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Silencing survivors: how news coverage neglects the women accusing Donald Trump of sexual misconduct

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“Will you please stop saying that word? My daughter is listening...” rebuked Donald-Trump-surrogate Scottie Nell Hughes to Republican strategist Ana Navarro in a CNN segment hosted by Don Lemon on October 8 2016 (Alex Lockie 2016). Their panel was discussing footage from a 2005 *Access Hollywood* pre-interview between Trump and then-reporter Billy Bush wherein, among other statements, Trump said, “Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything” (Penn Bullock 2016, 19). The tape, anonymously released on October 7, 2016, sparked news headlines describing Trump’s comments as lewd, vile, vulgar, crude, obscene, stupid, disturbing, crass, offensive, sleazy, locker room banter, sexist, and disgusting. Hughes, though defending Trump, reproached Navarro for quoting Trump’s use of the word pussy (Lockie 2016). Hughes’ plea reflects both rape culture (Diana Payne, Kimberly A. Lonsway, and Louise F. Fitzgerald 1999) and benevolent sexism (Peter Glick and Susan F. Fiske 1996): Trump wasn’t a predator because he didn’t really mean what he said as a fifty-nine-year-old man; on the other hand, Navarro was threatening the innocence of girls for using Trump’s derogatory terminology. Moreover, it was an attempt to silence Navarro for emphasizing the same word that Trump had used.

Rape culture refers to societal norms that promote stereotypes about rape and rape survivors (Karen G. Weiss 2009). False beliefs are so deeply imbedded within rape culture that Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999) developed a Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, which identifies seven key myths about rape: (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” (59). Believing these myths—some of which were used with reference to Trump—diminishes or dismisses sexual assault and rape. Of course sexual assault can occur in different combinations between and within genders; nevertheless, men attacking women occurs

most often (“victims of sexual violence” n.d.), like the reported scenario in this case. Furthermore, physical and sexual violence against women is widespread throughout the world, affecting one in three women (“Ending violence” n.d.). Yet, as a result of firmly accepted rape myths, survivors frequently do not go public or are doubted when they do (Ann Burnett, Jody L. Mattern, Liliana L. Herakova, David H. Kahl Jr, Cloy Tobola, and Susan E. Bornsen 2009). Globally, women are most often attacked by intimate partners or acquaintances, also making it unlikely they will come forward (“Ending violence” n.d.). Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974) theorized that those who hold ideas that contradict the majority internalize them into a spiral of silence. People with unpopular views thus become discouraged from speaking out, which results in mostly one-sided public discussions while, “...only a shunned minority is heard speaking out for the other side. Or nothing is heard at all” (Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann 1989, 10). Although first conceived in a political context, the spiral of silence theory gives insight into why news coverage is limited in its treatment of social problems (Michael Salwen 1990), in this case sexual misconduct.

At least twenty-four women have come forward to report Trump’s sexual misconduct (Amber Jamieson, Simon Jeffery, and Nicole Puglise 2016), but this did not stop Trump’s eventual presidential win. Moreover, it was not women coming forward on their own that sparked international news attention. Temple Taggart, Bridget Sullivan, Cassandra Searales, and Jill Harth (who originally reported in 1997), publicly reported sexual misconduct against Trump earlier in 2016 (Jamieson, Jeffery, and Puglise 2016), with minimal resulting news coverage. It wasn’t until the scandalous tape leak that news media collectively paid attention to the charges.

To understand the amount of news coverage of this issue and the possible spiral of silence occurring, we used the LexisNexis database’s major news publications option to search

for news coverage that related to Trump’s sexual misconduct or accused misconduct. To gauge the international reaction to this story, we included national publications from English-speaking countries including the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, India, and Australia. Several searches were conducted for each day examined, using combinations of the keywords Trump, women, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Once searched, we counted only articles that directly related to the issue. Dates were selected based on when each woman came forward and the two weeks following her initial statement as well as the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape. During the months of May–July when four women came forward, news coverage peaked at seventeen articles, and quickly faded within three days to minimal news coverage. The *Access Hollywood* tape, in comparison, triggered attention to the issue (peaking at 296 articles) with much greater news coverage of the twenty women who came forward in the days following, for the first eight days of news coverage (1720 articles total). However, news coverage again quickly faded after that. These results illustrate that men’s stories and perspectives dominate news coverage, which is consistent with previous research (Cory L. Armstrong and Fangfang Gao 2011; Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann 2011). The female survivors on their own were not enough to capture domestic or international headlines.

We also grouped the articles into specific categories by headline. In total, only 13 percent of news headlines were from a survivors’ perspective, such as the *Washington Post*’s blog entry, “This is rape culture: After Trump video, thousands of women share sexual assault stories” (Amy B.Wang 2016). By comparison, 41 percent of headlines featured Trump or his family’s reactions, like this ominous headline from the *Telegraph*, “Donald Trump threatens to sue women accusing him of sexual assault as he delivers his Gettysburg speech on his vision for the presidency” (Ruth Sherlock 2016). Notably, 14 percent of headlines included Bill Clinton, such

as the *Los Angeles Times*'s, "A look at the sexual misconduct allegations against Donald Trump and Bill Clinton" (Colleen Shalby 2016). The remaining thirty-two percent of headlines featured politicians' and celebrities' reactions or the fate of Billy Bush's career.

Spiral of silence theory argues that individuals monitor the climate of public opinion to understand whether they hold a majority or minority viewpoint (Vincent Price and Laura Feldman 2009). The major assumptions of spiral of silence help identify what took place in this case: threat of isolation for anyone who violated the social norms of the collective, fear of isolation for the minority, individuals monitoring the climate of opinion, and people in the majority speaking (John W. Spinda 2014). Traditional news media emboldened women to come forward in the wake of the *Access Hollywood* tape by covering what appeared to be a changing climate of opinion. Notably, on January 17, 2017, Summer Zervos filed a defamation suit against Donald Trump that was covered in *The New York Times* (Jonathan Weisman and Yamiche Alcindor 2017). However, the lack of news articles from the women's points of view presented a threat of isolation and ultimately silenced most survivors. More severely, at least one of the women feared not just isolation but rather threats to her life and thus canceled a press conference wherein she was going to accuse Trump of attacking her (Nancy Dillon and Leonard Greene 2016). Future research is thus needed to understand how, through the interconnectedness of the public via social and online media, fear of isolation has evolved into a fear of retribution to those in the minority, particularly in relation to women's issues such as sexual violence, which are often silenced in the public and news media.

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