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# Reassessing balance: News coverage of Donald Trump's Access Hollywood scandal before and during #metoo

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## Abstract

Sexual abuse became an important part of news coverage in the months leading up to Donald Trump's presidency and continued to dominate news cycles with the emergence of the #metoo movement. Yet, it remains to be seen whether the increasing amount of stories about sexual abuse have actually advanced social justice. We conducted content and textual analyses of newspaper, cable television, and online coverage of the Access Hollywood scandal before and during the #metoo movement ( $N = 1890$ ) to understand how the journalistic objectivity norm of balance via issue dualism influenced reporting on sexual abuse. Television and right-leaning media had the highest levels of rape myth acceptance in their coverage for both time periods. The use of issue dualism advantaged Trump as Bill Clinton and other prominent accused men shifted focus away from Trump and largely overlooked the women coming forward against Trump. The objectivity norm of balance reduced and politicized this complex issue, as well as gave power to Trump's retaliation while minimizing the serious accusations that have been brought against him.

## Keywords

#metoo, Access Hollywood tape, Donald Trump, issue dualism, news coverage, objectivity, rape myth acceptance

## Background

On 7 October 2016, an Access Hollywood pre-interview tape of then reporter Billy Bush and Donald Trump was anonymously leaked wherein Trump described his actions toward women, including the statement, 'Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything' (Bullock, 2016: 19). Within 2 weeks of the leaked tape, some 20 women had come forward to accuse Trump of sexual abuse (Jamieson et al., 2016). The coverage of the Access Hollywood scandal was mainly negative against Trump, particularly in the first week after its release (Blumell, 2017; Blumell and Huemmer, 2017). Media attention to Trump's admitted and accused sexual abuse functioned as a platform for survivors to come forward, many for the first time. Nonetheless, Trump went on to successfully win the election and little has been heard from his accusers since.

After the Access Hollywood scandal, several high-profile cases of various forms of sexual abuse have dominated headlines, culminating in the #metoo (France, 2017) and

#timesup ([www.timesupnow.com](http://www.timesupnow.com)) movements. 'Me too' was created by Tarana Burke in 2006 to give voice to survivors of sexual violence ([www.metoomvmt.org](http://www.metoomvmt.org)). It became a popular hashtag after the Harvey Weinstein case (Farrow, 2017) broke in October 2017 (1 year after the Access Hollywood tape release). Since then, several powerful men have been implicated across many sectors in the entertainment, food, sports, news, and tech industries. In politics, nine US Congress members from both the Republican and Democratic parties have resigned so far in the wake of #metoo over allegations (Cranley, 2018) – a number which will most likely increase. Nevertheless, #metoo does not seem to have impacted Trump.

## Introduction

The torrent of news stories about workplace harassment and sexual violence toward women in the last year has forced many media outlets to confront the 'rape culture' that continues to permeate our social structures. Rape culture is a societal acceptance and justification of male sexual and physical violence, explicitly against women (Buchwald et al., 1993). Rape culture fosters strong beliefs in rape myths – both in how sexual abuse happens and who gets attacked (Weiss, 2009). It should be noted, sexual abuse includes all forms of sexual violence (rape and assault), harassment, and misconduct. Rape myths posit survivors as liars, while defending and pitying the accused for facing such allegations (Payne et al., 1999). As a result of rape culture, sexual abuse often goes unreported, and survivors are silenced with fear of what may happen to them if they speak out (Burnett et al., 2009). Rape culture can be further exacerbated when survivors accuse someone who is in the public eye, since scrutiny and media attention usually ensues.

The news industry largely espouses rape culture when reporting on sexual abuse (Jordan, 2012; Pennington and Birthisel, 2016). Even though rape is considered a serious crime, journalists often trivialize public sexual abuse cases (Moore, 2009), exaggerate false reporting (Jordan, 2012), and victim blame (O'Hara, 2012). These shortcomings are, in part, because of sexist attitudes by journalists and sexism in newsrooms (e.g. Fadnis, 2018). However, we purport further investigation is needed into the professional objectivity norms of journalists, which are used under the premise of achieving ethical, unbiased standards in journalism (Tuchman, 1972), but in actuality contribute to a hegemonic status quo (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) – this case, namely, the reification of rape culture. This study uniquely addresses rape culture present in news coverage by specifically looking at objectivity through the lens of balance, or the common routine of telling both sides of a story (Tuchman, 1972) known as issue dualism (Lee et al., 2008). We examine the case of Trump's admitted and accused sexual abuse before and during #metoo to understand how issue dualism was used and to what extent it contributes to rape culture in news coverage. Two time periods are used to investigate whether news coverage changed due to the uncovering of several high-profile sexual abuse cases or the #metoo movement.

