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SPACES FOR FEMINIST (RE)ARTICULATIONS

The blogosphere and the sexual attack on journalist Lara Logan

Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke and Ingrid Bachmann

This discourse analysis explores traditional and feminist articulations of rape in online mediated discourse regarding the sexual attack on CBS journalist Lara Logan in Egypt in February 2011. Examination of 175 stories and links in the top ten news blogs in the United States showed that the blogosphere contested traditional rape narratives that blamed Logan for the attack and conceptualized rape through a more varied means. In doing so, bloggers engaged in a struggle for meaning, and mainstreamed feminist understandings of sexual violence within the online public space.

KEYWORDS rape narratives; blogs, ideology; public discourse; feminist (re)articulation; discourse analysis

Introduction

Our collective understanding of rape and sexual assault in the United States has a long history. Much of this knowledge has been realized through our legal system, mass communication, the patriarchal constructs of gender, and hegemonic concepts of race and class. Recently, feminist perspectives have also had an impact on this narrative (Barker-Plummer 2010; Byerly 1999; Cuklanz 1996, 2000; Worthington 2008). This research examines the mediated discourse regarding the sexual attack in February 2011 on CBS News chief foreign affairs correspondent Lara Logan to ascertain how traditional rape narratives and those informed through a feminist (re)articulation interact in the public discourse and inform public understandings of rape. The study builds on research examining rape within news and entertainment media by considering how the expansion of voices via the Internet and online communities expands the ideological struggle surrounding rape. The nature of online communication, which allows a broader group of people to enter a public mediated conversation, necessitates the consideration of Internet communities, particularly popular news blogs, in the evaluation of how mass media discourse about rape is changing and staying the same.

Logan was assaulted on February 11, 2011 while in Tahrir Square covering the events following Egyptian President Mubarak’s forced resignation. A statement by CBS read: “In the crush of the mob, she [Logan] was separated from her crew. She was surrounded and suffered a brutal and sustained sexual assault and beating before being saved by a group of
women and an estimated 20 Egyptian soldiers” (CBS News 2011a). While the statement made no mention of rape, discourse surrounding the attack illustrated that many interpreted “sexual assault” to mean Logan had been raped.² This interpretation and subsequent mediated reports offered a means for examining how the traditional patriarchal and feminist articulations of rape inhabit public discourse in the online environment.

Traditional and Rearticulated Notions of Rape

In a report to Congress, the US Agency For Healthcare Research and Quality (2003) explained:

Rape is a term that refers to forced or attempted sexual intercourse with a male or female, by an offender that may be of the same sex or a different sex from the victim. Sexual assault is usually defined to encompass rape, attempted rape, forced oral and anal sex, penetration with objects, touching of intimate parts, and other types of threats or coercion in which unwanted sexual contact is attempted or occurs between the victim and offender.

Beyond the formal definition of rape and sexual assault are ideological conceptions of rape that are socially constructed and rooted in history, myth, and ideology. Over the years this view of rape, firmly grounded in patriarchal hegemony, racism, and class bias, directed how rape victims, police officers, the court system, and journalists react to the crime. The crime, as understood culturally and legally, has a unique position “characterized by lying victims and false accusation (because of the supposed ‘revenge’ or ‘covering shame’ motives)” (Cuklanz 2000, 10). Benedict (1992) identified ten problematic rape myths prevalent in US culture. Among these myths: rapists are typically black or lower class; only “loose” women are victimized; and women provoke rape. Benedict identified eight factors leading the public and press to blame a woman for being raped, including “If she is young; If she is ‘pretty’; If she in any way deviated from the traditional female role of being at home with family or children” (Benedict 1992, 19). Not only do these myths blame the victim, they reinforce rape as rooted in individual actions rather than a societal problem and indirectly perpetuate sexual violence by distorting the definition of sexual assault (Franiuk et al. 2008). Benedict (1992) elaborated on the role race/ethnicity played in rape myths, explaining a racially charged history of rape accusations against black men in the United States for unfounded crimes against white women. In this construction black men take on the other status and are seen as savages while white women embody ideal femininity and represent white man’s property.

