

COVERING SEXUAL ASSAULT: AN EVOLVING NARRATIVE

a guide for writing sexual assault news stories at the campus level

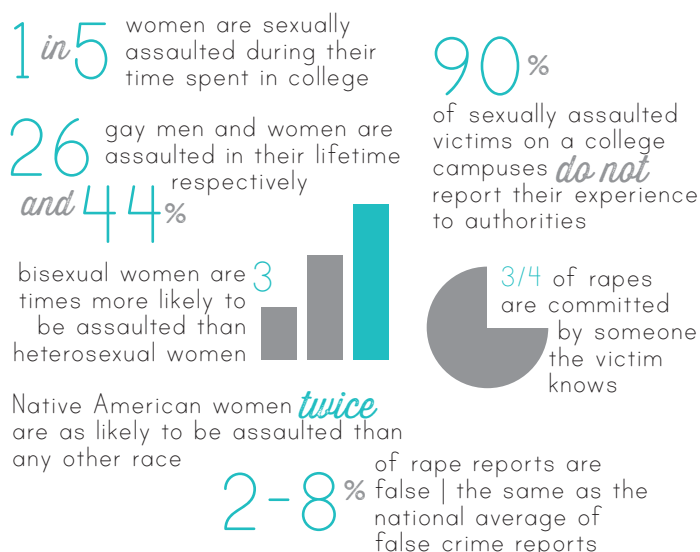
More than one in five women will be raped or sexually assaulted during the time they are in college. Further, nearly 6.1 percent of men in college will be victims of attempted or completed sexual assault, and those who identify as LGBTQ experience a higher percentage of assault than those who identify as heterosexual (The White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). Media are helping to raise awareness to the issue, evidenced in hyperlocal media coverage on the issue from college campuses across the nation. Campus newspapers engage in a delicate balancing act to gain access to sensitive information that could either help to hold their respective universities accountable for the ways they respond to sexual assault claims or could violate the privacy of survivors who might be identified through the release of details. This best practices guide was created through an undergraduate honors thesis that looked at sexual assault survivor's understanding and engagement with campus media coverage of sexual assault. The practices, suggestions and quotes were taken from professional advocacy organizations and qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with survivors and student journalists on UNC-Chapel Hill's campus. The letters associated with the data and quotes indicate attribution to survivors and journalists at UNC-CH who participated in the interviews.

"The reason we are reporting to the media is not in the hopes that our case will be better, but that the next person's case will be better."

...Survivor (Participant C)

By: Hannah Petersen | UNC-Chapel Hill School of Media and Journalism | April, 2017

1. SEXUAL ASSAULT BY THE NUMBERS



It's important to note that these statistics are based on an incredibly low number of reports, often given by white straight identifying women. Reporting rates for individuals of color as well as with individuals that identify as LGBTQ+ are incredibly low and therefore not represented in stats.

It's necessary to recognize these numbers do not reflect everyone and are based in a relatively small sample size considering the amount of individuals who do not report. The numbers are important for the context of the story, but do not rely on them. Rather, listen to the individual you are reporting on and frame their story within the larger one that these numbers suggest.

As a journalist, it's your role to ask what is missing from the numbers

(RAINN; National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2015; The White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014; Human Rights Campaign).

2. KNOW THE MYTHS

RAPE MYTH (definition) : belief that limits an individual's understanding of what constitutes sexual assault

TOP 5 RAPE MYTHS

1. The victim asked for it
2. The victim should have tried harder to fight the attacker off
3. The victim's previous sexual history proves he/she wasn't innocent before the assault and shouldn't be trusted
4. The victim is using the term "rape" to conceal regret
5. The alleged assailant is a "good guy"

(Burt, 1980)

"People blame themselves so that's a big part of recovery is realizing that, no that wasn't my fault".

... Survivor (Participant T)

3. UNDERSTAND THE USE OF LANGUAGE

Word choice when it comes to interviewing a survivor and writing a story can influence the way the public understands the truth as well as impact the survivor's perception of their social acceptance. It's important to understand the words as a survivor does and recognize that there is meaning behind each.

Journalists should default to the survivor when questioning whether to use the term survivor or victim, as well as when deciding between perpetrator and attacker. Journalists should also avoid using normalizing language when writing about sexual assault (Global Protection Cluster, 2013).