For this study, we created a rape myth acceptance index consisting of five variables: negative adjectives and descriptions used in relation to those accusing Trump (e.g. she is a liar), threats by Trump to accusers, threats by others to accusers, negative consequences of coming forward, and whether or not sexual abuse was reported as a serious crime. The index was informed by Payne et al.'s (1999) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, which includes the following rape myths: (1) 'she asked for it', (2) 'it wasn't really rape', (3) 'he didn't mean to', (4) 'she wanted it', (5) 'she lied', (6) 'rape is a trivial event', and (7) 'rape is a deviant event' (p. 59). The analysis includes major cable news networks (CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC), national print newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA*

*Today*), and the most shared articles from online sources (according to online analytics tool Buzzsumo.com) to show the complexities and, at times, paradoxes of news coverage. By including different media, we add to research, which is primarily focused on print only. The medium can result in different routines and coverage (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014), and accordingly, we looked at how rape culture via objectivity manifests in three different media. The sample also includes a range of partisanship (left leaning, centralist, and right leaning) to understand how political leanings can also influence news coverage.

## **Objectivity in the news**

Objectivity as a ‘moral code’ in journalism (Schudson, 2001: 163) evolved in the United States over several decades through various economic, scientific, political, technological, cultural, and social advancements (for further details, see Boudana, 2011; Schudson, 1978, 2001). The introduction of the penny press in the mid-19th century, for instance, commercialized newspapers – changing them from primarily serving a political party (partisan) to being a voice for the public (Schiller, 1979). Commercialized newspapers were also bigger operations, which created a need for professional standards in journalism (Schiller, 1979) such as objectivity routines such as source use, fact checking, formatted writing or the inverted pyramid, and so forth (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). In part, these routines developed as a defense by news organizations to avoid public scrutiny and backlash (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Schudson (1978, 2001), notes that the term objectivity solidified in the early 20th century when public relations and World War I propaganda challenged journalists’ beliefs in public institutions and the notion of truth. Objectivity then became a mantra and method by which journalists claimed to detach themselves from their reporting (Schudson, 1978, 2001).

Objectivity in journalism has since been challenged in the United States. Political developments such as McCarthyism and the Vietnam War led to questioning detachment (Boudana, 2011). During the civil rights movements in the 1960s, some labeled objectivity as a veiled source of power and privilege of the press (Carey, 1982). Indeed, Allan (2010) explains that emphasizing objectivity has promoted the acceptance of universal truths in journalism, which have been predominately defined by men (mostly elite and white). Thus, ‘men’s orientations ... constitutes the standard by which truth and falsity are to be impartially measured’ (pp. 149–150). So, even when accepting journalists can never be fully detached or neutral, agreeing on universal criteria in order for journalists to be objective (Boudana, 2011) is problematic, given the hegemonic status quo cultivated in journalism (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Nevertheless, Boudana (2011) contends objectivity is a journalistic performance rather than an absolute – which journalists can better implement through self-awareness, diversity in the newsroom, and thoughtful use of language.

## ***Balance***

Tuchman (1972) identified four defensive objectivity routines of journalists: issue dualism, supporting evidence, direct quotes, and a standardized story structure (inverted pyramid). We focus on issue dualism, which is explained as a way for journalists to create balance in their reporting (Lee et al., 2008). Issue dualism can be useful, but it problematically stresses the opinions of a few (mostly politicians) who can then determine the reality of situations (Beckers et al., 2018; Entman, 2007; Tuchman, 1972). Issue dualism also tends to present news episodically (Iyengar, 1994), which neglects important context to stories (Applegate, 2007). This reductionist approach oversimplifies and polarizes issues by presenting them as only having two sides (Condit, 1994; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017). It also promotes the

routine of sources telling the sides of a story so that journalists can claim detachment (Tuchman, 1972). Sources mix opinions and facts when interviewed by journalists, which limits evidence-based claims in news coverage (Cushion and Lewis, 2017). Relying on ‘balanced’ opinions rather than evidence conflates issues, for example, the autism–vaccine controversy (Clarke et al., 2015), climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004), rising sea levels (Opt and Low, 2015), and so forth. News coverage of these cases have juxtaposed overwhelming consensus of scientific evidence against opinions or political positions. As a result, achieving news balance and reporting facts are sometimes in direct conflict – to which balance often wins (Hackett, 1984).

## **Rape culture in the news**

Although there is a growing body of research on how sexual abuse is covered in news, more is needed on how rape culture manifests within news coverage. Of course, the two are interrelated; however, focusing on rape culture within news coverage of sexual abuse can give insight into its continuous shortcomings vis-à-vis issue dualism. It is important to note that sexual abuse can happen in various combinations both between and within genders; however, we emphasize the most common dynamic of sexual abuse ( ‘Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics’, n.d.), where a man is a perpetrator and women the survivors, since it is the scenario of our study.

