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2-5-2018

## Evaluating the Evaluators

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### Repository Citation

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## **Evaluating the Evaluators:**

**How news organizations select and report stories in contemporary and  
historical perspective**

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Dr. Hannah

Departmental Honors required paper

5 February 2018

Various news shows use different methods to report the same stories. In an attempt to understand this better, I watched and compared three news shows airing simultaneously on various networks, as well as viewing the front page of the *New York Times*, all from the same day – October 5, 2017. *ABC World News Tonight*, *Fox News Special Report with Bret Baier*, and *PBS NewsHour* were the shows under scrutiny, and while each show covered a large amount of the same material, they allotted varying amounts of time to certain subjects. Interestingly, while three of them largely focused on the same topics, they varied significantly from the front page that day of the *New York Times*. Ultimately, the Organizational model of newsmaking best explains the format and content of these television shows, and I conclude that, if a viewer could only watch one show, he would be most informed by watching *PBS*.

Starting with *ABC World News Tonight*,<sup>1</sup> for being part of the so-called “liberal media,” I did not notice much of any heavy bias. The show consisted of having many guests on to discuss certain topics, which was largely in the first half of the show, but the anchor, David Muir, did a fair amount of talking when there were no guests. Given the temporal proximity to the Las Vegas shooting, it came as no surprise that most of the topics related to the shooter and his girlfriend. There was speculation as to whether or not he had an accomplice, and the show also covered the ensuing debate in Congress over bump stocks and gun control in general. Other topics covered were Harvey Weinstein’s sexual harassment allegations, Green Berets killed in an ambush in Niger, a GOP Congressman resigning due to a sex scandal, Cam Newton’s sexist comments, impending natural disasters, and Jeff Sessions saying transgender individuals are no longer legally protected from workplace discrimination. The show then closed with a couple soft news stories. Regarding the format of the show, it largely consisted of guest appearances, where they

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42Ud8ao9Vrg>. Accessed 7 October 2017.

had prepared a voiceover video clip regarding about what they are brought on to speak, followed by some live comments and interaction with the host afterwards.

Similarly, *Fox News Special Report with Bret Baier*<sup>2</sup> did an excellent job of not being blatantly partisan, despite being regarded as a heavily partisan news source. Roughly one-third to one-half of the show was dedicated to continuing coverage of the Las Vegas shooter, his girlfriend, other prospective attacks, and the weapons he used. Relatedly, further regulation of bump stocks and the overall gun control debate were subjects discussed on the show. Something *Fox News* did differently from *ABC* in this regard, though, was to play numerous clips of both Democratic and Republican lawmakers on this issue, rather than just a few Republicans. Other topics covered included an ambush on Green Berets in Niger, Russian hacking into US state secrets, a GOP Congressman resigning in a sex scandal, the Iran nuclear deal, Harvey Weinstein's sexual harassment allegations, impending natural disasters, and the Virginia governor's race and how it relates to public sentiment on gun control. The format of the show was guest-heavy, consisting of numerous voiceover videos, followed by brief live comments. The host also did some speaking, and towards the end of the show there was a three-person panel brought on to further discuss issues that had been briefly covered.

Unsurprisingly, *PBS NewsHour*<sup>3</sup> spent a large amount of time on the Las Vegas shooter, as well as the overall gun control debate. However, *PBS* also spent a large amount of time on several other topics, including Russia's hacking efforts, fighting ISIS in Syria, and the ambush in Niger. There was a mini-documentary about how the opioid crisis is affecting businesses. Topics that garnered less attention were a GOP Congressman resigning in a sex scandal, impending natural disasters, the House budget vote, DACA, conditions on Wall Street, and distracted

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgfr6Yy9SjU>. Accessed 7 October 2017.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ye2FfK\\_t9qk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ye2FfK_t9qk). Accessed 9 October 2017.

driving. Similar to the other two shows, *NewsHour* was largely either interviews or voiceover videos. When guests were interviewed, they had plenty of time to answer each question without being interrupted. Production-wise, in contrast to *ABC* and *Fox News*, there was very little background music throughout the show, particularly in some places where there easily could have been some.

