

Media Manipulation Against Social Justice Researchers: Second-Order Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

According to scientific studies, manipulation, which is a key concept in critical discourse analyses, is used to gain control of power against those who act to promote transformations oriented toward social justice. In the case of the struggle against sexual harassment, attacks against people supporting the victims constitute second-order sexual harassment. In this article, we analyze a specific case of media manipulation aiming to silence the brave people who dared speak about gender violence at Spanish universities and acted toward eliminating violence at these universities. Most individuals who had assumed a position against gender violence have been professionally and personally attacked and destroyed by structural powers. In this article, we focus on two aspects. First, we analyze how the group that broke the silence in Spain managed to overcome the attacks by the yellow press. Second, we observe how this group achieved increasing social impact by transforming the universities and gaining the support of their family members, social movements, and most journalists. We performed this analysis using communicative methodology, including interviews with the relatives of the brave people who suffered second-order sexual harassment by certain media and compromised journalists. According to their relatives, by contributing to social justice, their families also improved their lives and family relationships.

Introduction

Qualitative studies exploring social justice issues have uncovered the social realities that have been previously hidden throughout history ([Denzin, 2017](#); [Denzin & Giardina, 2009](#)). The main contribution of this article is the demonstration of how communicative qualitative methods contribute to initiating public debates regarding the following subject that to date has not been explored in depth at an international scientific level: second-order sexual harassment ([Vidu et al., 2017](#)). Using a communicative approach, we were able to demonstrate this social reality, thereby contributing to the enhancing social impact of studies investigating this subject and improving people's lives. Furthermore, based on the obtained dialogues, we observed that the isolation of the people who suffered these consequences could be broken and transformed, leading to the generation of networks formed by brave people.

To illustrate this phenomenon, a case study investigating second-order sexual harassment perpetrated against the CREA (Community of Research on Excellence for All) research group was conducted ([Soler-Gallart, 2017](#)). In this case study, we analyzed the following two aspects: the harassment of people by the media due to their clear position against sexual harassment at universities ([Valls et al.,](#)

[2016](#)) and, from a transformative perspective, the strength of researchers supporting social justice as a group and the effects of positions favoring improvements in society on researchers and their close environments. Thus, we performed qualitative fieldwork by interviewing both the journalists who covered the case and agreed to participate in our study and the relatives of the members of the research group.

Raising awareness of second-order sexual harassment allows for an in-depth exploration of not only the problem but also of its potential solution. This twofold contribution is characteristic of studies based on a commitment to social justice and guarantees that the results will lead to social impact. First, one of the main contributions of this study is that we demonstrate that certain journalists collaborate in a campaign disseminating second-order sexual harassment by practicing a type of journalism internationally considered yellow press. In contrast, most journalists perform their professional duties with rigor and ethics and have contributed to illuminating this type of harassment that is currently affecting many lives, which is a necessary step toward overcoming gender violence and second-order sexual harassment.

The second significant contribution of this study is based on the identification of how interviews with the researchers' relatives provide insight into how the movements or groups of people managed to overcome second-order sexual harassment due to the ties they maintain with their immediate environment. These ties serve as a protective shield against the harassment and violence directed toward them by their harassers.

This article consists of four sections. First, we provide the theoretical background of this study and discuss the researchers who are dedicated to improving society and committed to the social impact of their projects. Second, we analyzed the second-order sexual harassment by interviewing journalists who are committed to fighting against gender violence. The yellow journalists who attacked the victims did not agree to be interviewed. Third, we focus on the analysis of the interviews with the relatives of the members of the research center to identify the consequences from their perspectives and analyze the main challenges experienced by researchers committed to improving society. Finally, we discuss the results and emphasize the importance of maintaining good relationships with the people in our environment to establish circles of solidarity and protection against attacks resulting from the struggle for social justice.