Since the 1970s, however, feminist attempts to rearticulate rape have made progress in legal, social, and media systems. Feminist (re)articulations of rape counter the misunderstandings and myths that lead to victim blame. Cuklanz explained that to counter the traditional views of women who lie about rape, feminists have argued that false accusations are no more common in rape than any other crime; that the “self-harm” notion asserting that a woman would ask for rape (through her manner of dress, seductive behavior, or use of alcohol) was an absurd claim; and that rather than being depraved men, rapists are typically men considered “normal” in other ways (2000, 10).
Ideological Struggle, Mediated Discourse and the New Media Landscape

The traditional and feminist notions of rape represent an ideological struggle. This negotiation illustrates how individuals and institutions jockey “to achieve authority, or at least some place for their own meanings, in a particular discursive field at a specific point in history and culture” (D’Acci 1994, 213). This discursive authority (or hegemony) is crucial to social power, and the struggle to define rape illustrates a larger struggle in which feminists are challenging patriarchal authority. This research focuses on the role the blogosphere plays in this process.

The ideological struggle to define rape and construct rape narratives within the public sphere primarily occurs within the discursive domain of mediated communication (Moorti 2002). Attention has been given to news media as a primary site of “information production and dissemination” though feminist media theorists have argued that examining rape coverage in traditional news offers a limited understanding of public discourses about rape (Moorti 2002, 4).

With widespread use of the Internet, alternative forms of mass communication—such as popular news blogs—have entered public discourse in meaningful ways (Harp and Tremayne 2006). These forms exist beyond the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy constructed to understand news and entertainment media. Further, they allow for greater variety of voices to enter into public discourse. Touted as a deviation from traditional news media, news blogs have been embraced for several reasons but especially for their departure from the one-to-many communication model (Gillmor 2004). Offering instead many-to-many communication, blogs allow a more flexible dialogue to emerge amongst many voices. While they do not always adhere to the same journalistic standards of balance and verification, they often resemble casual conversation (Matheson 2004; Trammell and Keshelashvili 2005). News stories are crucial to the public’s access to information yet more rigid when it comes to the public’s participation in discussion.

Rape Narratives and Mass Media

Contemporary understandings of rape have been negotiated within the context of a series of mass mediated discourses. By analyzing these discourses, scholars have illustrated how the articulation of traditional constructions and (re)articulated feminist notions of rape are present, absent, and negotiated within the traditional mediated public sphere (Baird 2009; Barker-Plummer 2010; Byerly 1999; Cuklanz 1996, 2000; Projansky 1995; Sampert 2010; Worthington 2008).

Several studies investigating news coverage of rape, and more generally violence against women, have shown how these narratives reinforce patriarchal understandings of gender in the United States and other areas of the world (Anastasio and Costa 2004; Baird 2009; Berrington and Jones 2002; Meyers 1997; Sampert 2010). The message in these studies is strikingly similar and the consequences serious as “the power to define and to impose definitions on others is an important one” (Berrington and Jones 2002, 309).

Cuklanz (1996), however, was among the first media scholars to illustrate how feminist notions of rape had become part of mediated discourse. In her analysis of news and entertainment texts of three nationally publicized trials, Cuklanz found that news conventions constrained coverage and for the most part reinforced traditional
conceptualizations of rape, that “coverage of the proceedings disproportionately focuse[d] on the character and credibility of the victim” and that coverage judged victims according to traditional criteria. However, Cuklanz (1996) noted the post-trial accounts of the cases through television and films were more open to offering feminist views and the victim’s perspectives. Additional research led Cuklanz to conclude that prime time episodic series—like news, movies, and films—had responded to feminist ideas of rape in “fragmented and uneven ways” (2000, 155). This finding has been echoed in similar analyses.

Moorti analyzed rape in television programs while foregrounding issues of race and highlighted “the variability within individual genres” of rape narratives (2002, 184), concluding that some genres offer more room for feminist ideas of the crime. For example, while daytime talk shows provided a more varied means within which to conceptualize rape, “news tend[ed] to offer monolithic understandings that are framed primarily by patriarchal definitions of rape” (Moorti 2002, 213).

Byerly (1999) offered examples of news events starting in the 1980s that illustrated how feminist understandings of rape had become part of journalists’ explanatory framework. Byerly suggested a subtle negotiation occurring in newsrooms as gender conscious journalists approached their work. More recently, Worthington (2008) showed how feminist interventions impacted news coverage of rape. Analysis of television news stories coupled with an interview with a key journalist demonstrated how feminist articulations of rape influenced the story narrative. Worthington (2008), however, underscored what many other scholars have argued: that along with the documented progress are persistent problems with mediated rape narratives. Some of these problems include story selection (stories fitting traditional and harmful news values that highlight conflict, bizarre and sexually explicit details, and reinforce rape myths), a lack of coverage, and neglecting to situate the story within a broader social context (Barker-Plummer 2010; Byerly 1999; Worthington 2008). Even Mcmanus and Dorfman (2005), whose analysis of rape coverage in two newspapers illustrated an absence of sexist patterns, saw a problem in news selection strategies and said the issue receives inferior coverage in relation to other crime stories.