Interestingly, the front page of the *New York Times*<sup>4</sup> contained largely different material from what these three newscasts covered, as well as displaying clear partisan bias. The agreement in coverage revolved around the Las Vegas shooter and the Congressional debate surrounding bump stocks. Here, though, is where the noticeable partisan bias absent in the television shows seeps through. In the article, Republicans are described as those people who “bottled up gun legislations, even as the carnage of mass shootings grew ever more gruesome and the weapons used grew ever more deadly...they blocked legislation to stop guns sales to buyers on terror watch lists.”<sup>5</sup> These statements are utterly devoid of context, particularly the second one, and a reader could be forgiven for thinking Republicans consider these actions to be acceptable. The only other story that appeared in all four sources was the ambush of Green Berets in Niger, and even then, the *Times* only gave this story a headline at the bottom of the page, with once sentence of text beneath it. Otherwise, none of the other frontpage headlines and stories made their way into the newscasts. There was an article about a Louisville men’s basketball recruit, drug shortages in Puerto Rico, Secretary of State Tillerson’s recent spat with President Trump, and other short headlines about sports and some soft news. Overall, just three

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/images/2017/10/05/nytfrofrontpage/scan.pdf>. Accessed 10 October 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Stromberg, Sheryl Gay, and Tiffany Hsu. "After Years of Resistance, GOP May Finally Back Gun Control Measure." *New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 5 Oct. 2017. Web. 10 Oct. 2017.

out of seventeen headlines from the *Times* made an appearance in the nightly newscasts in question.

For this reason, I do not believe there is evidence of pack journalism<sup>6</sup> for this day of the news. I do not consider all four sources spending large amounts of time on the Las Vegas shooter an example of everyone following the *Times*' lead; given that this was only four days after the largest mass shooting in American history, it is not surprising that the country should still be attuned to it. Also, such an event is sure to elicit a Congressional response, especially since gun control is such a heated topic. Further, the only other overlapping story was about the Green Berets killed in Niger; however, this story garnered much more attention on the shows than it did on the front page of the paper.

Additionally, each show spent large amounts of time talking about stories that merited no attention on the front page of the *Times*. All three covered the GOP Congressman's sex scandal and impending natural disasters, two covered Harvey Weinstein's harassment allegations (*ABC*, *Fox News*), the Iran deal (*Fox News*, *PBS*), and Congressional budget discussions (*Fox News*, *PBS*), and one covered several others – the opioid epidemic (*PBS*), Cam Newton's comments (*ABC*), the American economy (*Fox News*), Congress' to-do list (*PBS*), and the fight against ISIS (*PBS*). It seems unlikely that there was a domestic bias present in the *Times* for leaving out the Iran deal and ISIS stories, since that would not explain the other domestic stories they left out. If we were to find evidence of pack journalism, I think it would be in the fact that, of the four stories that overlap in all three broadcast stations, two of the most prominently featured stories on the *Times* frontpage made the top story in all three, the top two stories in two out of the three, and at least appeared in all three. The chart below demonstrates:

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<sup>6</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide* (United States: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), 84-5.

<i>ABC</i>	<i>Fox News</i>	<i>PBS</i>
1) Vegas shooter	1) Vegas shooter	1) Vegas shooter (more later)
2) Bump stock debate	2) Gun control debate	2) GOP Rep. scandal
3) Niger ambush	3) GOP Rep. scandal	3) Niger ambush
4) GOP Rep. scandal	4) Niger ambush	4) Gun control debate (brief)

If there was one news sources that bucked the trend, it was *PBS*, giving only a short intro with the Las Vegas shooter, followed by more detailed stories later in the broadcast, and only briefly and tangentially discussed the gun control/bump stock debate in a different segment.

Interestingly, and perhaps relatedly, it is also the one non-commercial news source of these four. Ultimately, though, for the reasons given above, I do not think this is strong enough to conclude that pack journalism was the driving force behind the television news stories selected.

Assuming that *ABC*, *Fox News*, and *PBS* were not reliant on the *New York Times* for the selection of their stories, how should we explain the differences in the stories they chose and in the way they chose to structure their shows? I believe the Organizational model of newsmaking best explains their behavior. This model holds that news institutions decide what makes the news based on organizational processes and their goals.<sup>7</sup> For instance, *Fox News* played to their more Republican base by spending more time on both the Iran deal (six minutes) and the Niger incident (4 minutes) than either of the other networks (approximately 25% of their show time).

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<sup>7</sup> A. Lee Hannah, "Models of Newsmaking," Political Science 4300: Politics and the Media, Wright State University, Fall 2017. Ultimately, while I do think that the Professional model has strong explanatory power, I do not believe that it was the best explanation, for this reason: Each network aired a batch of stories that was not identical to the other two newscasts – each had a few unique stories. I could not think that the reason, say, Fox News and PBS did not air the story about Cam Newton (as ABC did) was because it was not economically viable. Clearly it was, otherwise ABC would not have aired it. The difference, I believe lies in the audience and the goals of the specific networks, which points to the Organizational model.