Scientific Studies Investigating Social Justice

Studies investigating social justice refer to all science-based studies exploring how to overcome inequalities, barriers, poverty, and privileges; the protection of individual; and collective rights ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2011](#); [Khondker, 2017](#)). According to this definition, the research methodology used in studies based on social justice focuses on the eradication of all types of oppression to generate a change in the object of the study. Researchers who work for social justice often perform work that can be controversial and generates discussions; thus, certain individuals are more comfortable in participating in a theoretical or conceptual debate. Similarly, [Denzin and Giardina \(2009\)](#) analyzed the importance of research methodologies used to improve social justice and human rights. According to [Denzin \(2017\)](#), we can use “new critical inquiry” in these types of research studies.

In this case study, we focus on the following specific field of social justice: overcoming sexual harassment and second-order sexual harassment, which is harassment perpetrated against people who take a stance and stand in solidarity with the victims of gender violence and thus are defamed and attacked, at universities ([Vidu et al., 2017](#)). The main objective of second-order sexual harassment is to isolate and effectively silence the victim and, thus, protect the name of their harasser and the

institution that tolerated the harassment and/or failed to comply with its responsibilities to avoid and act against first- and second-order harassment. This situation was always the dynamic at Spanish universities until a study investigating this subject was conducted by CREA ([Valls et al., 2016](#)).

Regarding social impact ([Flecha et al., 2015](#)), if the scientific and social activity of researchers in the field of social justice can be analyzed according to their contribution toward overcoming social inequalities or their ability to end abusive situations or the violation of rights, the purpose of defamation (and its media coverage) is to prevent and/or reduce the social impact of social justice contributions based on internationally supported scientific studies and methodologies.

Contributions by Journalists to Media Manipulation

The dissemination of defamations was the strategy used in June 2016 by certain journalists, university authorities, and sexual harassers against the CREA research center, which initiated a study investigating gender violence at Spanish universities and is leading the fight against such violence. The student and survivor movement, which has been fighting against a Professor reported for harassment for years, has achieved great success with more than a thousand signatures in only three days demanding the professor's dismissal ([Vallespín, 2014](#)). Simultaneously, the harassers filed complaints against CREA at the University of Barcelona. The university sent the complaints to a prosecutor; the prosecutors clearly filed the case without further investigation given the obvious falseness of the allegations. However, because the prosecutors required approximately six months to examine the cases, this process allowed for the defamations to spread for half a year. Certain journalists linked to a university authority that supported the harasser disseminated the allegations via radio and TV broadcasts and newspapers closely linked to each other without applying the professional rigor demanded by the journalistic profession ([Borràs, 2016](#)). After six months, the prosecutors closed the case without an investigation, and the sensationalist journalists made no attempts to correct their false allegations. Those months of disseminating false information successfully silenced and completely stopped the students' and survivors' campaign against the Professor.

Through active international solidarity, the support of social organizations (more than 100) fighting against gender violence in Catalonia, the presentation by the research center of evidence dismantling the accusations, and the excellent professionalism of most journalists, the media manipulation was overcome. Most TV and radio stations and newspapers have been able to clarify to the public the falseness of the defamations and how the researchers acted fought against the continued instatement of the mentioned harasser ([Agencia Sync, 2017](#); [Borràs & Pérez-Mendoza, 2017](#); [Francino, 2017](#); [Martín-Arroyo, 2017](#)).

We contacted all journalists who participated in the defamation campaign against the network of researchers to obtain in-depth information regarding their perspective and role in addressing first- and second-order sexual harassment from a qualitative methodological perspective. However, none of the journalists who participated in spreading the attacks agreed to participate in this study, and they never responded to the interview requests.