These previous studies have formed an account of when, why, and how feminist ideas of rape become part of or are absent from the narrative framework of public discourse. These projects, however, focus on traditional media fitting a one-to-many model. Our research builds on this previous work by illuminating how these rape discourses play out in a new media environment where a diversity of voices interact in dialogical form. The investigation, then, asks whether news blogs might be an important site for the contestation of rape narratives.

Mainstream news, a place in which social meaning is negotiated and constructed, has traditionally been a place where patriarchy exerts its influence, as the press has traditionally been a man’s world. The media landscape is changing as more women move into newsrooms and into decision-making positions and as more voices contribute to the mediated public discourse through the Internet. Our project attends to this discursive space to understand how contemporary rape narratives (and the hegemonic process to construct meaning) are negotiated in this contemporary media landscape. Texts within the popular news blogosphere regarding Logan’s attack form the foundation for this case study that asks the following questions.
Has the popular news blogosphere expanded patriarchal news discourses to allow for more diverse, feminist perspectives about rape and sexual assaults against women? If so, how?

Has the popular news blogosphere contributed to a more dynamic and a wider range of understandings and diverse perspectives on Logan's assault? If so, how?

Has the popular news blogosphere allowed voices outside of traditional news authority to contribute to the shaping of the discourse regarding Logan's assault? If so, how?

**Media Landscape and Methods of Analysis**

No longer situated outside of news media, blogs have evolved into having a more vital role in journalism (Lowrey 2006). Throughout this research article, “blog” refers to “web logs,” which are websites that feature news and journal-type entries authored by journalists and non-journalists. The terrain of blogs known as the blogosphere is infinite in its diverse topics and forums, however, for the sake of manageability, our research only focused on the discourses set by the top ten most widely read news blogs as rated by Technorati (an Internet search engine for blogs). On March 1, 2011, the top ten new blogs were: The Huffington Post, The Daily Beast, Think Progress, Hot Air, The Daily Dish by Andrew Sullivan, Mediaite, Politics Daily, CNN’s Political Ticker, Media Matters for America, and Michelle Malkin. We chose to include only general news blogs and not to analyze feminist blogs because we were interested in how feminist articulations of rape have become part of mainstream discourse in the contemporary media landscape.

One common trait in blogs is hypertext links to websites and online documents that an author refers to in her/his blog entry. This action of openly offering information sources has turned blogging into a conversation and increased the reliability of bloggers’ posts (Blood 2000). Recognizing the importance of hypertext links in blogs while acknowledging the potential never-ending continuation of links, our analysis includes only one additional degree of analysis of all content hyperlinked from the main blog.

After typing “Lara Logan” into each blog’s search feature, researchers found seventy-nine blog posts published by March 1, 2011—two weeks after the Logan assault story broke—and identified another ninety-six stories linked from them (for details, see Table 1).³

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**Table 1**

Sample overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>Blog posts</th>
<th>Links</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Huffington Post</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Beast</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Progress</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot Air</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Dish by Andrew Sullivan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediaite</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics Daily</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN Political Ticker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Matters for America</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Malkin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the blog posts discussing the attack were dated between Tuesday, February 15, and Sunday, February 20.

After compiling all relevant stories, researchers conducted a discourse analysis to examine how the discussion regarding the attack on Logan was constructed and articulated in the blogs. This qualitative method addressed the construction of meaning through language and the reproduction of ideology (Van Dijk 1993). Discourse analysis “pays close attention to language and its usage” (Meyer 1997, 13) and is useful for its attention to multiple levels of language analysis, attending to both what is implicit and explicit in a text as it is tied to broader social and cultural understandings. Our analysis, then, focused on social messages and representations related to articulations of rape rather than only what was explicitly said. In employing this method of analysis we acknowledged the polysemy of texts and the feminist framework from which we approached these texts.