"The term sexual assault undergoes this transformation once you've experienced it and it means something so incredibly much. All of these words take on different meanings"

... Survivor (Participant D)

words to avoid:

AFFAIR: implies consent on both parties

ALLEGED: places doubt on the survivor's story

ACCUSER: puts a negative connotation on the survivor

ENGAGING IN: assumes it was consensual

FONDLED: too vague, doesn't indicate force, instead say 'forcibly touched'

GROPE: too vague, doesn't indicate force, instead say 'forcibly touched'

KISSING: appears non aggressive, doesn't imply force

RECEIVED/GAVE: places the responsibility on the survivor

SEX: implies consent, rape is not sex

UNHARMED: dismisses internal, mental trauma

WAS RAPED: removes the responsibility of the rapist

words to be cautious with:

ASSAULT: isn't very specific, the survivor may prefer another term

ATTACK: the survivor may not feel attacked

FALSE: false and unfounded are different, be sure to use correct one

RAPE: by definition is limited, some survivors may not identify with term

RAPIST: perpetrator must be convicted, default to survivor's preference

SURVIVOR: an individual may identify as a victim, it's his/her decision

VICTIM: an individual may not feel victimized, it's his/her decision

(MINNESOTA COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT, 2013; GARCIA-ROJAS, 2012; WALSH, N.D.; C; D; S; T)

The use of language is a conscious decision, especially when it relates to one's identity. The terms used in discussing sexual assault are full of connotations that either place blame on one party or create an expectation of another. Each word can have many meanings depending on how an individual interprets his/her experience.

Journalists must realize that survivors may understand these terms differently than the general public because it relates to an actual experience in their life. It's also important to realize that survivors may not identify with terms you want to use. In these moments, don't force your language on the survivor's story, defer to the survivor's preference.

"I never really identified with the words. I see it and I understand it from other people's perspective and from what I've been studying, but for myself, not so much."
- Survivor (Participant S)

"I remember the point in which I started identifying as a survivor and not a victim. Every time I say those words, it is a conscious decision." - Survivor (Participant D)

4. APPROACHING THE INTERVIEW

A. BE TRANSPARENT FROM THE BEGINNING

When approaching a survivor as a source for a news article, it's important that they know your intentions not only for the interview, but also for the finished piece. Give yourself time to explain your intentions to the survivor. If there is a camera or recording involved, you should let the survivor know in advance. If there are legal obligations surrounding anonymity, responsible employee regulations, etc. you should state those in the beginning.

"Give me the opportunity to share my story with you that will put pressure on the university while still making us feel safe."

... Survivor (Participant C)

B. BE EMOTIONALLY PRESENT

When interviewing a survivor, it is important for them to know that you are taking their emotions seriously and that you are respecting the pain they are feeling. You should be relateable and listen to understand, not to simply fill in a quote. If they know that you are listening intentionally, you may get better information.

Be cautious of your emotions as well. While it is important for you to truly listen and to feel, your reaction to your emotions could trigger a survivor and make them feel guilty for upsetting you.

5. CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

- Note that there is an inherent power hierarchy already (S). As a journalist, you have the power over your sources story. This can make a survivor feel threatened and unsafe so it's best to take steps to place both parties on an equal playing field.
 1. Allow the survivor to pick the time and place of interview. This ensures they feel safe.
 2. Grant anonymity. You are more likely to get a full and impactful story. Be sure to reference only the pseudonym in your notes and CQ's because you never know who is acquainted with who.
 3. Upon your editors approval, offer to send quotes or a draft of the story to the survivor. You are more likely to get a moving story, if the survivor isn't worrying about how the quote could be spun against them. The fear of losing control of their own story is powerful. Let them maintain some control. Sources will trust you more after you offer this and could let you use them for future work (A).
 4. Have a broad understanding of "off the record" and offer it to the survivor. Make sure you are transparent about the definition at the beginning, and you honor your definition.
- Ask open questions and let them control the conversation. Once you have asked your questions, be sure to ask them if they have anything they would like to add (Garcia-Rojas, 2012). They may have ideas for a story that you hadn't thought about.
- Under no circumstances should you make suggestions on what they should do or could have done differently in their experience (C). Do not suggest that media coverage will help their situation (Garcia-Rojas, 2012).
- Assume truth in a survivor's story. Do not pick their answer apart and do not correct them as they tell it. Trauma can make someone sound wishy washy (Q) when they answer a question, but that doesn't mean the response isn't true. Give a survivor plenty of time to talk and any confusion will be resolved.
 1. If you have to ask a question, use open statements that ask for clarification, rather than reasons why (S).
 2. If a survivor is hesitant to answer your question, move on to the next or pause the interview (T).
- Allow yourself to feel what they are expressing to you. Attempting to understand their viewpoint and experience will give your story more inherent truth as well as encourage them to give you more information. No one likes talking to someone who appears disinterested, especially when it's a sensitive and vulnerable topic. You didn't live through the experience, so unless you allow yourself to feel their emotions, your story is incomplete (C; D; Durham, 1998)
- Close the interview by explaining the timeline for when you will send them quotes, if applicable, and when the story will be published. Be sure to give them your contact information and tell them that they can reach out if they change their mind or have questions. Honor what you tell them.