However, we were able to recruit the virtual participation of five journalists who committed themselves from the beginning to fight against gender violence at universities due to their remoteness. These journalists not only did not participate in the smear campaign but they also published and disseminated the second-order sexual harassment case suffered by the CREA members due to their support of victims of sexual harassment. One journalist, that is, Javier Martín-Arroyo, gave us permission to disclose his identity in this article. Javier Martín-Arroyo works for the number one

newspaper in Spain, that is, *El País*, which published a full in-depth report about the sexual harassment cases at the Spanish universities and incorporated the victims' voices. This report was published both on paper and in an online version, generating a very important social impact. We used pseudonyms for the remainder reporters. Two reporters are men who work for two online Catalan-language newspapers. The other two journalists are women who work for Reenfoca2 Radio, which is a radio station with a national scope. Newspapers and TV stations are currently preparing new reports regarding this case. The *Feminist Journal* is among these media source, and the director of this journal agreed to be interviewed.

Javier Martín-Arroyo, who is the editor of the newspaper *El País*, emphasized the following:

The role of journalists in cases of sexual harassment is always thorny: to report rigorously on the specific episode; give voice to all parties; consult with expert psychologists, sociologists and psychiatrists regarding the reasons of each case and its derivatives; and report how the harasser and the victim's environment reacted, the effect it had on them, the intervention by the institutions, justice achieved, whether they solved the problems or aggravated their scope, and the social relevance and the institutional campaigns initiated to prevent and alleviate identified cases of abuse.

As the journalist indicated, obtaining a global perspective of the entire context is fundamental to understand and expose information in the most rigorous way possible. Notably, regarding issues related to social justice, the violation of people's lives is in the hands of those who treat, prepare, and disseminate information. According to one of the interviewed radio journalists, this information is completely public matter:

Journalism is a tool that should not forget its vocation of public service; therefore, people working in the world of communication, journalists, should make these situations public. And, as each case is different, they must be treated with respect and report to the authorities any case of which they have knowledge.

To explore further, we asked the journalists how the media should treat harassment cases and to identify the main barriers that often give preference to morbidity in the face of rigor. The other radio journalist affirmed that harassment is a social problem integrated into the dynamics of journalism:

The problem is when society itself tolerates these cases, diminishing their importance, blaming the victim . . . Such behaviors or situations are also passed on by the media, which sometimes promotes the prevention of information from coming to light, or even not taking it into account, or considering it unworthy of treatment.

Through the interviews, we analyzed the reasons why journalistic information is silenced and hidden from public light. The arguments exposed by the two radio journalists are clearly concerns for people who work as journalists, that is, those whose primary interests prevent the coverage of certain information:

This is not an acceptable situation. In the act of silencing, there is intention. Whether it is the intention of the journalist or the journalistic company for which they work, which can be moved by interests that have nothing to do with the principles of journalism. Whether it is to avoid damaging the image of the University, for advertising interests, for business relations . . . In the professionalism of each journalist lies their duty to make relevant facts that can impact society. Obviously, this one is.

One of the two journalists working in one of the online Catalan-language papers, Josep, argued that it is occasionally necessary to not disclose the full information, particularly in those cases where such information endangers the victim or violates their privacy. However, in most cases, failing to include the victims' voices precludes seriously addressing the issue in depth:

In some cases, it is necessary to hide the information in order to protect the woman who has suffered the attack. But, the fact of not having access to this information reduces the effect of the news in question, so that certain important aspects of this issue actually vanish, bearing in mind that in most cases, they would help the reader/listener/spectator understand how serious the situation is.

Moreover, Joaquim, the other journalist who works for an online newspaper in Catalan, stated that there are journalists who prioritize the morbidity of a case instead of deploying an ethical attitude toward the victims, thereby obviating the informative rigor. Joaquim stressed the importance of complying with the deontological code of journalism to erase this type of sensationalist journalism, which lacks both rigor and sensitivity:

I think that more informative rigor should be given. In many cases, morbidity appears in the informative coverage. Lack of sensitivity. In any case, journalism is a good resource to improve this treatment, which is the deontological code of journalistic practice.