Rape culture is upheld in the news industry through both the attitudes of journalists and the rape myths perpetrated in news coverage of sexual abuse (Jordan, 2012). This area has limited research, but Fadnis (2018) reported rape culture in Indian newsrooms. For instance, there is an overemphasis on false reporting, which consequently reinforces the stereotype that women are natural deceivers (Jordan, 2012; Waterhouse-Watson, 2016). Journalists also fail to acknowledge the existence of rape culture, specifically, the power dynamics involved in rape culture, as found in the Steubenville High School rape case (Pennington and Birthisel, 2016). Furthermore, analysis of print coverage on sexual abuse found patterns of victim blaming and dismissing the crime (Moore, 2009; O’Hara, 2012). In other words, journalists use rape culture to judge the severity of sexual abuse and whether or not a victim is worthy of public support, such as Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald (2002) found examining popular magazines.

Worthington (2008) suggests news coverage of sexual abuse improves if a broader range of stories are reported on (acquaintance rape), rape myths are avoided, patriarchal power dynamics are acknowledged, and more survivor perspectives are included. Carll (2001) adds more follow-up coverage on the consequences of sexual abuse against women and the different kinds of abuse women experience is also necessary.

## **Research questions**

We analyzed rape myth acceptance within news coverage of the Access Hollywood scandal by creating a five-variable index. Importantly, we sought to understand whether or not the #metoo movement changed news coverage, thus decreasing the prevalence of rape culture in reporting. Accordingly, the first research question sought to understand whether the greater context of change surrounding sexual abuse impacted coverage of the Access Hollywood scandal:

**RQ1:** How does coverage differ before and during the #metoo movement in terms of rape myth acceptance?

To focus on how issue dualism manifests in a case of a high-profile man accused of sexual abuse, we also examined the sample according to medium and partisanship by asking the following:

**RQ2a:** How does coverage differ between TV, print, and online sources in terms of issue dualism?

**RQ2b:** How does coverage differ between the partisanship of media in terms of issue dualism?

## Methods

We utilized a mixed-methods approach to answer our research questions, which combines quantitative and qualitative approaches (e.g. Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Mixed methods are used as a way of balancing the weaknesses of each type of method because ‘collecting diverse types of data best provides a more complete understanding’ (Creswell, 2013: 19). Specifically, we used explanatory sequential mixed methods which first utilizes a quantitative method, followed by qualitative exploration (Creswell, 2013). For this study, we conducted a quantitative content analysis followed by a textual analysis.

## Content analysis

### *Sampling*

To maintain equivalency between three different media, we used relevance sampling, which Krippendorff (2012) explains is when researchers choose sources they determine have the highest impact in terms of circulation, prestige, and access to resources. Krippendorff (2012) notes that although oftentimes overlooked, most studies include some form of relevance sampling. In this case, we used circulations of national print newspapers (‘Cision’, 2016) to choose *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. We also used cable network ratings (Joyella, 2018) to choose Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN. Third, we used BuzzSumo (an online analytics tool that measures Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, and Google+) to pick the 200 most shared articles relating to our topic during the sampled period (shares ranged from 10.1K to 1.3 million).

The first time period spanned from 7 October 2016 (day the Access Hollywood tape was released) to 2 February 2017 (2 weeks after accuser Summer Zervos filed a defamation lawsuit against Trump). The second time period was 1 year later, 7 October 2017 to 2 February 2018. Sample articles and transcripts for the newspapers and TV sources were collected by searches in LexisNexis using combinations of keywords: Trump, Access Hollywood, sexual assault, and sexual (to include harassment and misconduct). Once collected, duplicate and irrelevant articles were eliminated leaving each source with the following for the first time period: CNN (520), *The New York Times* (114), *The Washington Post* (99), MSNBC (79), Fox News (55), and *USA Today* (44). The same search words were then used in BuzzSumo to collect the top 196 articles (four were duplicates from traditional media and so eliminated) for a total coded sample of  $n = 1107$ . In addition, online articles were coded by how the source self-identified politically as left-leaning (83), moderate (64), or right leaning (49). The same pattern was followed for the second time period with the following results: CNN (351), *The New York Times* (69), *The Washington Post* (53), MSNBC (84), Fox News (33), and *USA Today* (7). The same search of 200 top articles was made again, but reduced to 186 after duplicates and faulty hyperlinks were removed. Online articles

were once again coded as left leaning (68), moderate (76), or right leaning (42) for a total of  $n = 783$ . Combined, the total sample was  $N = 1890$ .