Compared to *PBS*, which also spent significant time on the Niger incident, *Fox News* took a more openly pro-military approach to the overall story, having a former Green Beret himself on the show (again in line with their audience's general disposition) than did *PBS*, which was by no means anti-military or critical of the military, instead opting to have a professor on to simply give information. *PBS* had the ability to somewhat sidestep the market pressures for past-paced entertaining presentation, which was evident by how they had extended segments with guests, allowing them to give more in-depth and detailed answers. Also, due to not airing any commercials, they had time to air a 10-minute (or 10% of their show time) mini-documentary about the opioid crisis. On a different track, *ABC* decided to air more sensational topics, being the only channel to cover the both the GOP Congressman sex scandal, Harvey Weinstein's sexual harassment allegations, and Cam Newton's sexist press conference remarks. I am not sure why *ABC* chose to air more sensationalized topics; my only inference is that these are more eye-catching stories, and *ABC*, due to being accessible to regular television viewers,<sup>8</sup> chose to show stories that would retain more casual viewers. However, *PBS* is just as available to anyone with a television as *ABC* is, so this explanation faces some weakness there. Perhaps this has something to do with *ABC*'s commercial structure or its overall entertainment aspect that *PBS* lacks.

The data pertaining to the number of daily viewers may shed light on this matter. *ABC World News Tonight* has the highest daily total viewers, drawing 8.3 million viewers per night.<sup>9</sup> *Fox News Special Report with Bret Baier* comes in second with 2.4 million daily viewers,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> By that I mean neither a cable news channel nor behind a paywall.

<sup>9</sup> <http://beta.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-network-news-ratings-20170927-story.html>. Accessed 11 October 2017.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2016/03/30/fox-news-channel-ratings-top-all-cable-networks-for-first-time.html>. Accessed 11 October 2017.



while *PBS NewsHour* comes in a distant third, with 1.3 million daily viewers.<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps, the explanation lies in the reverse – maybe it is because they include a dose of popular-level coverage, mixed with enough serious news, that *ABC* has the numbers they do. It could also relate to the pattern of soft news in each station. *PBS* had 30 seconds of soft news toward the end, *Fox News* has no soft news, and *ABC* had three minutes of soft news in the second half of the show. This is an observation, though, not an explanation. Ultimately, I do not know, and am not sure why.

But which network do I think did the best job reporting and why? To begin with, I was surprised by little overt bias I found among each of the channels. While they all prioritized their stories a little different, and even had large amounts of overlapping material, there were no outlandish claims made in one that did not appear in the others. Understandably, each show focused more on the GOP during the gun control debate, since that was the part suddenly put on defense by the shooting. Upon closer examination, however, I was able to find certain types of bias among each network in the stories that overlapped in all three.<sup>12</sup> The only example I could find of gatekeeping bias – reporting stories of a particular nature – was that *ABC* did not have as many military-oriented stories as the other two. Granted, they had a 30-minute show instead of an hour-long show, but their coverage of the Niger incident was only 20 seconds, which was significantly proportionally less. Regarding coverage bias – giving more attention to certain stories – all three covered the GOP Congressman’s sex scandal, but *ABC* gave it much more attention, both actually and proportionally, with 100 seconds of coverage, whereas *PBS* and *Fox*

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/tv/z-on-tv-blog/bal-pbs-newshour-huge-audience-loss-20131018-story.html>. Accessed 11 October 2017. While these numbers are from 2013, they are the most recent I could find, and PBS NewsHour is actually hemorrhaging viewers, down from 2.5 million daily in 2005.

<sup>12</sup> A. Lee Hannah, “What drives media slant,” Political Science 4300: Politics and the Media, Wright State University, Fall 2017.

*News* only gave it 20 seconds each. For statement bias – covering stories in a certain way – *Fox News* gave the most attention to the gun control debate, and included statements and clips from several Democrats along with Republicans, something *ABC* and *PBS* did not do.

Overall, each network did a better job conveying hard news in a bias-free way than I expected. The vaunted “liberal media” made no outlandish claims or egregious insinuations, and *Fox News* stayed away from turning the gun control debate into a sky-is-falling “they are coming for our guns” commentary, and just stuck with giving the same details and timeline that the other two did.

