

**Reformulation Theory:  
Gauging Feminist Impact on News of Violence Against Women<sup>1</sup>**  
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The communication of feminist ideas, political agendas, and achievements through the agency of women’s media activism has received scant attention from feminist scholars. And yet feminist communication has had measurable impact on the social fabric in the both the United States and other societies these last decades (Byerly, 2008). American feminist activist Ariel Dougherty (2007) reflects on her own decades of writing for feminist newsletters and founding film networks, where she was often “struggling to keep the networks alive.” She laments that these activities have been largely lost to both mainstream feminist and scholarly discourse (p. 25). How should the work that Dougherty and other women like her be evaluated in terms of its impact in public discourse represented in news?

This essay seeks to make a contribution in the realm of theory-building on women’s media activism by revisiting and extending the work that Byerly and Ross began with the book *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction* in 2006. The authors posed the Model of Women’s Media Action to show the structure of women’s media activism during second wave feminism and to demonstrate the ways that such activism has figured into the historical process of women’s liberation. The essay also builds on Bernadette Barker-Plummer’s (1995) research on feminist media activism by National Organization for Women, and other related studies. Together this small literature opens the intellectual space for further investigation and theory-building.

The essay seeks to achieve four things: (1) to make a case for radical theory building, (2) to locate such theory building within a context of feminist struggle and liberation, (3) to provide examples of useful conceptual and theoretical developments, and (4) to pose a new theory based on quantitative and qualitative findings from ongoing research on feminist media activism’s impact on news.

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Feminism, feminist movements, and women's liberation are terms that will be used interchangeably in the discussion. These refer to critiques of women's subjugation that have led to a range of activities aimed at overcoming that subjugation and extending women's rights during the last four decades. Groups and individuals undertaking those activities have included writers, organizers, and others working both on their own and together. Activism may be defined as embodying elements of dissent, resistance and rebellion (Hands, 2011, p. 3). In Hands' formulations, dissent is a protest against something, resistance as refusal to go along with something, and rebellion as a productive response to change something. The last of these goes to the heart of feminist media activism, which, following Hand's definition, was not just a protest by women against news and other media that ignored or misrepresented them, but also represented organized efforts to bring about a different system (p. 5). Byerly and Ross (2006) conceptualized the range of women's efforts to create more pro-feminist media content and, in some cases, to establish their own woman-controlled media through their "feminist media activism" (pp. 100-101). Earlier work has argued that feminist media scholars should examine the ways that feminist work has embedded the values, ideas and language in society (Byerly, 2008). One way to do this is by examining how the mainstream news media have covered feminist activities and issues.

### **Radical theory building**

The term *radical theory building* is used here to designate scholarly work that attempts to explain social dynamics that are transformative in nature. Some might argue against the appropriateness of the term as regards feminist movements. It is true that all feminist work is not necessarily radical, and, therefore, theory building associated with that work might also be seen as not necessarily radical in its undertaking. Feminist theorists like Donovan (1988) have delineated strands of feminist analyses – liberal, radical, socialist, etc. – along a philosophical continuum from reformist to revolutionary. Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz (2000) observe that in North America and Europe, it was radical feminism that gave women's liberation its transformative edge in the late 1960s and early 1970s (p. 222). This essay adopts the stance that all versions of feminism contain an element of social transformation that begin with a different

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vision of gender relations than presently exists, and that each has sought to bring about a fundamentally different social relationship between the sexes based on that vision.

The transformative nature of such visions fits squarely within the understanding of feminism(s) that has been established by other feminist theorists. For example, in the revised edition of *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism Women*, socialist feminist Zillah Eisenstein (1993) recognized the dialectical process that exists among debates within the various strands of feminist movements which began in the 1970s. She concluded that the various positionalities have been “transforming each other”, particularly as they struggled to remain alive and viable through the rise of the neoconservative state in the 1980s (Eisenstein, 1993, p. xiii).

Bernadette Barker-Plummer (1995) referred to modern feminism (i.e., what is usually called second wave feminism, dating from the 1960s) as a transformative agent because it is:

. . . associated with fundamental challenges to traditional or ‘old’ political distinctions (such as that between public and private concerns), and with subtle, but radical extensions of what can even legitimately be considered a ‘political’ issue. . . but we have less information about *how* the new movements [like feminism] have created or communicated these new discourses. (p. 306)

Barker-Plummer’s seminal article goes on to ask what those media strategies have been, and what roles they have played in diffusing new ideas about women. The challenge to feminist media scholarship, therefore, is twofold: to reveal the strategies and to explain their roles in social transformation. Thus, the present essay follows Eisenstein’s and Barker-Plummer’s line of thinking that feminist work in all of its forms lends itself to radical theory building because that work aims to transform society in ways that represent women’s vision, lived experiences and self-interests. Picking up specifically on Barker-Plummer’s challenge, the essay concludes with findings from ongoing research that reveals how feminist language has transformed news reporting on violence against women and poses Reformulation Theory to explain the changes in news and institutional action associated with feminist activism and the language it created.