### *Code development*

An a priori design was used by first developing a codebook before coding began (Neuendorf, 2016; Riffe et al., 2014). To measure rape culture acceptance, five dichotomous variables were developed to form an index. The first variable relates to negative comments about the women who came forward (attacks on her character, negative points of her past, or negative points of her current actions). Examples include she is lying, she is ugly, she is seeking fame, she actually wanted it, or she has an unsavory profession. This variable was created based on rape myths, which position accusers as untrustworthy or with dubious intentions (Payne et al., 1999).

A second variable measured threats from Trump, which mainly consisted of promises to sue the women. Third, threats from others were measured, which included Melania Trump's promise that the women would be sued. For both categories, threat was defined by, 'a statement of an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on someone in retribution for something done or not done' (oxforddictionaries.com). Threats were included in the index because part of rape culture is acceptance of retaliation against survivors (Burnett et al., 2009; Weiss, 2009). It is expected for men to be aggressive and violent (Buchwald et al., 1993). Fourth, reported negative actions were coded such as a woman losing her job for coming forward as a way of measuring the consequences women face for coming forward.

Finally, a category was created to code for dismissing all forms of sexual abuse as not being a serious crime, for example, stating that the case was a distraction. This was included since a rape myth is that sexual abuse is not a serious crime (Payne et al., 1999), one that gets repeated in news coverage with high rape culture acceptance (Pennington and Birthisel, 2016). Other variables were also created including media identification, media type, mention of Bill Clinton, and mention of Trump accuser's name.

In order to ensure validity of rape culture acceptance, a factor analysis was run after the coding was complete. Results show a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin of .65 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $\chi^2(10) = 507.27, p < .001$ ). Factor loadings were grouped together according to .40 or higher levels (see Table 1). Since, other threats and negative action to survivor were not significant, they were eliminated. The three remaining variables were then combined to form an index.

### *Intercoder reliability*

Two coders sampled 100 articles or transcripts from all three media sources. ReCal2 (dfreelon.org) was used to calculate intercoder reliability. After the first round, the variables 'negative comments' ( $\pi = .90$ ), and 'Trump threats' ( $\pi = .81$ ), 'mention of Bill Clinton' ( $\pi = .94$ ), and 'mention of Trump accuser's name' ( $\pi = .83$ ) achieved acceptable levels. Two other variables and categories received higher than 80 percent agreement but low Pi levels, and, therefore, after additional discussion and training, the second round of coding also included potentially more varied coding units to make up for the high percentage agreement but low coefficient level (Neuendorf, 2016). Results for the second round of coding included acceptable levels for the 'other threats' ( $\pi = .80$ ) and 'negative actions' ( $\pi = .81$ ) variables. After further explication, a third round of coding resulted in acceptable levels for the 'dismiss' variable ( $\pi = .83$ ) and the other variables ( $\geq .80$ ).

## Textual analysis

A textual analysis of the same sample was conducted once the content analysis was complete. A textual analysis examines the characteristics contained within texts, and through a qualitative approach, focuses on the meaning of the texts (Frey et al., 1999). The two coders read each article or transcript at least twice. The first read was to code for the quantitative variables, and the second read was to highlight specific sections that related to the research questions posed. Kuckartz (2014) describes the first phase of qualitative analysis as open coding, which researchers are looking for the answers to specific questions. Kuckartz (2014) suggests that this phase includes a line-by-line reading by more than one coder (they should have background knowledge of the subject). Given the large size of the sample, selective coding (Van Waes et al., 2006) was also employed to identify the sections of the texts that directly relate to the research questions. After the complete sample was highlighted, both researchers examined the highlighted texts and discussed their initial interpretations together. They then individually organized the highlighted texts into categories relating to the research questions and identified subsequent themes for each category. They then compared their findings and finalized the categories and themes together. While the content analysis revealed how frequently rape myths and, by extension, rape culture were perpetuated in the coverage, the textual analysis provided a nuanced understanding of how and in what ways these problematic elements manifested. For example, while many news outlets referenced Bill Clinton in their coverage of Trump's scandal, the textual analysis revealed how the underlying tone and intention of this coverage differed between right-leaning media to moderate and left leaning media.

## Findings

We used an integrated approach to presenting our quantitative and qualitative results, which has been done in previous communication studies in order to simultaneously answer the research questions using both methods (e.g. English, 2016; Melki and Mallat, 2016).