Each author read the texts, looking for arguments framing and defining Logan and her circumstances. Through the qualitative assessment we identified constructions of traditional and feminist ideas about rape and sexual violence as informed by previous research. We looked in the blog posts for commonalities, topics, and meanings raised, and various articulations of rape before comparing notes to identify interpretive convergence—places in which each author located similar meanings. Aware of the possible coexistence of multiple meanings in the messages studied, we relied on this multiple-researcher approach as a means of triangulation to verify the findings and increase interpretive validity (Lindlof and Taylor 2002).

**Analysis**

The attack on Logan brought widespread condemnation and empathy from colleagues, pundits, bloggers, and readers, but also a lot of vitriol aimed at Logan and the circumstances surrounding her attack. In other words, the discourse both maintained a conviction that women are never responsible for rape while also fitting traditional myths of rape narratives that blame the victim. Noteworthy, however, was that for every argument that ended up re-victimizing Logan there was a consistent message that countered traditional rape myths. The discourse also included a feminist articulation that simply criticized sexism in the many forms it took in the discussion. Bloggers countered this sexist rhetoric along with people’s inability to grasp that violence against women, reporters, or foreigners is not specific to any country, culture, or religion. Further, three leading themes emerged in the conversation, each in the form of a discursive battle between traditional and feminist articulations. These themes illustrated how the struggle for meaning and hegemonic dominance about rape is occurring in the popular news blogosphere.

**Pretty Woman**

One of the most discussed themes on the blogs focused on Logan’s “Hollywood good looks” (Wilson 2011). Among traditional patriarchal rape myths is the misconception that only young, beautiful women are raped (Benedict 1992). Logan is an especially attractive woman in standard terms of American beauty and her looks garnered much attention in the discourse. Responses to her attack included questions about why a woman so attractive put herself in such a dangerous position. Further discourse simply referred to or described her looks when discussing the attack. Descriptions of a woman’s looks in
discussions about rape perform the subtle work of reinforcing the myths that only pretty women are raped, that women ask for it through their physical appearance, and that rape is an act of lust by sex-hungry men.

One example that strongly illustrates the reinforcement of traditional conceptualizations of rape and also how feminist understandings were used to refute these notions occurred in response to an LA Weekly blog. The widely criticized piece, written by blogger Simone Wilson, described Logan as a “blonde reporter” who is “known for her shocking good looks” (Wilson 2011). Nomani and Todd (2011), educators at Georgetown University, contributed an article on The Huffington Post condemning Wilson’s detailed narrative of Logan’s former career as a swimsuit model and intimate accounts of Logan’s personal life. Nomani and Todd stressed that the details offered in Wilson’s article were completely irrelevant to the brutality Logan faced. Nomani and Todd also emphasized that this attack should serve as an opportunity to shed light on how, as a society, we can further promote journalists’ safety—not reduce it to one that interrogates the reporter’s character. They wrote, “The sexual brutality that Logan suffered casts a pall upon all of us in the journalism industry, but also upon us, as educators, as we send enterprising women journalists in to the world.” They also stressed that in addition to condemning the crime against Logan, criticism must be targeted at those responses that blame the victim for the attack saying, “There should be indignation at not only the alleged crime against Logan but the response that blames her.”

Another blog entry, contributed by guest blogger Matt Cornell (2011) on Sociological Images, also criticized Wilson’s piece on Logan. Cornell—an artist, performer, and film programmer—characterized Wilson as the “worst offender” in a line of usual offenders who blame victims of sexual assaults. Though Wilson did not explicitly blame Logan for the sexual assault, Cornell wrote that focusing on a sexual assault victim’s looks and sexual past did amount to blaming Logan for the attack. He also added that the irrelevant discussions of Logan’s looks and character did something even more ominous—it framed rape as sexy.

Intense reactions were also ignited in response to Jim Hoft’s blog entry on Gateway Pundit (2011). Hoft posed these disturbing questions regarding Logan’s sexual assault: “Why did this attractive blonde female reporter wander into Tahrir Square last Friday? Why would she think this was a good idea?” Shannon Galpin (2011), president and founder of Mountain2Mountain, a non-profit group that creates education and opportunities for women in places of conflict, wrote a harsh response on The Huffington Post denouncing Hoft. Galpin accused Hoft of blatant sexism and reiterated that Logan was in Tahrir Square because she was a reporter covering a news story. Galpin wrote,

Well Jim, here’s a newsflash: this is sexist BS, pure and simple. Lara Logan didn’t wander. She wasn’t in Tahrir Square because she took a wrong turn. She knew exactly where she was and why. Lara Logan was in the square on purpose, covering the revolution in Egypt because IT’S HER JOB.

