generated extensive public debate, ranging from classic victim-blaming to high levels of support. However, Farrow’s call for Hollywood and audiences to stop supporting Allen has largely gone unheeded with the director continuing to make critically and commercially successful films, and many claiming that he should be treated as innocent because he was never convicted of a crime; legal proceedings at the time were dropped due to concerns regarding their potentially traumatizing effect on Farrow.
While it would be wrong to say the allegations have again been forgotten, they do not appear to have significantly impacted Allen’s career. The director Roman Polanski similarly faced renewed media attention to his 1977 conviction for “unlawful sexual intercourse” with a minor in 2013 when he also received a lifetime achievement award at the Zurich film festival.

There are, however, several celebrities who have faced greater consequences over revelations of sexual assault. In 2014 media scandals erupted in the United States and Canada over multiple allegations of sexual assault against media personalities Bill Cosby and Jian Ghomeshi. In both cases, media interest was again generated in the absence of criminal justice convictions—Cosby has never been tried and Ghomeshi was acquitted. While the allegations against Cosby had previously been made public during a 2005 civil suit, which the comedian settled for an undisclosed sum, they had been largely buried until a Philadelphia magazine reporter uploaded a video of comedian Hannibal Buress referring to Cosby as a rapist (McQuade, 2014). Following this, a media storm ensued, with publications such as New York magazine carrying interviews with more than 30 women claiming to have been assaulted by Cosby, leading to a number of media companies canceling upcoming projects with the comedian (Malone, 2015). At the same time the Toronto Star began investigating long-standing allegations of violence against Canadian celebrity Jian Ghomeshi, leading the Canadian Broadcasting Company to terminate his employment.

Writing about the media response to the allegations against Cosby in 2014 the New Yorker magazine claimed that “More has changed in the past few years for women who allege rape than in all the decades since the women’s movement began” (Malone, 2015). While it is undoubtedly a time of cultural change around sexual violence, the differing responses to these celebrity cases indicate that this change is uneven, raising questions about the role of race in the different public and commercial consequences of these allegations, as well as the potentially different standards accorded to Allen and Polanski because of their status as “artists,” rather than entertainers.

### Social Change and Backlash

Media reporting of sex crimes has, since the 1970s, also included coverage coverage of feminist, survivor, and other activist movements seeking to challenge the widespread existence and normalization of sexual violence. Publicly visible activism around sexual violence is generally held to have begun in the United States but spread rapidly to other countries (Dow, 1996). The first public feminist event about sexual violence was a “speak out” held in a small church in New York City in January 1971 and covered by Vogue and New York magazines. Feminist activism around rape increased internationally through the 1970s with “Take Back the Night” marches beginning to occur regularly in many countries (Bevacqua, 2000).

This movement changed the nature of media coverage of sexual violence. The policing and prosecution of sexual offenses are a key site for reflecting and reinforcing ideas of the sexually normal and abnormal (Lacey, 1998). Media attention to social changes around sexual violence is often through the prism of individual trials or actions by agents of the criminal justice system. The changing social and legal definitions of sexual violence, prompted by
feminist activism, have made rape trials especially newsworthy, as they became vehicles for highlighting, promoting, and contesting social change, as well as for highlighting the complex relationships between gender, race, and class, in public responses to sexual violence.

In addition to spectacular coverage of individual cases, and by the early 1980s media outlets began to generate “episodic stories” where trials were discussed as illustrative examples of a social problem, and “thematic stories,” discussing more abstract issues such as prevalence and causes (Cuklanz, 1996). While traditional rape myths and victim-blaming remain prominent, particularly in “masculine” media forms such as newspapers, which are overwhelmingly staffed by, and have traditionally been marketed toward, men, more diverse types of coverage are now seen. “Feminine” media forms, however, such as daytime television and women’s magazines, are more likely to feature stories about acquaintance rape, provide space for victims’ and survivors’ accounts, as well as run thematic stories on the social problem of rape (Bevacqua, 2000; Cuklanz, 2000; Projansky, 2001).