### Some change, but not for Trump

RQ1 asked whether the coverage differed before and during the #metoo movement in terms of rape culture acceptance. To answer this quantitatively, an independent  $t$  test was first run between the two sampled time periods and the rape culture acceptance index, with significant results,  $t(1888) = 10.98, p < .001$ . The first time period was significantly higher ( $M = 0.53, SD = 0.38$ ) than the second ( $M = 0.34, SD = 0.35$ ). Two one-way ANOVAs were then run to compare the three media types during the first time period and the second. For the first time period, results were significant,  $F(2, 1107) = 46.08, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ . Post hoc Bonferroni test comparisons revealed that TV ( $M = 0.61, SD = 0.33$ ) had significantly higher levels than print ( $M = 0.42, SD = 0.47$ ) or online media ( $M = 0.38, SD = 0.35$ ). There was no significant difference between online and print. There was also significance for the second time period,  $F(2, 783) = 17.48, p = .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Interestingly, post hoc Bonferroni calculations showed that while TV ( $M = 0.33, SD = 0.34$ ) was still significantly higher than print ( $M = 0.22, SD = 0.28$ ), online ( $M = 0.44, SD = 0.37$ ) actually increased and was significantly higher than TV and print media.

Qualitative comparisons further supported the results, particularly when considering the changed positioning of Trump and his tail wagging tactics (which dominated news coverage). Tail wagging refers to the expression, 'tail wagging the dog', which means a powerful organization (in this case, the press) being unduly influenced by someone (see



merriam-webster.com). During the first time period, Trump engaged in several public strategies that fed into rape culture acceptance and were broadcasted on TV continuously. Trump's tactics were also reported in print, but often summarized. Examples include calling the women who came forward liars, threatening to sue them, insulting their appearance and character, and dismissing his recorded confessions of sexual assault. In an address at Gettysburg, Trump said, 'Total fabrication. The events never happened. Never. All these liars will be sued after the election is over' (quoted in Diamond and Scott, 23 October 2016).

In another example, in what Trump described as an apology video, he softened the seriousness of the situation by calling the tape 'locker room talk' (Brown, 2016). Consequently, almost all coverage included the term ( $M = 0.91$ ). Downplaying the incident as locker room talk builds on the myth that 'boys will be boys' and their mischief is both inevitable and innocuous (Weiss, 2009: 810). Prominent Trump surrogates were clear to emphasize that point, like Rudy Giuliani's comment to CNN's Jake Tapper, 'men at times talk like that' (quoted in State of the Union, 9 October 2016). Some of the coverage clarified this was not merely locker room talk, including professional athletes like pitcher Sean Doolittle who argued, 'As an athlete, I've been in locker rooms my entire adult life and uh, that's not locker room talk' (quoted in Howard, 10 October 2016). Nevertheless, the underlying sentiment permeated news coverage as illustrated by *USA Today* deputy editor David Mastio's statement, 'It's not shocking that frat boys would talk dirty about scoring with chicks ... But men should grow out of it before they are eligible to join AARP' (quoted in Mastio and Lawrence, 10 October 2016).

However, the inclusion of the term 'locker room talk' fell dramatically during the second time period ( $M = 0.16$ ) – but remained most salient in online articles, which partly accounts for its increase of rape culture acceptance (39% of total articles). Another noticeable change was how the term locker room talk was used. While the first period included the term mostly as a direct quote from Trump or his surrogates, it was mainly used for TV and print in the time period following the #metoo movement as a way to illustrate how the term was problematic. Specifically, Rachel Crook, a woman who came out against Donald Trump, stated, 'I shared my story last year because it was relevant'. Mr. Trump dismissed his words in the 'Access Hollywood' tape as locker room talk but having been the victim of such actions I knew better (quoted in CNN Newsroom, 11 December 2017). Crook and fellow accuser Jessica Leeds went on to discuss the #metoo movement: 'And it became apparent that in some areas, the accusations of sexual aggression were being taken seriously and people were being held accountable. Except for our president' (quoted in CNN Newsroom, 11 December 2017).

Overall, though the #metoo movement may have changed the context of the Access Hollywood scandal and exposed some high-profile abusers, the decreased level of rape myth acceptance did not mean that Trump was no longer tail wagging, but rather doing so less frequently and with a shifted focus. Most prominently, after *The New York Times* reported that Trump had privately said he thought the tape was fake (Martin et al., 2017), it made headline news. In particular, 44 percent of online news coverage focused on it. Trump even claimed at one point it was actually Hillary Clinton's voice (Borowitz, 2017). Illustrating that while there was a positive change in terms of a lower rape culture acceptance, Trump is still able to dictate coverage.

### **It's a political issue first**

One last quantitative calculation was run to understand possible coverage differences before and during the #metoo movement: two one-way ANOVAs between the rape culture

acceptance index and partisanship. The first time period resulted in significance,  $F(2, 1107) = 3.26, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ . A post hoc Bonferroni test indicated that right-leaning media ( $M = 0.61, SD = 0.37$ ) was significantly higher than left-leaning media ( $M = 0.48, SD = 0.41$ ), but not moderate ( $M = 0.52, SD = 0.38$ ). There was no significance between left-leaning and moderate media. The second time period also produced significant results,  $F(2, 783) = 24.14, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ . This time, however, right-leaning media ( $M = 0.58, SD = 0.32$ ) was significantly higher than moderate ( $M = 0.30, SD = 0.33$ ) and left-leaning ( $M = 0.36, SD = 0.37$ ) media, with once again no difference between moderate and left-leaning media.