But which station did the best job conveying political news? In terms of quantity, *PBS* got the most in, due to more air time. I take political news to mean hard news, so in terms of quality, I would think not *ABC*, due to their spending much more time on soft news than the other two. Between *Fox News* and *PBS*, *Fox News* had more clips of direct quotes from the individuals about which they were talking, and *PBS* had more professional commentary. Both have pros and cons – showing videos of people talking allows viewer to see and hear directly from the sources, but the short length often means it is devoid of context. Having largely commentators means that the viewer is hearing from a talking head rather than the sources themselves, but extended conversations with talking heads can give the viewer a better understanding of the big picture. Neither show had dissident guests on this evening, so there was no real debate. If a viewer were to watch only one of these two shows, he would not have a skewed view of the news; in the overlapping content there was no discernible partisan bias. In terms of entertainment, *Fox News* had more images and videos than *PBS*, but entertainment value does not an informative show make. Ultimately, I think a viewer would be most informed by watching *PBS*, despite the fact that they had no debate, opting instead to give the floor to a

single expert. They covered the most number of topics, even though some were very brief, and gave the most detailed answers.

Three major stories, though, deserve a closer look. Each of these types of events (mass shooting, military surprise, and sexual harassment) have been reported on before and will most likely be reported on again. Thus, the way in which the media handled them on this day in the news compared to how they were handled in the past, as well as the ramifications from the manner of reporting, are of interest when evaluating the news.

A topic that has generated more discussion in academic literature than in popular discussion, though not for lack of seriousness, is the affect that media has on future mass shootings. Extended, continued, and dramatized coverage of mass shootings has a high likelihood of providing a template for other disaffected and deranged individuals to undertake similar actions.<sup>13</sup> In an article titled “Mass Media reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings,” the author identifies seven stages of reporting mass shootings that the media typically follow: 1) Tragic shock, usually followed by attention-grabbing headlines; 2) First Witness Reports, consisting of frantic survivors providing even more provocative headlines; 3) Identification of shooter; 4) Reports of character of shooter; 5) Media branding, where media outlets dramatize and produce a high-quality representation of the shooting; 6) Official response and official report; and 7) Return to stage 1, and begin cycle again. “Discussions about guns, mental health, and bullying in the United States do take place and are reported briefly by the media after notorious shootings, but not until the gory details describing the shootings has run its profiting course.”<sup>14</sup> It is these “gory details” and the continual coverage of the event that draws the

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<sup>13</sup> “Murray, Jennifer L. “Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings,” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*. 2017; Meindl, James and Jonathan Ivy, “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation,” *American Journal of Public Health*. 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Murray, “Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings,” 7.

attention and admiration of similarly-disaffected individuals, whatever the reason for their ostracization may be. The sensationalized version of the shootings, and the riveting attention they garner, provide future shooters “with a comradery-focused fantasy, someone to relate to, justify their own actions, and have an ego-boosting fantasized goal to out-do them.”<sup>15</sup> Notes left behind from mass-shooters at Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora, Sandy Hook, and others justify this conclusion.<sup>16</sup>

Law enforcement at the highest levels has recognized this pattern of imitation among mass shooters. After the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, then-director of the FBI James Comey refused to use the killer’s name in a press conference so as to not give the shooter the attention he desired.<sup>17</sup> Other suggestions have been to not profile the shooter with such detail, reduce the overall coverage of the shooting, or not broadcast live press conferences in the immediate aftermath of the shooting.<sup>18</sup> Granted, these are unlikely to happen, at least from for-profit news media – “the more violence is displayed, the more popular it becomes as a form of entertainment’...therefore, media companies have a significant financial interest in delivering what the public desires to consume.”<sup>19</sup> All this is not to say that the media is to blame for the sequence of mass shootings in the United States; stripping the shooter of personal agency is unwise and dangerous. It is, however, to recognize a self-repeating pattern with these types of scenarios. Regarding how the Las Vegas shooter heavily covered in this night of news, it is unclear how much prior media coverage of mass shootings influenced him. Many details are still

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<sup>15</sup> Murray, “Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings,” 7. Additionally, “Similarities between the shooter and others are brought to the surface through detailed accounts of the life of the shooter, with which others may identify.” (Meindl and Ivy, “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation,” 2.

<sup>16</sup> Murray, “Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings,” 8.

<sup>17</sup> Meindl and Ivy, “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation,” 2.