C. PREPARE YOUR QUESTIONS AHEAD OF TIME

Know what you are going to say so that you can establish a sense of trust and comfort. Plan your questions so that they begin broad and eventually ease into a difficult topic. When making a plan, be sure to take into account cultural differences (Global Protection Cluster, 2013). Having a plan will ensure to yourself and communicate to the survivor that you have thought through the emotional consequences of the interview.

Stick to the plan for questions that you have developed. Don't ask probing follow up questions that might make a survivor uncomfortable. If the information is offered willingly, listen, but be sure to not press beyond what a survivor tells you upfront.

It goes without saying to not ask a survivor about their assault experience, but also be careful to not touch on it even tangentially. Take caution when asking about their emotions, their thought processes or their steps they took because all of those questions can make an individual have to walk back through their assault experience. It's better to ask broader questions or ask about their opinion on a topic, even though it's traditional journalism practice to ask for details related to the hook of the story.

"Don't push your agenda to make a survivor respond." -Survivor (Participant T)

"Knowing that I would be allowed to review it would compel me to give everything I can muster to make sure the story is truthful, complete and as journalistically valuable as it could be"

...Survivor (Participant D)

STRONG (definition) : OBJECTIVITY

rather than simply aggregating parts of the story, obtain objectivity by acting as an outsider that becomes engaged in the consequences of the story from the point of view of those most affected.

As a campus journalist, you are already a part of the community you are writing about. Consequently, being completely objective is not possible (Durham, 1998). Rather than striving for objectivity, it's your responsibility to employ agency when determining fact from opinion. Pinning opposing viewpoints against each other and making them seem equally valid does a disservice to the community. Rather than educating the public, when a journalist includes statements that may not be true, the attempt at objectivity leaves readers less educated. This can be avoided if journalists employ their morals rather than attempting to be morally neutral for the sake of objectivity (Cohen-Almagor, 2008).

To achieve strong objectivity a journalist must report as an outside party, while acknowledging his/her own presence within the story. Further, the journalist should write as if he/she was invested in the consequences of the story. This will ensure true facts are the focus of the story rather than opposing viewpoints.

6. WRITING THE NEWS STORY

If journalists are able to combat bias through strong objectivity rather than emotional distancing practices, they are able to find actual truth.

According to survivors, by refusing to emotionally connect to the story, journalists are being biased against them. "You have to let yourself feel it or else it's really not accurate," said Survivor (Participant D).

Campus journalists fill a unique role where they are already a part of the story by being students at the university. Because of this unique role, survivors expect journalists to write in a way that shows they care about the outcome. Applying strong objectivity will aid in this, but journalists should also write continued and hard pressing stories, rather than one sensationalist article.

GOALS OF COVERAGE

1. Educating the public about what sexual assault is:
 - *Explaining the statistics and the national context to local sexual assault cases. Dispelling myths while showing the public more cases of sexual assault, not just the sensationalized public cases.
2. Showing those who are not survivors the effects of trauma and the emotional aftermath an assault can create:
 - *Survivors cite the emotional aftermath as often more difficult than the actual assault (D). By reporting on the effects of trauma, the public can become more educated on how to be an effective ally to survivors, while having the tools to dispel rape culture.
3. Educating survivors and others about resources available:
 - *Often individuals don't know about resources until they are assaulted and forced to use them. By writing about the resources available, media can have a conversation about sexual assault without having to feature someone who was raped (Q; X).

... "Media create this image, that people believe, in which rape is something where someone you don't know attacks you out of nowhere, so you immediately go get help. That's not the case because most of the cases are people who you know, which already adds in this huge factor. You have to ask yourself, 'Do I do anything about it?'"

Survivor (Participant Q)...