Not surprisingly, the right-leaning media's use of rape culture acceptance as a justification for defending Trump was also demonstrated by the qualitative findings. During the first time period, right-leaning online articles sought to disparage the women who came forward against Trump. In fact, 17 online articles from right-leaning sources specifically attempted to vilify the women who spoke out against Trump. The comments often included sentiments such as, 'Isn't it ironic that only three weeks before the presidential election, two women come forward claiming Donald Trump sexually assaulted them, one of which was over 30 years ago?' (quoted in Binder, 13 October 2016). In terms of traditional right-leaning media, Fox News chose different strategies: Avoid the subject by having little coverage, distract the audience by discussing Bill Clinton (more below), and dismiss the severity of the tape. These strategies are summarized by the following statement made by Sean Hannity on 10 October 2016, 'I asked you, why would the words of Donald Trump mean more than the actions of Bill and the smearing by Bill and Hillary?' On occasions when Fox news was forced to confront Trump's actions, they frequently downplayed the severity by attempting to highlight Bill Clinton's actions as much more severe.

### **Tipping the scales to those in power**

The final research questions addressed the use of issue dualism. Since the sample was based on Trump's admitted and accused sexual abuse, he is not surprisingly featured in 100 percent of the coverage. As discussed above, Trump used that to his advantage by engaging in tail wagging techniques that served to change the focus of the coverage. One such Trump strategy was to point to the accused behavior of Bill Clinton (Brown, 2016).

The press followed suit by often including Bill Clinton, the husband of Trump's presidential opponent, as the 'other side' of the story. Logically however, the reductionist approach of issue dualism ought to include those coming forward to accuse Trump of sexual abuse. Consequently, to understand issue dualism in this case, both the mentions of Trump accusers and Bill Clinton were calculated to identify their prominence in comparison with Trump.

### *The medium matters*

RQ2a sought to understand to what extent Bill Clinton and Trump accusers were covered regarding media types. Chi-square statistics were run by year, with significant results (using standardized residuals with a level of at least + or - 2.0).

Table 2 shows the percentage breakdowns. In the first time period, coverage differed in relation to featuring Trump accusers,  $\chi^2(2) = 42.60, p < .001$  and Bill Clinton,  $\chi^2(2) = 99.16, p < .001$ . TV featured the accusers significantly less and Bill Clinton significantly more. Online, however, featured the accusers significantly more and Bill Clinton significantly less. In the second time period, coverage also differed, but only significantly for Bill Clinton,  $\chi^2(2) = 22.52, p < .001$ . Once again, TV featured Bill Clinton significantly more, and online

featured him significantly less. There was no significance for coverage of the accusers in the second time period, averaging 11.5 percent for all combined media.

While print coverage was less than TV, it did commonly feature Bill Clinton, mostly through Trump's direct quotes and reporting on Trump's predebate news conference, which featured three women accusing Bill Clinton of sexual abuse, and one rape survivor who wanted to expose Hillary Clinton for being a defense lawyer in her court case (Healy and Martin, 2016). For instance, *The Washington Post* cited Bill Clinton accuser Juanita Broaddrick as saying, 'Trump may have said some bad words, but Bill Clinton raped me and Hillary Clinton threatened me' (quoted in DelReal, 19 October 2016).

Interestingly, Bill Clinton did not have strong viral appeal in the online coverage for either time period, but Trump accusers and survivors generally did for the first time period. This was, in part, due to the attention that online coverage gave to social media reactions to the Access Hollywood scandal. The biggest being when Canadian author Kelly Oxford asked women to share their stories of sexual assault on Twitter, which received over 1 million replies (Domonoske, 2016). Oxford's tweet was a precursor to the #metoo hashtag that also received over 1 million tweets (Park, 2017) and became the label of the current movement to end all forms of abuse against women.

Besides the use of direct quotes on TV, that again feature Trump's tail wagging by discussing Bill Clinton, another reason why TV has higher percentages of featuring Bill Clinton is the use of panel debate on cable news. In these panel debates, Trump surrogates (who were especially featured on CNN and Fox News) took every opportunity to use Bill Clinton as a way to shift focus from Trump.