I think that information is hidden. In most cases, there is talk of death, but there are other examples of violence that are hidden. Violence beyond the one assessed. Why? I think it responds to the fact that this type of violence does not generate morbidity, and the great media want the show.

Interviews With Relatives of CREA Researchers Who Suffered Second-Order Sexual Harassment

There is a gap in the scientific literature regarding the personal consequences of performing research studies and being committed to social justice and how coexisting with socially just people affects their closest social circles. To advance this research topic and promote transformative studies from another perspective and based on our analysis of the facts from different perspectives (i.e., scientific and journalistic), we studied the consequences of working toward improving social justice considering second-order sexual harassment.

The lobby of sexual harassers at Spanish universities has not managed to find anything specific against the center to use in the attacks; thus, this lobby followed the example of the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Goebels, by constantly repeating a very large lie to raise suspicions. Because the CREA

is involved in various scientific investigations and is among the most pluralistic and open-ended research groups, harassers and sensationalistic journalists have attacked members of this center for being a sect and compared the center with the Manson sect ([Ustrell, 2016](#)). They presented the alleged obligation of its members to separate from their families as evidence. Nevertheless, an external psychological report ([Fernández Aguado, 2016](#)) showed that 100% of the 23 families interviewed (of 73) reported having a good relationship with their researcher family member. Another relevant fact that emerged from the interviews was the diversity in the ways of life and places of residence of the 81% of interviewed members.

To perform the analysis of the present case, we conducted ten interviews with people with very different profiles, all of whom are related to CREA researchers ([Fernandez, 2015](#)). The interviewees included two pensioners, including the mother of a CREA member and her partner; a retired woman and man, who were parents of CREA members; a man and a woman aged 50–60 years, who were both siblings of CREA members; two men aged 30–35 years, who were both partners of CREA members; and a man and a woman aged 40–50 years, who were also partners of CREA members. The selection of the people to be interviewed was performed based on a criterion of diversity. We attempted to obtain a representative sample including different ages from 30 years of age. We also ensured the parity of sexes and a diversity of origins and backgrounds. Thus, we aimed to interview people with very different profiles and very different ties to the members of the CREA while prioritizing parents, siblings, and couples to ensure that the link was close. By interviewing these ten people, we generated a representative sample of life options and perspectives of the people working at the CREA. According to scientific ethics principles, we obtained consent from all interviewees to publish their opinions and used pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

In the interviews, we discussed the ties between the participants and their relatives and how the participants valued their relatives' involvement with social justice and their work using the following questions:

What are the bonds that you have with your relative/friend working at CREA? Do you think that these bonds changed when he or she started working at CREA? How do you think that the task performed by your relative/friend contributes to improving social justice? Do you think that the results of their work on social improvement have also had an impact on your friends and family?

How is that? Can you please give us some examples? What was your reaction when you actually observed the attacks we suffered last year? What about your friends/relatives who were with you? How do you think these attacks affected your family/friends? Do you think that this defamation campaign has made you feel closer or has it led to a separation from your family/friends? Why? Do you think that people similar to your family/friends are models in the fight against sexual harassment and social justice?

Historically, the key to successfully overcoming attacks has been to have a strong, supportive group with which to strengthen the bonds and continue the work toward social justice. Thus, by using this approach to develop narratives, we analyzed in depth not only how the attacks affected the members of the center and their relatives but also how the movements overcame those attacks due to the ties maintained among friends, family, and so on. Such ties function as a protective shield against the attackers' attempts to damage and destroy.

From the interviews, the following two key issues were illuminated: first, the people who dedicate themselves to transformative research projects and are committed to social justice take great care of their personal relationships with their families and friends. This theme was consistent across all testimonials. Caring for relationships in this case study indicated the creation of an important

protective shield that reinforced the links as the attacks and discrediting became more efficient through the mass media.