<sup>18</sup> Meindl and Ivy, “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation,” 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Murray, “Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings,” 1, quoting Steven Levy.

unknown, such as his motives and any notes left behind regarding this shooting. However, as detailed above, significant time was spent on him, his shooting, eyewitness reports, footage from the shooting, and nationwide responses to it on a political level, as well as having his image in the eyes and name on the lips of opinion leaders, late night comedians, internet commentators, and newscasters around the country for several weeks. If it was fame he was searching for, he got it. Due to the undoubted recurrence of mass shootings in the United States, it will have to be noted if any future attacks follow any patterns begun in Las Vegas, whether in the accessories to the weapons used or the method of execution.

While the media may have influence on patterns of mass shootings, patterns of reporting regarding unexpected military announcements are rather different, ranging from parroting the Administration's talking points to actively and openly questioning them. In this case, they take one of these routes quite specifically.

The ambush on American soldiers in Niger happened on October 4, so this was the first report of it.<sup>20</sup> Questions began to swirl about US military presence in Niger, ranging from surprise we were there to what exactly we were doing there. The Department of Defense released the identities of soldiers killed on October 6, and on October 12 they placed blame on a group they believe is affiliated with ISIS. President Trump took 12 days to officially recognize that four US soldiers were killed in Niger, making a statement on October 16, and then made a striking claim that his predecessors did not make phone calls to families of soldiers killed in combat. Several high-ranking Congressmen were not content with the curt explanations given, and the Pentagon announced further investigation into attack. Senator John McCain, particularly

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<sup>20</sup> <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/356541-timeline-the-trump-administrations-response-to-the-attack-in-niger>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

displeased with the handling to the ambush and the Trump Administration's handling of it, threatened a subpoena if the President's Administration was not forthcoming.

With this information with which to work, did the media take the Trump Administration's official line (also known as indexing), or did they question it? These news outlets, on this night and in future nights (at least so far), seem to be taking the official line from the Trump Administration. To the extent that are questioning it, they are merely reporting what several members of Congress have been asking, and the skeptical stance they are taking, specifically Senators McCain and Lindsay Graham.

Given the short time gap from the recent nature of the event, it is not surprising that indexing appears as prominently as it does in these reports and in the reports of the weeks to follow. Also, since "the press can represent an adversarial posture only when opponents of government policy outnumber (or prove more vocal than) proponents"<sup>21</sup>, indexing is also not surprising. The most vocal voices that were not in lockstep with the Trump Administration were not necessarily criticizing it; Sens. Graham and McCain used their voices to demand answers, not give alternative explanations. Further, given that the opponent the U.S. and Nigerien soldiers were fighting was an ISIS-affiliate, it would be unlikely that media members would reach out to them for an alternate explanation of the events.<sup>22</sup> French forces were also cooperating with the U.S. and Nigerien forces, so they would likely give the same story as the U.S. did.

From the government's side, three weeks after the ambush the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs said that his preference for publishing information about this story would be to wait and gather more information to present to the media, rather than have the media present bits and

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<sup>21</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide* (United States: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), 95.

<sup>22</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide* (United States: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2016), 97.

pieces as they become known.<sup>23</sup> Further, the official response from Defense Secretary James Mattis was nearly identical to what the press had reported thus far.<sup>24</sup> This general attitude of waiting for official information to be given can be seen on the flipside from the reaction of the press in the weeks following the event. *Fox News* (not necessarily *Special Report*) published an article on October 23 which did not present much new information, and the new information they did provide came from official sources, toeing the Trump Administration's line.<sup>25</sup> *PBS NewsHour* published another article the day after my viewing of their newscast, and their updated information also came from the Trump Administration, with numerous paragraphs in the article beginning with, "U.S. officials say" or "U.S. officials describe."<sup>26</sup> *ABC* (not only *World News Tonight*) did the most follow-up on this story, with several videos providing updated accounts. In three videos from about three weeks after the attack, *ABC* still largely took the official line on the story.<sup>27</sup> Another video aired that was an animated narrative of the ambush, which still relied wholly on official sources.<sup>28</sup> Only one video did not depend entirely on sources from the Trump Administration, instead including information from an anonymous intelligence official and a survivor of the attack.<sup>29</sup> Given that the official reports had not yet concluded, and

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/26/top-general-is-very-frustrated-with-the-drip-drip-drip-of-information-on-deadly-niger-attack/?utm\\_term=.2459a107b068](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/26/top-general-is-very-frustrated-with-the-drip-drip-drip-of-information-on-deadly-niger-attack/?utm_term=.2459a107b068). Accessed 21 November 2017.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/jim-mattis-defends-response-to-ambush-in-niger-that-killed-4-us-troops/article/2176909>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/10/23/pentagon-updates-niger-ambush-timeline-says-us-troops-called-for-air-support-hour-after-attack.html>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/fourth-u-s-soldier-found-dead-attack-niger>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

<sup>27</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/details-ambush-us-service-members-niger-50781255>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

<sup>28</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/deadly-niger-ambush-killed-us-soldiers-50700363>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

<sup>29</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/details-niger-ambush-killed-us-soldiers-50676604>. Accessed 21 November 2017.

the Trump Administration was not actively releasing significant amounts of new information, the slant towards indexing is not surprising.