Galpin proceed to lambaste Hoft for bringing up Logan’s looks and then shared her own experience as a rape victim, reminding readers that Logan was simply a reporter who had been assaulted and that her looks should not have been a point of discussion when referring to this crime. Galpin wrote:

Even more despicable is your use of a woman’s attractiveness as an excuse for sexual assault. My own rape and assault was a long time ago, very few people knew about it, and
I wasn’t a public figure like Lara … You should not castigate Lara Logan because she’s an “attractive blonde female reporter.” She is a reporter who, while heroically covering one of the most important events of the decade, was the victim of a terrible crime. Period.

Sharing Galpin’s disdain for Hoft’s piece was Ben Dimiero, a blogger for Media Matters for America. He wrote,

One thing you learn when covering Gateway pundit Jim Hoft is to never declare anything he does “rock bottom,” because he always manages to find a new low. Today he blamed CBS reporter Lara Logan and her “liberal belief system” for her sexual assault. (Dimiero 2011)

Eric Boehlert, another blogger for Media Matters for America, further denounced Hoft’s credibility when he reminded the public in his blog entry that Hoft is the same man who called Logan a “media whore” in 2008 when details of her private life surfaced in the tabloids (Boehlert 2011).

In general, the voices countering the traditional discourse associating Logan’s looks with her sexual assault originated from a diverse group of individual bloggers though they were all linked to the most popular news blogs. From seasoned journalists to a stay-at-home mom, the writers on various blog sites sent a uniformed message: discussing how a sexual assault victim looks is sexist and detracts from the actual crime, and rape is not about how a woman looks or acts but instead about power and domination.

Wrong Place

While not as prevalent as the discussion about Logan’s looks, another common topic in the blog discourse focused on why she would “put herself in such a dangerous situation”—especially because she is a mother. Traditional rape narratives blame victims who deviate from traditional feminine roles (e.g., confined to the world of child-rearing and domesticity) and circumscribe sexual violence to individual actions rather than societal ones. Much of the Internet discourse about Logan’s attack referred to this frame. However, voices in the blogosphere countered these misconceptions and highlighted that Logan was not only doing her job—one marked by important achievements in a twenty-year career—but that the attack had nothing to do with her being “irresponsible” and all to do with women not being safe worldwide.

In a post on Mediaite, blogger Lori Wagner (2011) argued that comments like Logan “should have known better than to go there” or “she shouldn’t have left her children to do her job” had no place in a story about sexual assault. A similar critique on the blog Gossip Cop (2011) argued that had it been a “male hard-working journalist with two kids at home who suffered a ‘brutal’ and ‘sustained’ attack” nobody would have called him irresponsible. On Politics Daily, journalist and contributor Suzi Parker (2011) cited Keri Potts, an ESPN executive that escaped a rape attempt in Italy, and who argued that it would be irresponsible to say the attack happened to Logan because she was in Egypt. Potts noted, “mob violence can happen anywhere, even here [in the US].” Further, The Daily Beast author Howard Kurtz explained that Logan could not stay away from doing her job and shared the following story:

When she returned to Afghanistan eight months after her first baby was born, Logan told me: “I think about that child growing up without a mother and that’s definitely the hardest
thing I've ever done.” But she said she feels a “responsibility” to tell the stories of those who are sent off to fight for their country. (Kurtz 2011)

Several of the blog posts condemned conservative writer Debbie Schlussel’s (2011) piece blaming Logan for getting herself sexually assaulted in Cairo. “So sad, too bad, Lara. No one told her to go there. She knew the risks,” she wrote. Gayle Lemmon, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, posted a reply on The Huffington Post saying Logan was in Tahrir Square in the first place, “because it is her job. Because she is good at it. And because it is what she does” (Lemmon 2011). While a widely cited interview in Esquire magazine labeled Logan as “insane” for returning to Egypt after being detained, interrogated and told to leave the country the week before the attack (Kamer 2011), Lemmon explained that Logan chose to return to the country “because the story mattered and because it is the work she does best. What happened afterward was a tragedy. And one for which Logan should never be blamed” (2011). Gawker editor Hamilton Nolan (2011) stressed, “the only ones to ‘blame’ in the Lara Logan incident are the people who committed the crime. Reporters will keep reporting, and, sometimes, being attacked, or hurt, or even killed.”