The ten interviewees affirmed that they had always had a good relationship with their friend or relative. After the news began to constantly appear in the media, the participants had more opportunities to discuss second-order sexual harassment and the fight against gender violence at universities. According to Rita,

It brought me closer because I did not understand the sadness of my children. My children did not tell me everything so that I would not suffer. Not until it came out on TV media did I realize the reason for the sadness they felt. At that moment, I stopped believing in justice. When I reflected and calmed down, the same justice is the one that has to make everything clear and let the guilty ones know who they are and pay for it.

Agreeing with his partner Rita, Pedro said,

As a family, it has brought us closer. In the face of the problems, we help each other and talk about the subject. Therefore, it has brought us closer. Defamation, even if it is unfounded, affects our mood, and, therefore, we must unite and help each other (listen, understand and give importance).

Another relevant aspect that was consistently mentioned in all interviews was that the participants felt proud to be a part of the life of a person who is committed to improving society and dedicates his or her efforts to transforming science and citizenship. Most participants agreed that this dedication is a source of motivation for their lives. According to one of the mothers, Silvia,

Of course! I see her very committed to this task and with great desire and confidence that justice will be made. Personally, I like her to do it because, at the same time that I see how important it is for her (she is happy), I also thank her for doing her part in improving our world, helping all the people affected and correcting the situation facing the future.

Through her words, we can perceive her enthusiasm for having a committed person nearby. Salvador affirmed that this commitment for the struggle for social justice is among the things that gives meaning to his daughter's life:

Yes, I see her very happy and excited doing scientific research in favor of social justice and against harassment. In fact, I find that without this sense in her life, where you can see that she can improve the world and see how the work she does, the research and the projects in which she is involved, she would not be satisfied, and she would miss something important in her life. In fact, she would lack meaning in what she does. Therefore, not only do I love that she does it, but I encourage her to keep doing it.

Finally, we sought to understand the participants' reactions to the slander about CREA that was spreading in the news. We sought to determine how they reacted, whether they established solidarity mechanisms with their relatives or friends, and so on. Most participants felt a great impotence on the day the news came to light while claiming that such informational coverage did not make them hesitate for a moment, feeling that the attack toward their closest friends and relatives was somehow an attack toward themselves. According to Silvia,

Rage towards injustice and manipulation of people and the media, but with confidence that the truth would end up being known, because there was a group of people who would continue to fight for it.

Similarly, Saul, who is a husband of a CREA researcher, stated,

The strength they have is that they are in a group and that will make them continue to fight until the truth comes out.

In the face of the attack, several interviewees developed a strong feeling of pride and satisfaction at having such brave people close to them. According to Ernesto, who is a husband of another CREA researcher,

I have always defended brave attitudes, and in regard to a relative who exercises this defense, well, I feel even more proudly co-responsible.

Maria and Joan agreed that all the information that appeared in the media was an outrage and that it united them even more with their relatives. The ten interviewees agreed in their rejection of the attacks aimed at their relatives and the satisfaction they felt to be linked with someone who fights for social justice.

Conclusion

In this case study, we analyzed a historical strategy that has been used to delegitimize and stigmatize people who have chosen to support social justice through science by developing studies that are always committed to the most vulnerable groups and major social inequalities. Through testimonies, we analyzed how certain media act to protect the interests of institutions or, in this case, harassers by silencing the primary victims of first- and second-order sexual harassment.

Furthermore, by interviewing ten relatives of CREA members, we analyzed the importance of having brave people who are capable of reporting any injustice so close at the social level. Moreover, we observed the strong links generated between these people with their families, which transmitted enthusiasm for the struggle for social justice. In addition, our analysis of interviews with journalists who agreed to participate revealed certain internal aspects of the media.

This contribution aims to mark a step forward in research studies related to social justice, specifically the struggle against second-order sexual harassment by yellow journalists. Through these interviews, we analyzed the key aspects and gained an understanding of the basic essence of many researchers' struggle for social justice. We understand that the main focus is on the good relationships that are maintained with the people closest to them, who are also in solidarity with them and provide support as necessary.

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