If there was a part of this story where the media did not necessarily take the Administration's line (albeit further down the calendar than the day I watched the news), it was in the fallout around the content of his call to the wife of Sgt. La David Johnson, one of the soldiers killed, and the version of the call given by Congresswoman Frederica Davis, who was with Sgt. Johnson's wife when President Trump called. This story received plenty of attention, with much credence being given to the version from Sgt. Johnson's wife and the Congresswoman.

Different from either mass shootings or military surprises, how the media reports on sexual harassment both influences behavior and is influenced by other behavior. Cultural trends, which don't originate from the media but are disseminated by them nonetheless, influence the behavior of the individuals on which the media reports, demonstrating how the media plays two roles in these situations. These two behaviors can be seen in how the media handled the Harvey Weinstein story compared to how they have handled stories of a similar nature in decades past. The Harvey Weinstein story first broke on October 5, so this was the first coverage of it. Once the first allegations were made public, however, it was not long before over 30 women in total accused him of behavior ranging from sexual harassment to rape.<sup>30</sup> As if contagious, accusations of other high-profile figures began to pop up, with dozens of men being accused similar behavior.<sup>31</sup> What made the reporting on these stories distinctive, however, was how the women making these accusations were almost unanimously believed.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/us/harvey-weinstein-accusations.html>. Accessed 30 November 2017.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/10/us/men-accused-sexual-misconduct-weinstein.html>. Accessed 30 November 2017.



In a major incident in the 1990s that is representative of how the media previously handled sexual assault claims, an incident with the Navy at Tailhook highlights the dominant way in which these stories were handled. At a large conference for the United States Navy, several male soldiers were accused of sexually harassing female soldiers, with the accusations ranging from verbal to physical. The female officer who first brought the charges was met with stiff resistance – she was not taken seriously by either her superiors or the media. Instead, when this story became public news (and it was not immediately), the media engaged in massive victim-blaming of the accuser and the other women who came forward to corroborate her account.<sup>32</sup> Months later, several female Congressional legislators brought renewed attention to the incident. Even then, thought, the focus was more on how the Navy handled the cover-up than the harassment and behavior they were covering-up.<sup>33</sup> Further, the media was delinquent in publishing pertinent information.<sup>34</sup> When they did publish information, it was decidedly one-sided – the primary accuser is labeled by the media as a “party girl,” “willing participant in sexual proclivities,” and by other sailors (which the media dutifully quoted), as a “whore,” a “tease,” and “promiscuous.”<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, given the nature of the topic and its connection to the government, the media relied on official governmental sources for the first four years of covering the story.<sup>36</sup> “Only when powerful women legislators directly challenged the male power structure did the mainstream media present a front-page story.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Kasinsky, Renee Goldsmith, “Tailhook and the Construction of sexual Harassment in the Media: ‘Rowdy Navy Boys’ and the Women Who Made a Difference, *Violence against Women*, 1998. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Kasinsky, “Tailhook and the Construction of Sexual Harassment in the Media,” 10.

<sup>34</sup> Kasinsky, “Tailhook and the Construction of Sexual Harassment in the Media,” 11.

<sup>35</sup> Kasinsky, “Tailhook and the Construction of Sexual Harassment in the Media,” 9.

<sup>36</sup> Kasinsky, “Tailhook and the Construction of Sexual Harassment in the Media,” 14.

<sup>37</sup> Kasinsky, “Tailhook and the Construction of Sexual Harassment in the Media,” 15.