Politics Daily’s Woman Up editor Bonnie Goldstein (2011) indicated an understanding of traditional rape narratives, writing “now inevitably, the question of whether [Logan’s] confident qualities [as a correspondent] also got her burned occurs.” On Salon, Mary Elizabeth Williams (2011) argued what should be said regarding Logan’s attack is that “like countless women around the world, Lara Logan was attacked in the line of duty. She was assaulted doing her job. It was a crime of unspeakable violence.”

In her piece on The Huffington Post, Gayle Lemmon wrote,

Logan is a veteran of wars around the world ... And she is good at what she does. That is all that should matter to those who recount the horrid, lurid story of her attack. The rest says far more about who we are as an American public than who she is as an accomplished journalist whose work led her to danger she escaped only with the help of other women, Egyptian women, and members of the Egyptian military. (Lemmon 2011)

On Gawker, Nolan (2011) also broadened the debate by highlighting that sometimes reporting is an inherently dangerous business but one that needs to be done. As blogger Allahpundit (2011) posted on Hot Air, “Logan wasn’t the only reporter in danger while covering the protests.” Indeed, Logan’s ordeal helped to put the spotlight on the safety of journalists as they cover tense situations and conflicts in foreign countries, with sex attacks as “a secret job hazard.” Mediaite cited a Washington Post piece by Alexandra Petri (2011) that acknowledged “journalists run many risks. It comes with the profession. But this should not be silently accepted as one of them,” while on The Huffington Post, blogger Nancy Palmer (2011) quoted ABC’s Senior Foreign Affairs correspondent Martha Raddatz, who argued that Logan’s attack made obvious “through the last decade especially, there is absolutely no protection that comes from being a journalist, male or female.”

While comments existed indicating that women do not have a place amid chaos and news organizations should rethink sending women to dangerous zones, an overarching message in the blogosphere indicated it is not fair to exclude female reporters from covering important stories because their voice and perspective is needed. “After all, Anderson Cooper got attacked [in Egypt too]. What news organizations should be doing is everything they can to protect all their employees regardless of gender,” said someone cited on TV Squad (2011). The Daily Dish referred to a post by Ann Friedman (2011) on
Feministing, saying: “Doing everything in our power to ensure the safety of women reporters—and supporting them unequivocally when that safety is threatened or violated—isn’t just important on feminist grounds. It’s important on journalistic grounds, too.”

The common thread weaving these posts together was the idea that what happened to Logan had to do with sexism and power. She was a target because women are targets throughout the world and while she was in a dangerous situation she was doing her job, like many other fellow reporters in Cairo that day. The Daily Beast explained, the assault was “the worst of 140 such reports of reporters being targeted during Egypt’s rising” (2011) and according to The Daily Dish, “it isn’t just reporters who face these kinds of danger” (2011).

Sacred White Women and the Muslim “Animals”

The discourse surrounding Logan’s assault unsurprisingly morphed into a discussion about race and the imagined violent component of Islamic masculinity. As Rachel Newcomb (2011), professor of anthropology at Rollins College, noted on The Huffington Post, “The media sprang alive in search of a scapegoat.” The scapegoat included “blaming Muslims or Egyptian culture for the assault.” Logan, a white woman, was attacked by a mob of “savages” a.k.a. Middle Eastern men and discourse quickly erupted with explanations—many highlighting the ethnicity of the participants. The discourse was reminiscent of traditional and racist white victim/black rapist narratives found in US culture. The analysis illustrated how blog contributors were able to counter this discourse casting blame on an entire racial or religious population. Further, the discourse highlighted the realities of sexual assault against women noting they are not unique to Middle East or Islamic cultures.

Debbie Schlussel (2011) wrote one of the most widely talked about blog texts that blamed Islam for Logan’s attack. The political commentator wrote “Islam is violent” and the assault on Logan would have never happened when Mubarak “was allowed to treat his country of savages in the only way they can be controlled.” Schlussel further noted Logan should have expected such treatment from “Muslim animals.” Michelle Malkin, a frequent guest on Fox News, stated on the cable news network that the assault on Logan was “business as usual for many parts of the Middle East” (Media Matters 2011). Racist statements such as these resemble central aspects of the discursive practices of dominant groups in the context of colonialism and imperialism to assert and reinforce power and status differences (see Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; O’Donnell 1999). These comments also propelled those in the blogosphere to counter these falsehoods—which included a number of voices from beyond the realm of traditional media.