The first trials to draw attention to the emerging feminist movement against rape in the United States were not rape but murder trials. In 1974, feminists, civil rights activists, and others began to campaign around the cases of Joan Little, an African American woman, and Inez Garcia, a Latina woman. Little was charged with murder of a prison guard while in custody but claimed that she had killed the guard while resisting a sexual assault. Garcia was charged with the murder of an acquaintance. She claimed that the killing was in response to a sexual assault and subsequent threats to kill her. Both women were eventually exonerated in legal rulings that were seen to enshrine the rights of women to use deadly force to resist sexual violence, reflecting an increasing awareness of and sympathy with victims of sexual violence (Bevacqua, 2000).

In the 1980s and 1990s, prominent cases, such as the 1983 Big Dan’s case, drew attention to changing legal and social norms around rape, but also highlighted ongoing social conflicts around gender, race and class. In this case, later the inspiration for the film The Accused, a young woman was gang raped in Big Dan’s tavern in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in view of other patrons who failed to intervene. The sensational nature of the charges combined with the supposed indifference of witnesses made the story highly attractive to news outlets both nationally and internationally. Prior to the trial, feminist organizations mobilized large-scale protests in support of the victim. The conviction of the perpetrators, despite the fact that the victim had been drinking and was portrayed as flirting and acting provocatively, was seen by many as a sign that the legal system was improving in its treatment of victims. Much of the media coverage was also sympathetic to the victim. However, while both the victim and perpetrators were part of the town’s large Portuguese community, only the perpetrators and bystanders were labeled “Portuguese” in media coverage, much of which focused on the supposed sexism of this community. In response, local Portuguese media targeted the victim through traditional narratives of victim-blaming, reinforcing media reporting that cast the assault as a problem of a specific minority community rather than a wider issue of gender relations (Benedict, 1992, Cuklanz, 1996).

Feminist protests have drawn media attention to the failings of the criminal justice system internationally. In 1998 in Canada, for instance, police action on rape was subject to significant media scrutiny following a successful civil case brought against the Toronto police by “Jane Doe,” the fifth victim of a serial rapist. Doe argued that her rape could have been
averted if police had warned women of the existence of the rapist. Doe was named “Woman of the Year” by Canadian women’s magazine Châtelaine in 1999 and the publicity surrounding the case is credited with strengthening public demand for reform of criminal justice practices around sexual violence in Canada (Sheehy, 2012).

In 2011, Toronto’s criminal justice system again became the focus of media attention when a group of activists organized a “slutwalk” in response to comments from a police officer at a university safety forum that “women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized” and a prominently reported case in which a judge gave a man a reduced sentence on the grounds that he thought the victim “consented” because she was wearing revealing clothing and “clearly wanted to party.” The “slutwalk” received extensive coverage internationally and generated a number of similar marches in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia, with cross-organization fueled by online feminist activism and social media networks (for example, Facebook’s SlutWalk <https://www.facebook.com/SlutWalk/> page). The coverage was largely sympathetic, although some outlets reproduced debates and criticisms from within feminist movements, including that the march failed to engage with the racial dynamics of the term slut and the ways in which African American women especially are labeled as permanently sexually available and “unrapable” (Mendes, 2015).

International coverage was also generated in 2012, after large-scale protests occurred in India in response to the 2012 “Delhi Gang Rape” of a student and the legal system’s handling of it. Activists drew media attention to widespread problems of sexual violence in India, the presence of victim-blaming by criminal justice officials and media, and the inadequacy of official responses. One of the most successful activist interventions was the comedic video “It’s Your Fault” by “All India Bakchod”, which satirized examples of victim-blaming in India media and the criminal justice system. The video received extensive international media coverage and has been viewed over 5 million times. Western media responses were criticized, however, for frequently falling back on narratives of “otherness,” reporting these issues as somehow particular to India rather than emphasizing the commonality between India and their own societies (Roychowdhury, 2013). These debates were centered particularly on a BBC-produced documentary, India’s Daughter (Udwin, 2015), which was widely praised in India and the United Kingdom, but accused by some feminists of reproducing stereotypes about India’s cultural backwardness and engaging in a “white savior” mentality (Krishnan, 2015).