Similarly, particularly in print media, there has been a specific pattern that most reports of sexual harassment would follow. Scant details are given about both the accused and the accuser, and most of the focus is on the accuser. This one-sidedness is pervasive unless the story garnered significant attention. Even then, most of the communication flowed through the attorneys of both the accused and the accuser. If litigation followed the accusation, the lion-share of the story focused on events during and after litigation, rather than the accusation that sparked them.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout the decades of reporting on sexual harassment, one factor has stayed the same – when one woman comes forward with a sexual harassment story, it encourages other women to come forward with their stories. Additionally, when placed in a political context, it encourages many women to run for office. This is likely part of the reason why in the 2017 midterm elections, particularly in Virginia, women were elected in numbers much larger than normal.<sup>39</sup>

While there was a flurry of accusations against high-profile celebrities and politicians (and even low-level politicians) after the initial Weinstein accusations, a slow trickle had begun in the years prior with other celebrities. Not until the past few years, however, would accusations like those against Weinstein be taken as seriously as they were. Starting in the 1990s through the 2010s, several famous men were accused of sexual harassment – Clarence Thomas, Bill Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tiger Woods, Anthony Weiner, and Bill O'Reilly being the most notably, among others. Chronologically, those towards the beginning of the list got a “pass” from the media, while those towards the end did not. Why the difference?

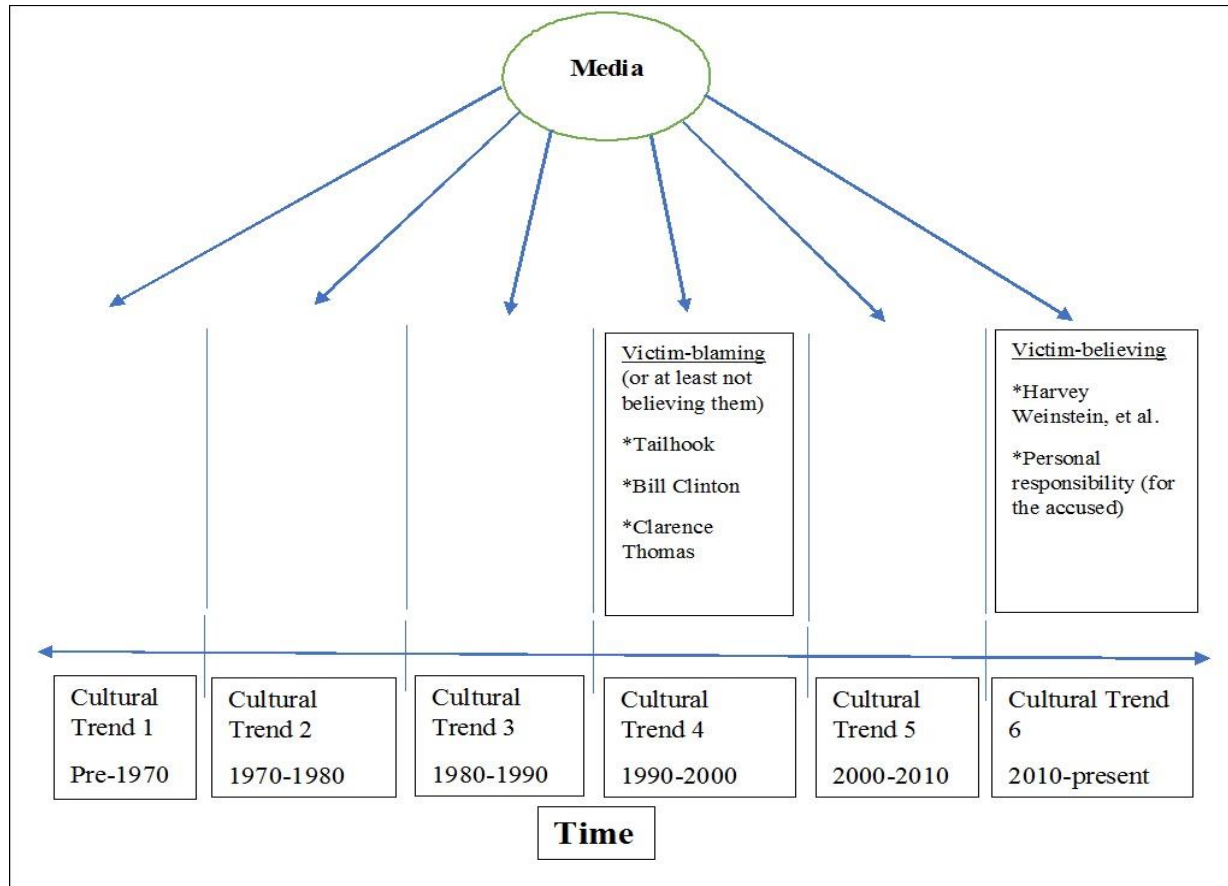
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<sup>38</sup> Hersch, Joni, “He Said, She Said, Let’s Hear What the Data Say: Sexual Harassment in the Media, Courts, EEOC, and Social Science,” *Kentucky Law Journal*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/08/democratic-women-state-elections-244726>. Accessed 1 December 2017.