Carol Muske-Dukes, an English professor at the University of Southern California, noted the oppression of women in Muslim countries in her blog entry but reminded readers of the oppression against women in the United States. She wrote:

I do not feel safe knowing that in South Dakota, Republicans proposed a bill that could make it legal to murder a doctor who provides abortion care to women. The state legislature of Georgia would like to change the legal term for victims of rape, stalking and domestic violence to “accuser”—in effect, denying victims their right to accurate representation by description. In Congress, Republicans have put forward a bill that would force hospitals to let a woman die rather than perform an abortion that would save her life.
Shannon Galpin, president and founder of Mountain2Mountain, wrote, “sexual assault is not a problem that belongs only to the Middle East” (Galpin 2011). Sharing her own rape story, she reminded readers of news reports that had recently surfaced about US Secretaries of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Robert Gates’ failure to attend to the rape cases and sexual assaults in the US military. Galpin noted in the United States a woman is sexually assaulted every two minutes and one in six women in this country are attacked. Parvez Ahmed (2011), an associate professor at the University of North Florida, reiterated Galpin’s viewpoint arguing that in the United States, where nearly half of all murders of women are committed by a romantic partner, “abuse of women is just as problematic in conservative Muslim societies as they are in the liberal West.” Apart from stressing that sexual assault is common in the United States, the blogosphere offered the perspective that Logan’s attack should not be reduced to a narrative dominated by race or faith, or an attack on a white woman by Middle Eastern men. Instead Logan’s attack should be viewed as another horrific example of the violence women suffer everywhere. Tala Dowlatshahi (2011), senior adviser and US representative of Reporters Without Borders—the Paris-based media watchdog organization—wrote that it was time “to give up the habit of deploying ethnic stereotypes in our efforts to explain sexual violence.” Ursula Lindsey (2011), a reporter based in Cairo, noted 83 percent of Egyptian women have been the target of sexual assault, arguing that sexual assault in Egypt happens to women—not just white women.

Matt Cornell (2011), guest blogger on Sociological Images, further noted there was no evidence that Logan’s assailants were Muslims. Cornell posited that Logan’s attackers could have very well been pro-Mubarak thugs or apolitical opportunists. Mary Elizabeth Williams, a writer and radio commentator, stressed that even if Logan’s assailants were Muslims (10 percent of Egyptians are Christians), Islam is a religion that a few million people share and the brutal acts of a few should not define the character of millions (Williams 2011). Williams, alongside many other bloggers, also stressed that Logan’s skin color had nothing to do with her attack.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Newspapers, television, and movies have traditionally served as sites where struggles for cultural meaning play out. Now with the Internet, and specifically the popular news blogosphere, a new space has opened as a site for hegemonic struggle. Considering the new electronic landscape, this research asked if and how popular news blogs expanded patriarchal news discourse to allow for more diverse, feminist perspectives about rape and sexual assault on women. This study found that news blogs have indeed allowed for more varied voices to emerge.

Rather than professional journalists shaping the rape discourse, often informed through historical and patriarchal understandings of rape and journalistic norms, values, and routines, the blogosphere offered the opportunity for a freer form and a variety of voices (often university professors). In contesting and censuring traditional rape narratives, these blog posts presented feminist understandings of sexual violence within this online public space. Given that bloggers’ entries are not bound by traditional news requirements such as objectivity or timeliness, bloggers were free to offer various forms of information, including personal viewpoints. These bloggers did not identify themselves necessarily as feminists, but in using certain articulations to conceptualize rape mainstreamed feminist explanatory frameworks for this crime.
With this in mind, our research explored how traditional and feminist articulations of rape intermingled in this mediated public space. Three main themes surfaced, providing an interactive dialogue between patriarchal rape narratives and feminist (re)articulations. Thus, the focus on Logan’s appearance was explicitly criticized as well as the notion that Logan got herself attacked for just going into a conflict zone. Further, issues of race, while prevalent in the debate, were also countered. These racial and ethnic debates also fit neatly into traditional rape discourses of fear and violence used to uphold the power of dominant classes, as shown by colonial studies.