**Survivor Voices**

One of the most significant impacts of the feminist anti-rape movement has been to challenge the stigma and shame that attaches to victims and survivors of rape and child sexual assault, and to emphasize the importance of survivor voices. Survivor narratives of rape and child sexual violence began to appear in the 1960s in feminist zines and small-circulation publications shared among participants in the women’s liberation movement, and survivor voices featured prominently in media coverage of the 1971 New York Radical Feminist Conference and Speak-Out.
In the late 1970s a number of feminist activists began to speak out publicly about their experiences of child sexual assault. Louise Armstrong (1978) received widespread media attention in the United States after publishing a first-person account of incest, and a number of prominent activists spoke about their experiences in the 1980s, such as Elly Danica (1988) in Canada, receiving significant media attention. In February 1990, the Des Moines Register, the major daily paper of Des Moines, Iowa, published a weeklong feature, “It Couldn’t Happen to Me: One Woman’s Story,” an in-depth account of Nancy Ziegenmeyer’s experience of rape and its aftermath, including the failings of the criminal justice and medical systems, recounted to journalist Jane Schorer. The story received national press attention and Schorer was awarded a Pulitzer Prize (Benedict, 1992).

While individual survivors who choose to speak publicly are generally praised for their courage there have been a number of concerns raised about the ways in which these stories are framed by the media. It is far easier for survivors to speak out and be heard sympathetically about examples of “real” rape, particularly if these cases also relate to racial stereotypes (Benedict, 1992). In addition, critics have drawn attention to the sensationalism that often surrounds such coverage and the ways in which survivors of violence are represented purely as victimized, traumatized, “damaged,” and forever defined by their experience, rather than as active agents capable of recovery and change (Alcoff & Gray, 1993).

It remains rare for rape survivors to speak publicly about their experience, with most preferring to remain anonymous, a testament to the enduring effects of victim-blaming and rape stigma. However, changing social attitudes and the growth of social media have created more opportunities for victims to speak and to be heard. Twitter and Tumblr have seen hashtag campaigns such as #yesallwomen, #everydaysexism, #tellyourstory and #ibelieveyou encouraging survivors to speak out about violence, with these trending hashtags frequently receiving mainstream media coverage.

These historical changes are perhaps exemplified by the phenomenon of survivors speaking publicly about historic cases of rape and sexual abuse, including against powerful men. In 2014, for instance, Máiría Cahill, a former prominent Sinn Féin activist, spoke in a BBC documentary, “A Woman Alone with the IRA,” of being sexually assaulted in the late 1990s by an IRA member and of an internal IRA process in which she was forced to confront her assaulter in a case that the organization ultimately judged “inconclusive” (Thornton, 2014). The BBC documentary received several awards, led to a review of public prosecution of the case, and generated a high level of media controversy for Sinn Féin and its leader, Gerry Adams, who Cahill claimed had been involved in the internal inquiry.

Survivors may also be criticized themselves for telling their stories in ways that seem to reinforce rape myths or lead to victim-blaming. Chrissie Hynde (2015), lead singer of the Pretenders, included a description of being sexually assaulted at the age of 21 in her autobiography. She wrote that she took “full responsibility” for putting herself in a dangerous situation, describing the assault as “all my doing.” This passage, and later comments by Hynde that women could provoke sexual violence through irresponsible or provocative dress and behavior, led to extensive criticism in media and on social media, which Hynde described as a “lynch mob” in an interview. Hynde protested that she was just “telling her story”; her case shows the limits to publicly acceptable narratives around sexual violence for survivors and others (NPR, 2015).
Campus Activism and “Sexual Correctness”