The media reports on sexual harassment allegations according to the cultural trends of the time. For instance, in the 1990s, more aspects of cultural institutions (media, Hollywood, politics, etc) were more male-dominated than they currently are. As such, the cultural trend that comes out of these establishments will be slanted towards to benefit of those in power. Reports of sexual harassment (whether legitimate or not) were thusly slanted to be more favorable to the accused than the accuser, as demonstrated by the incidents at Tailhook, Bill Clinton's allegations, and Clarence Thomas' allegation. All three of these were significant events that deserved to be taken seriously. Media representations of them, however, were characterized by victim-blaming, or at least not believing the victim. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than by the Tailhook incident (eg, "party girls" getting what they had coming). More recently, starting around 2010, this trend started to change. Significant cultural figures, whether athletes, celebrities, or politicians were more frequently accused and the court of public opinion, with the media as their lawyer, found them guilty more frequently. Tiger Woods' reputation was tarnished and his career tattered. Anthony Weiner is currently in jail. Bill O'Reilly is out after decades at Fox News. Bill Cosby, while acquitted, had his reputation checkered. More recently, the allegations against Harvey Weinstein have inspired a flurry of accusations against other notable figures in all walks of life (eg, Mark Halperin, Al Franken, Roy Moore, Matt Lauer, among dozens of others). Notably, the media now is giving these types of allegations significantly more attention than it did in the past, including more credence to the accusers and less leeway for the accused. This cultural trend has been characterized by victim-believing, rather than blaming, and focuses more on the personal responsibility of the accused rather than the accuser. As can be seen from the figure below, between Cultural Trend 4 and Cultural Trend 6, there was a change in who gets the benefit of the doubt. It cannot be said that sexual

harassment did not happen until 2010 or later, or that it only became much worse at the turn of the decade; they clearly happened, were just as serious, and the evidence for them existed. What changed was the cultural trend, influencing how they were reported.



One of the major ways by which this sparked a cultural change is through the #metoo movement on social media. Four days after the Harvey Weinstein story broke, a woman on Twitter started this trend in order to bring to light the prevalence of sexual harassment in normal situations.<sup>40</sup> In turn, this led to more women making public accusations, naming names of their harassers; the

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/10/the-movement-of-metoo/542979/>. Accessed 29 November 2017.

accusers were willing to name both themselves and the accused, a marked difference from previous reporting trends.

Further, given the prominence of the issue in national media, both political sides naturally latched on to it and had their own point of view. While both the Left and the Right quickly denounced Weinstein and his actions, many on the Right were quick to point out his ties to high-profile Democrats in recent years, most notably Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. In response, several Democrats reminded the Right of how President Trump has been accused of sexual harassment by multiple women, as well as the contents of the infamous Access Hollywood tape.<sup>41</sup> As more revelations became known about figures accused of sexual harassment, whether near or distant past, this quickly turned into a game of whataboutism.<sup>42</sup> If Roy Moore should step aside from his Senate race, then Al Franken should also step down from the Senate. If Bill Clinton got a pass for his behavior and accusations, then why are we applying a different standard to Donald Trump?

This is the reaction of partisan loyalists on either side of the political aisle, and their reactions are in large part shaped by the media presentation of the matter. Media behavior, thus, has a role that is not confined to a television or a piece of paper, isolated from the stories they cover. Choosing what stories to report, and their patterns of behavior while doing so, are vital functions of what distinguishes different news outlets from one another. Temporal cultural trends, when reporting on stories of sexual harassment, become a key factor in understanding how the media behaves. The level of trust put in government sources concerning military operations, such as the Niger incident, indicates both the influence of governmental pressures on

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/09/politics/clinton-obama-weinstein/index.html>. Accessed 29 November 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Whataboutism is a debate tactic that argues that your opponent is guilty of something that is just as bad, or even worse, with the goal of distracting from the original argument or accusation. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whataboutism-origin-meaning>. Accessed 29 November 2017.

reporting and the usual deference of the media to official sources concerning overseas armed forces operations. Interestingly, the media's intense movie-like coverage of mass shootings likely has an influence in the motives and planning of future mass shooters. The convergence of these factors across all three network news sources, in general and on the night which I watched, and despite their institutional differences and leanings, speaks to an overall similarity in how journalism and reporting is conducted.

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