Another reason for more discussions of Bill Clinton on TV is that hosts and contributors invoked issue dualism in their preambles and commentaries, but with different motivations: Fox News to condemn Bill and Hillary Clinton, CNN as a way to report 'both sides of the story', and MSNBC to rebuke Trump for using Bill Clinton. For example, comparing how the networks responded to Trump's first mention of Bill Clinton in his apology video, while all three heavily focused on Bill Clinton, they did so differently. Fox News host Sean Hannity was quick to ask, '... if we really care about the issue, the treatment of women ... which the media has never asked Hillary ... why did she sit silent when her husband was doing this in the White House?' (7 October 2016). CNN host Jon Berman stated, 'And in that statement, which they call an apology, he, of course, takes on Bill Clinton' (quoted in Anderson Cooper 360, 7 October 2016). MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell, however, chastised Trump for his tactic, 'That is the apology of a snake trying to pretend that what he had to say on that video is somehow Bill Clinton's problem' (7 October 2016). Another MSNBC host, Chris Hayes was perplexed that Trump surrogates also used Bill Clinton, '... they somehow think that the invocation of Bill Clinton is just universally exculpating' (7 October 2016).

Consequently, despite the resolve of networks such as CNN to name Trump's behaviour as 'sexual assault', their efforts to portray both sides of the issue often detracted from their attempts to unequivocally condemn sexual assault. By highlighting the voices of Trump surrogates and concentrating on Bill Clinton, the voices of actual survivors of sexual assault became less compelling as the narrative was reframed to focus on the political horse race.

Even in the second time period, when Bill Clinton was not featured as prominently, other prominent men took his place that span entertainment (e.g. Harvey Weinstein), news (e.g. Matt Lauer), and politics (e.g. Al Franken, Roy Moore). Like Bill Clinton, these men were used (mostly inadvertently) to reduce Trump's accused and confessed sexual abuse by lumping him in with others. Although not originally anticipated, document searches show that Harvey Weinstein alone received 322 mentions in print, 1481 in

TV, and 15 in online coverage.

### *Politics also matters (again)*

Finally, RQ2b asked whether issue dualism differed between partisanship of the media. Chi-square tests were again run, with significant results. For the 2016 to 2017 sample, both the accusers,  $\chi^2(2) = 63.92, p < .001$ , and Bill Clinton,  $\chi^2(2) = 19.47, p < .001$ , had significance. Table 3 outlines how left-leaning sources covered the accusers significantly more and Bill Clinton significantly less. Right-leaning media conversely included the accusers significantly less. For the 2017 to 2018 sample, there was no significance for the accusers, but there was for Bill Clinton,  $\chi^2(2) = 19.47, p < .001$ . Right-leaning media covered Bill Clinton significantly more than left-leaning and moderate media. As stated above, the qualitative analysis revealed that right-leaning media used Bill Clinton as one of many tactics for downplaying the severity of Donald Trump's comments. This approach also served to reinforce their argument that 'all men do it'.

## **Discussion**

This study focused on how objectivity contributes to the prevalence of rape culture in news coverage by examining the Access Hollywood tape (Bullock, 2016) when it was first released and during the same time period a year later. Significant changes occurred in the interim of the time periods, most notably Trump became president, and the #metoo (France, 2017) and #timesup ([www.timesupnow.com](http://www.timesupnow.com)) movements began. A mixedmethods approach was used to analyze cable TV, print, and online sources. It can be noted that during the sampled time period, Trump was not convicted of sexual abuse – though the Access Hollywood tape did document him admitting to sexually assaulting women (Bullock, 2016).

This study shows the use, absence, and limitations of objectivity. For instance, just as previous research has challenged the notion of so-called accepted truths in journalism as a result of objectivity (Allan, 2010), we purport rape culture myths, such as dismissing the seriousness of sexual abuse and discrediting survivors (Weiss, 2009), were often reported as accepted truths because of the detachment that accompanies the defensive objectivity routines of direct quotes, supporting evidence, and our primary focus of issue dualism (Tuchman, 1972).

One way rape culture acceptance was demonstrated in news coverage was through the use of direct quotes. This was especially true for TV and right-leaning media in the first time period analyzed. There is overlap between the two because Fox News is both TV and right-leaning media; nevertheless, the format of playing direct quotes on a loop meant that Trump's threats and accusations were played repeatedly on all TV networks. It is, of course, expected for the press to include Trump's own perspective, but Trump used that platform to deflect to others, downplay the situation, and insult and threaten his accusers.

Absent in the coverage, which consequently also led to rape culture acceptance, was a lack of supporting evidence (Tuchman, 1972) on rape culture and sexual abuse statistics. In fact, only online coverage in the first time period addressed the power dynamics of rape culture, while both TV and print coverage confirmed previous research of oversimplifying and trivializing complex issues (Applegate, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2017).