"The aftermath is in a lot of ways a lot more important than the actual event. That was in some ways, worse than what happened, which is weird, but true none the less. Being thorough in reporting that part of the story would be important to me, because that was the hardest part"

... Survivor (Participant D)

DETAILS OF COVERAGE

photos

THEY SHOULD NOT BE IDENTIFYING AND IF THEY ARE YOU SHOULD OBTAIN WRITTEN CONSENT (GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER, 2013).

THEY SHOULD ADD TO THE STORY, NOT DETRACT FROM THE CONTENT (D; X).

THE INTERVIEWEE SHOULD KNOW BEFORE THE INTERVIEW IS CONDUCTED THAT YOU ARE CONSIDERING TAKING PHOTOS. ASK FOR CONSENT BEFORE TAKING PHOTOS (T).

sources

SURVIVORS ARE WILLING TO TALK AND WOULD APPRECIATE A CHANCE TO SHARE THEIR VOICES (C).

THOSE RELATED TO THE TOPIC SUCH AS ADVOCACY GROUPS, LAWYERS, COUNSELORS, AND CAMPUS ORGANIZERS. YOU SHOULD BE TRANSPARENT WITH YOUR INTENTIONS BEFORE ASKING THEM FOR A QUOTE (GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER, 2013).

CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS THAT DEAL WITH THE TOPIC OF SEXUAL ASSAULT SEE THE HUMAN SIDE TO THE STORIES.

COURT DOCUMENTS ARE HELPFUL, BUT BE MINDFUL THAT THE PUBLIC MAY NOT NEED ALL THE INFORMATION THAT A JURY RECEIVED TO MAKE A DECISION (X).

placement

BE CONSCIOUS OF WHERE YOU PLACE THE STORY WITHIN THE NEWSPAPER AFTER YOU HAVE FINISHED IT. IF IT'S NOT ON THE FRONT PAGE OR IN AN EASILY VISIBLE SPOT, THOSE WHO AREN'T CONNECTED TO THE ISSUE CAN ASSUME THE ISSUE DOESN'T EXIST (D).

AS A JOURNALIST CONSIDERS PLACEMENT, THEY SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER THE CONTINUANCE OF COVERAGE. A PAPER SHOULD NOT WRITE ONE SINGLE SENSATIONALIST STORY AND THEN NOT PROVIDE THE READER WITH FOLLOW UP (C). INSTEAD FOLLOW CASES, INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES, BROADER TRENDS WITH ARTICLES THAT EITHER CONTINUE THE STORY OR CONTRIBUTE TO IT. WITHOUT FOLLOW UP, PEOPLE LOSE THE ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE THE ISSUE EXISTS.

review

DISCUSS WITH THE EDITOR THE POSSIBILITY OF SENDING THE INTERVIEWED SURVIVOR THEIR QUOTES OR A DRAFT OF THE ARTICLE FOR REVIEW. THIS WILL MAKE THEM MORE COMFORTABLE AND WILLING TO TALK (C;D).

REACH OUT TO SURVIVOR GROUPS OR ORGANIZATIONS ON CAMPUS TO GET FEEDBACK AFTER AN ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED. RECEIVING FEEDBACK FROM THOSE MOST AFFECTED GIVES THE SURVIVORS A VOICE WHILE HELPING THE PAPER COVER THE TOPIC BETTER IN THE FUTURE. THERE ARE MANY SURVIVORS WHO WOULD BE WILLING TO HELP (C).

BE SURE TO MONITOR AND POSSIBLY DEACTIVATE THE ONLINE COMMENTS SECTION BECAUSE IT HAS THE POSSIBILITY TO HARM THE SURVIVOR (GARCIA-ROJAS, 2012)

8. PRACTICE SELF CARE

Vicarious trauma is real and can affect a journalist who is interviewing a survivor about their traumatic event. Survivors suggest that journalists become emotionally involved in their stories so they can write an accurate reflection of their experience. This serves as a benefit to society because it allows others to see real truth. However, it can subject the journalist to emotional trauma other news stories would not.

While everyone handles trauma and vicarious trauma differently, there are steps that one can take to recognize and accept what they are feeling.

1. Recognize what types of stories or emotions trigger you. Acknowledge that you might not feel upset until after the interview is over.
2. Talk with your editor if you are having difficulty finishing a story or are worried about interviewing a survivor. Let your editor know if you are past your limit with sexual assault stories (N).
3. Be honest with yourself and with the survivor. If something upsets you, acknowledge it and do what is best for you in the moment. Be cautious to not trigger the survivor, but it isn't productive for you to remain upset during an interview.