Racism has long played a role in the rape discourse in US culture and in colonial and imperialist practices. Benedict (1992) is among those who have noted how black men have been marked as sex-hungry animals in the rape discourse, particularly when white women were involved. O’Donnell (1999), among others, has also stressed the rape panic used to repress men of color in Colonial times. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Muslim men have become the new racialized enemy in US culture. Baird noted that in rape the “imagined Arab body, a simultaneous reflection and reproduction of long-standing and recently intensified racist views of Arabs and Muslim which posits them as uncivilized, essentially evil and indeed inhuman” (2009, 380). The racist language found in the text within the blogosphere illustrated this demonization of Muslim men and the assumed link between Islamic masculinity and sexual violence. The discourse noted that the attack was “not surprising from” and a “sign of cultural norms” in the Arab/Muslim/Middle East world. This unfortunate racial construction reinforces the myth that only the Western world is civilized while the rest of the global community remains trapped in barbaric times.

The second research question that drove this study inquired if and how popular news blogs contributed to more wide-ranging and diverse perspectives on Logan’s assault. The findings revealed that the blogosphere did host a varied and dynamic number of perspectives as bloggers (rather than only media professionals) could offer their impassioned viewpoints without necessarily conforming to particular news organizations’ rules and by providing links to other sources to bolster their arguments and demonstrate their standpoints.

While some traditional rape narratives were common in the discourse, there are numerous signs for encouragement, as this analysis shows feminist understandings of rape myths and sexual violence entered into the public discourse and mainstreamed by bloggers in the contemporary media landscape. Traditional hegemonic notions of rape still found a voice in the discussion but were consistently and ruthlessly countered through a feminist articulation. The common thread in this critique was that these kinds of arguments are irrelevant and ignorant and they say nothing about the crime itself. Although some blog readers may not have encountered these feminist discourses at all, the fact that they occurred even in non-feminist spaces such as popular news blogs suggests that the attempts to rearticulate rape have made progress within the online mainstream public sphere.

Our third research question asked if and how popular news blogs had allowed voices outside of the traditional news authority to contribute to the shaping of the discourse of Logan’s assault. The findings demonstrated that the blogosphere welcomed a wide array of voices and discourses—from seasoned journalists to stay-at-home mothers and professors, and those presenting hegemonic narratives and feminist ideals. One of the key differences worth noting between bloggers and traditional journalists who covered the Logan assault was that bloggers, unlike traditional journalists, chose to participate in this discourse. These
inspired writers presented a passionate perspective, offering richness and depth to the discourse.

Furthermore, and especially noteworthy, bloggers criticized traditional mainstream coverage of the Logan attack—contesting traditional arguments, urging people to stop blaming Logan, and sending a consistent message that sexist rhetoric had no place in the debate. These bloggers engaged in a deliberate effort to shape the discourse on rape and essentially became watchdogs of the watchdogs. In this struggle for meaning, bloggers contributed to a more diverse perspective on Logan’s assault, oftentimes based on feminist understandings within which to conceptualize rape.

News blog contributors also illustrated how the blogosphere offers a space to debate these issues and sympathize and support Logan. Further, the discourse included a call for action, saying it is time as a society to address and do more to prevent sexual violence and harassment against female correspondents and journalists. Truly the blogosphere in this instance became a vehicle for feminist action. Also, this is an important public dialogue to take place as women continue to break barriers and do work that has traditionally been seen as being beyond their abilities or too dangerous.

This study explored the role of news blogs in expanding and adding to our understanding of rape in public discourse and showed that in the struggle to define rape, feminist articulations challenged patriarchal authority and meanings. This finding alone illustrates the importance of examining rape narratives beyond the traditional news and entertainment media. Future research should expand the sample of analysis and include other outlets and online communities, such as Facebook groups, forums, and readers’ comments, as they all contribute to the public discourse on rape. Comparisons of this online mediated discourse with the mainstream media discourse might also prove fruitful. In any case, the contested ideological terrain occupied by rape narratives is ripe for more analysis.

NOTES

1. Feminists have long challenged traditional misconceptions of rape. From debunking myths such as rape being a rare occurrence to redefining the problem as male violence against women regardless of who the woman is, where the woman was, or what she was wearing.
2. Two months later, in a 60 Minutes interview, Logan described the assault as the mob’s “hands raping me over and over and over again” (CBS News 2011b).
3. At times the blogs would link to some of their own content, and in several cases the various blogs made reference to the same external content (e.g., the CBS statement on Logan’s attack).
5. Debbie Schlussel’s categorization of the Egyptian people—not just Logan’s attackers.
6. Traditional news has been institutionalized as a male domain with a masculine narrative (Rakow and Kranich 1991).
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