Third, this study shows the limitations of issue dualism (aka balance), which consequently resulted in overlooking those who came forward to accuse Trump, and ultimately reinforced the hegemonic status quo so often found in journalism (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014). Trump's accusers should have been positioned as the other side of the debate

because they came forward to accuse him of sexual abuse. This study shows that not only are prominent men's voices featured more substantially (Zoch and VanSlyke Turk, 1998), Trump was in a position to dictate 'the other side', by continually pointing fingers to Bill Clinton. As a result, simplifying the debate to mostly two sides meant that other important contributors, such as the women who came forward are given less prominence in news coverage.

Moreover, making Bill Clinton's behavior the predominant counterpoint implies that somehow Trump's guilt or innocence is predicated upon another man's guilt or innocence, which is a false comparison. Many Trump surrogates excused Trump because they say another man is worse (e.g. Bill Clinton or Harvey Weinstein), others excused other men because they say Trump is worse (e.g. Al Franken). Such an approach relies on evading consequences or punishing the accused based on politics and public opinion, rather than the right to individual safety.

Just as Waterhouse-Watson (2016) found that balancing sources results in overlooking greater cultural context, overall, the Access Hollywood tape was ultimately a political not social justice and human rights scandal. These results ultimately point to the press' complicity in rape culture acceptance by heavily relying on direct quotes that promoted rape culture, while failing to add context to the problems of rape culture.

Indeed, analysis from the first time period revealed that most media outlets struggled to discuss the Access Hollywood scandal and sexual abuse without reducing the issue to an analysis of its political implications. This was one of the most distinct differences between the samples analyzed before and during the #metoo movement. Unfortunately, that is not to credit the #metoo movement necessarily, as there was no presidential campaign to take precedence as it did in 2016. Furthermore, Trump said less about the scandal, denoting that his tail wagging shifted news coverage both in terms of discussion and its amount. Interestingly, it was the fall of Harvey Weinstein, and the galvanized #metoo hashtag, which led to a movement – not the Access Hollywood scandal and its associated 1 million tweets (Domonoske, 2016). So far, Trump has escaped facing any consequences of #metoo. There are several possible reasons for this: The Access Hollywood scandal was so politicized, it faded once Trump became president, other political scandals associated with the Trump administration distract the public, most news coverage of Trump no longer includes Trump's admitted and accused sexual abuse, and perhaps most of all, Trump holds unprecedented power as president.

This study revealed important implications about the use of news balance. However, it is not without limitations. While the study did find that the coverage of sexual abuse varied significantly before and during the #metoo movement, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact causes of this shift in coverage. More research is needed to examine how these changes in coverage occur incrementally over time in order to better understand how political or social changes directly influence the tone of news coverage. In-depth interviews of journalists could also provide further insight. Our sample also only focused on national news organizations and overlooked network and local media. Despite these limitations, this study provides an important step in understanding the pitfalls of balance, particularly for important and complex social justice and human rights issues such as sexual abuse. In sum, we challenge the current conception of news balance in the greater norm of objectivity. The #metoo movement may provide various platforms for survivors to voice their stories, but their reach still is too limited and separate from news coverage.

Journalism gatekeepers need to reassess their approach to objectivity and recognize the ways in which the current conceptualization of objectivity continues to allow power and influence to subordinate the voices of the marginalized in society.

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**Table 1.** Summary of Factor Analysis Results for Rape Culture Acceptance Index.

Item	Factor loadings
	Rape culture acceptance
Negative comments toward woman who came forward	<b>.81</b>
Trump threats	<b>.83</b>
Other threats	<b>.29</b>
Dismiss the survivors	<b>.65</b>
Negative action toward woman who came forward	-.14
Eigenvalues	2.00
Percent of variance	40.07

Note: Factor loadings over .40 appear in bold.

**Table 2.** Chi-square results between Trump accuser and Bill Clinton and media types in percentages (standardized residuals).

		Television	Print	Online
2016–2017	Trump Accuser	32.6 (-2.2)	35.8 (-0.5)	58.2 (4.6)
	Bill Clinton	52.8 (4.8)	35.8 (-0.5)	10.7 (-6.2)
2017–2018	Trump Accuser	15.2	9.3	10.2
	Bill Clinton	20.7 (2.5)	10.1 (-1.8)	7.5 (-3.0)

**Table 3.** Chi-square results between Trump accuser and Bill Clinton and partisanship in percentages (standardized residuals).

		Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
<b>2016–2017</b>	Trump Accuser	65.4 (5.7)	34 (-1.8)	26 (-2.0)
	Bill Clinton	22.8 (-3.1)	41.1 (1.3)	43.3 (0.9)
<b>2017–2018</b>	Trump Accuser	15.8	12.8	9.3
	Bill Clinton	11.2 (-1.6)	16.4 (-0.1)	29.3 (2.7)