Activism around sexual violence has at times been highly controversial, particularly in relation to campus activism and attempts to change cultural norms around sex and consent. The most pronounced of these controversies occurred in the early 1990s, a period that is considered to be marked by media and popular backlash against feminist social change in general (Faludi, 1992). In 1990, an article titled “It Sounds like I Raped You!’ How Date Rape ‘Education’ Fosters Confusion, Undermines Personal Responsibility and Trivializes Sexual Violence” appeared first in Reason magazine and then in Playboy (Gutmann, 1990). As the title suggests, the article argues that feminists had adopted an overly expansive view of rape to include situations that might be reasonably interpreted as consensual by the men involved, and that this encouraged women to disavow their personal responsibility for sexual situations, instead seeing themselves as victims, while trivializing “real” cases of sexual violence, defined by the author primarily as violent stranger rape.

The article was followed by the emergence of a number of commentators who portrayed themselves as feminists campaigning against what they saw as feminist orthodoxy. In the United States, the most well-known of these “backlash feminists” are Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and Christina Hoff Sommers, all of whom were given space in a number of prominent media outlets (Atmore, 1999). In a series of newspaper columns in the New York Times and elsewhere, Paglia (1992) declared herself opposed to rape but asserted that men are “biologically programmed” to be sexually aggressive. Paglia portrayed feminist rape prevention measures as leaving young women ill-prepared to face the reality of war between the sexes. Katie Roiphe (1993), a graduate student at Princeton, wrote several articles for the New York Times, as well as a book in which she denounced “date rape hysteria” on college campuses. She accused “rape crisis feminists” of inflating rape statistics, promoting a puritanical model of female sexuality, and encouraging young women to experience “bad sex” as traumatic and violent. Christina Hoff Sommers (1994) published a book based on her writing for Newsday accusing alleged victims of date rape on campus of diverting resources and attention from the victims of the “real rapes” that occur in lower-class and particularly inner-city communities.

Similar debates were raised elsewhere, including in Australia, where René Denfeld’s (1995) book The New Victorians made similar arguments to Roiphe around the date rape hysteria on university campuses and the puritanical model of sexuality that she believed feminists were promoting. Helen Garner’s (1995) book The First Stone, a nonfiction investigation of allegations of sexual harassment at a prestigious university college, argued that young feminists had embraced a victim identity and were labeling experiences that she and her peers would have simply considered to be unappealing behavior or bad sex as acts of violence and assault. Garner suggested that women were better off simply sticking up for themselves and ignoring male advances rather than buying into what she described as a cult of victimhood.

The primary target of all of these authors was growing feminist efforts to combat and prevent date rape on university campuses. Gutmann (1990) claimed that rape education materials distributed by Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania defined date rape as including behaviors such as “verbal harassment and inappropriate innuendo.” Despite attempts by the university to correct what was in fact a this claim was repeated by a number of media outlets. In 1992,
media outlets discovered a newly designed “Sexual Offence Policy” at Antioch College in Ohio. The policy required students to gain “affirmative consent” prior to every stage of sexual activity from kissing and touching onwards (Sanday, 1996). Despite research indicating students generally supported the policy, the widespread media coverage portrayed it as absurd “sexual correctness,” and a puritanical and totalitarian attempt to regulate sexual behavior (Bevacqua, 2000).

The 2010s have seen a renewed wave of campus activism around sexual violence in the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, and elsewhere. The U.S. campaign is based around students making use of the civil rights “Title IX” provision against sex and gender discrimination to challenge institutional inactivity in preventing and responding to sexual violence. Students at a number of universities publicly filed complaints to the federal government under the legislation, and the string of complaints, along with federal government investigations, drew extensive media interest, culminating in the production and screening of a documentary film, The Hunting Ground in 2015. The Title IX measures were accompanied by a series of high-profile protests at university campuses, including Emma Sulkowicz’s final-year art project, the “Mattress Project,” in which she carried her mattress with her around campus to protest Columbia University’s handling of a sexual assault committed against her (Carrigan Wooten & Mitchell, 2016; Dick, 2015). At the same time, many universities have adopted affirmative consent policies similar in content to the much-maligned Antioch policy of 1992, and have initiated classes and training in sexual consent.