9. RESOURCES TO USE

UNC-CH SPECIFIC RESOURCES

- Policy on Prohibited Discrimination, Harassment and Related Misconduct: know the ins and out of the policy as well as what qualifies as sexual violence and harassment
- FERPA: journalists have rights to information with FERPA that applies to sexual assault.
- Clery Act: has information and statistics about campus safety and it must be released to the public. Can serve as a context builder for sexual assault stories.
- The Carolina Women's Center: this resource has information that can not only build context, but provide insight on policy as well as campus climate when it comes to sexual assault.
- Orange County Rape Crisis Center
- Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office: they are the ones that receive sexual assault cases and could talk about the process to the public.
- Speak out events: while they should be approached carefully, those who are speaking out may be willing to talk to another outlet.
- Survivors: reach out to survivor organizations to ask for comments or feedback.

quick check of what to do and not to do:

Do: PRIORITIZE SAFETY, PRIVACY AND DIGNITY

Don't: WRITE FOR THE PURPOSE OF SELLING COPIES OR PUSHING A CAUSE (GLOBAL PROTECTION CLUSTER, 2013)

Do: FOCUS ON WHAT THE SURVIVOR WANTS TO SAY IN THEIR STORY

Don't: PUSH YOUR AGENDA OR DEADLINE

Do: RECOGNIZE THE RESPONSIBILITY THAT COMES WITH KNOWING THESE INTIMATE STORIES ABOUT ANOTHER

Don't: ASSUME THAT BECAUSE YOU KNOW THEM THAT THE REST OF THE WORLD SHOULD TOO (A; N)

Do: ACKNOWLEDGE THE INTERSECTIONALITY INVOLVED IN SEXUAL ASSAULT. GET A DIVERSE RANGE OF VOICES AND ASSAULT EXPERIENCES. RECOGNIZE THAT IT'S EASIER FOR SOME IDENTITIES TO SPEAK ABOUT THIS ISSUE THAN FOR OTHERS.

Don't: GO BACK TO THE SAME SOURCE CONSTANTLY. THERE IS NO ONE SURVIVOR STORY, NOR ONE SURVIVOR VOICE. DON'T LIMIT COVERAGE TO INDIVIDUALS THAT HAVE THE PRIVILEGE TO BE COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT THE SUBJECT

Do: MAKE SURE THAT YOUR COVERAGE IS UNIQUE TO CAMPUS AND TAILORED TO FIT THE NEEDS OF THOSE AROUND IT. TAKE CARE WITH DETAILS AND FIND NUANCE. COMMUNITY JOURNALISM HAS THE POWER AND FREEDOM TO MAKE CHANGE, USE IT.

Don't: WRITE THE STORY IN A WAY THAT ANY NATIONAL OUTLET COULD, SEEMINGLY WITHOUT CARE FOR THE CONSEQUENCES.

.....

NATIONAL RESOURCES

- Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network
- The White House council on Women and Girls
- Human Rights Campaign
- Know Your IX
- Student Press Law Center

"Unless it happens to you, you really can't grasp and get a feel of what it feels like. You can care and you can be an ally, but if you want to report and get our voices out there, you need to be open to seeing what we feel."

...Survivor (Participant C)

REFERENCES

- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal Of Personality And Social Psychology*, 38(2), 217-230. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.38.2.217
- Garcia-Rojas, Claudia (2012). Reporting On Rape and Sexual Violence: A Media Toolkit for Local and National Journalists to Better Media Coverage. Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women.
- Global Protection Cluster, (2013). Media Guidelines for Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in Humanitarian Contexts. Global Protection Cluster GBV Prevention and Response.
- Human Rights Campaign. "Sexual Assault and the LGBTQ Community." The Human Rights Campaign. <http://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-assault-and-the-lgbt-community>
- Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2013). Reporting on Sexual Violence: A Guide for Journalists.
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2015). Statistics about Sexual Violence. National Sexual Violence Resource Center: Info and Stats for Journalists.
- RAINN. Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics. Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>
- The White House Council on Women and Girls (2014). Rape and Sexual Assault: A Renewed Call to Action. The White House.
- Walsh, Anna. Writing About Gender-Based Violence & Title IX: A Guide for Journalists & Editors. Know Your IX: empowering students to stop sexual violence.