This new wave of activism has generated significant media sympathy but also controversy and criticism, where the policies and training measures are accused of promoting victimhood, being impractical and unrealistic, demonizing men, and violating legal due process, with faculty and students at some universities using media to voice their concerns. In October 2014, for example, a group of 28 law professors at Harvard University published an open letter in the Boston Globe in protest of new disciplinary measures around sexual harassment and assault (Bartholet et al., 2015). The professors accused the measures, introduced in response to Title IX requirements, of failing to provide due process for the accused, unreasonably expanding proscribed behaviors, and threatening academic freedom. In 2015, a student at Warwick University in the United Kingdom wrote an article in the student newspaper objecting to being mandated to attend consent lessons. Posing in a picture holding a “this is not what a rapist looks like” sign, the student described the invitation as hurtful, arguing that he and other students at the university already understood the differences between consensual and non-consensual behavior (Lawlor, 2015). What is clear, however, is that support for these programs has increased markedly from the almost universal condemnation of the Antioch policy in the mid-1990s.

**Review of the Literature**

Analysis of media depictions of sex crimes arose out of the second-wave feminist movement and its analysis of rape and other forms of sexual violence as a social problem. The foundational texts were therefore primarily produced between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s (e.g., Benedict, 1992; Cuklanz, 1996; Estrich, 1987; Sanday, 1996). Since the early 21st century, scholarship has begun to engage more closely with the impacts of feminism and the social changes that have followed second-wave feminism. These analyses both build on the
earlier texts and critique some of their “blind spots,” such as assumptions that victims are solely women and perpetrators solely men (e.g., Cohen, 2014). In general, these texts have moved beyond analyzing the taboos and silences that surround rape to look at its strong presence in popular culture, and the cultural effects of feminist activism and social change (Gavey, 2005; Horeck, 2004).

The primary debates in relation to media and child sexual abuse center on questions of moral panic and debates about the ways in which the phenomenon is or is not misrepresented and the causes of that misrepresentation. While some authors argue that feminists and survivor-activists have contributed to a “witch-hunt” atmosphere, others argue that this agenda has been appropriated and depoliticized by media sources that have displaced the critique of power within the family onto the figure of the stranger pedophile (e.g., Furedi, 2013; Jenkins, 1998; Jewkes & Wykes, 2012).

Finally, the changing nature of sexual violence due to the rise of online technologies is an emerging area of scholarship. Debates center on whether Internet culture is particularly misogynist or reflects, and makes more visible, the high levels of sexual abuse and violence confronted by women and girls more broadly (for an overview see Mantilla, 2015). A further area of debate is whether concerns around consensual online sexual activities between young people and adolescents constitute an over-reaction or moral panic, or whether these concerns are justified due to evidence of young women particularly being pressured and coerced into, for instance, sending explicit images (See, for a range of positions, Albury, Funnell, & Noonan, 2010; Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012).

References


Drache, D., Fletcher, F., & Voss, C. (2016). What the Canadian public is being told about the more than 1200 missing & murdered indigenous women and First Nations issues: A content and context analysis of major mainstream Canadian media, 2014-2015. SSRN.


**Related Articles**

-Pornification and the Mainstreaming of Sex
- Feminist Criminology and the Visual
- Organized Child Sexual Abuse in the Media
- Cultural Representations of Nineteenth-Century Prostitution
- Clergy Sexual Abuse and the Media
- Image-Based Sexual Abuse
- Selling Sex in a Global Context
- Global Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of Children
- Human Trafficking: Women, Children, and Victim-Offender Overlap