A central concern of feminist movements the world over has been violence against women, both physical and sexual. While we focus primarily on social change around these problems within the United States, we recognize where possible the relevance of the discussion in other parts of the world. Feminism emerged as a global women's liberation movement in the 1970s and after, aided in part by the United Nations Decade for women, 1976-85, and its follow up meetings in 1995 and 2005. In this period feminists of all philosophical strands strived to advance new analyses of women's subordination and to develop the means to restructure gender relations through the passage of laws and through modifications to gendered social practices in other institutional realms.

As participants in activities associated with the many activities and campaigns forming the anti-violence movement, women developed strategies to circulate ideas related to sexual assault and domestic violence in the news media. This communications work was a major component in establishing rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters, creating preventive education programs in schools, and providing training for police and prosecutors, among other things. Leaders took what they learned from survivors of this violence (who included many among themselves) and began to articulate it in public forums, press releases and other activities. Some brought useful skills into feminism with them from having worked as reporters and government agencies for a number of years; thus, being among a small number of women involved in feminist activities in the community<sup>2</sup> who understood news routines, how to write press releases, and how to talk to the media. The larger context for such local work was global feminism, which put the news media's neglect of women's serious problems and contributions central to their social change agendas. One product of this was the UNESCO-funded Women's Feature Service, which placed five woman-managed news programs within established third-world regional news agencies. The project succeeded in increasing news flow of women's activities and analyses for the five years of its life, and three of the programs survive through independent funding to the present time (Byerly 1995). How should these activities be examined, evaluated and theorized within the dialectic of gender relations?

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<sup>2</sup>This refers to one of the authors of this article, Byerly's, involvement in the Seattle-Olympia area of Washington state.

### **The case for theory building**

A theory is an abstract statement that provides an explanation for social phenomena that are problematic in some way. In communication scholarship, theories function to solve conceptual, empirical and practical problems related to human communication (Miller, 2001, pp. 22-23). A theory has certain properties. For instance, it explains phenomena within a certain scope of investigation, and it typically has specific procedures associated with it. Consider McCombs and Shaw's (1972) well-known agenda-setting theory, which predicts that the *media agenda* (i.e., most prominent stories) shapes the *public agenda* (i.e., public opinion), which in turn shapes the *policy agenda* (i.e., the government response). The agenda-setting theory predicts a linear relationship in communication events, and it requires careful quantitative measures to assess each of those events and their relationship to each other. Researchers employing agenda-setting theory use it to investigate a specific series of events (or activities) that they believe are interrelated – typically political elections or controversial issue campaigns in a community or region of the country. In other words, they draw a scope around the study in terms of location, timeframe, and/or population in their work.

The theory-building process also includes models – the cousin to theories – which are developed to show how distinct aspects of a broader process function together. One good example is Stuart Hall's (1982) encoding/decoding model, which advanced theory-building by showing the way that ideology (i.e., taken-for-granted assumptions) enters into both the production and consumption stages of mediated communication. Unlike theories, models cannot really be tested (or proven) in research, but rather they serve to guide the inquiry process in a systematic way. Hall's model is critical in its formulation in that it is inherently concerned with revealing relations of power among categories of individuals in the media-audience relationship. In Hall's model, the greatest power to shape content lies with the media professionals, working within largely conservative media companies. It is these individuals who determine which events will become newsworthy and how they will be imbued with preferred meanings in the telling of the story. The audience members consuming these stories (or, as Hall called them, texts), view television news through their own frameworks of knowledge and accept the

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preferred meanings that frame stories, or they may interpret them using oppositional, negotiated or alternative readings.<sup>3</sup>

The distinction to be made between quantitative and critical theory-building at this point is that the second is specifically concerned with revealing relations of power with regard to a problematic situation, and it has the goal of enabling change (i.e., change that would alter the unequal relationship in some way). Critical theorists, including feminist critical theorists, have been slow to develop specific theories to explain social phenomena associated with women's experiences and social behavior, including communication. This is not helped by the fact that many of women's efforts associated with media activism are invisible and therefore lost to scholarship as well as to the broader public knowledge. Invisible activities include strategy development, drafting press releases, preparing victims and survivors to give interviews with reporters, etc. Visibility arises through the recounting of what women did in using the media to advance feminist agendas. Some such documentation has occurred on a small scale through the published first-person stories of women journalists working on the inside of major media companies in second wave feminism's early years<sup>4</sup>.

Feminist advocacy groups like Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, in Washington, DC, have been attentive to tracking women-owned and oriented media over the years in its annual published directory, but without assessing the impact of women's media. Occasional but rare feminist scholarship has included investigations that reveal the work of women's media activism, attempt to evaluate its effects, and even theorize it. Of note is Barker-Plummer's (1995) earlier cited study that examined ways that the US-based National Organization for Women influenced news agendas in the early 1970s with a strategic media component in its state-by-state campaign to reform rape and other laws. Barker-Plummer's study is noteworthy for its conceptual and theoretical development in scrutinizing NOW's

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<sup>3</sup> In this scheme, preferred readings are those congruent with the dominant values in society, oppositional readings are rejecting of the preferred meaning, negotiated readings accept some part of the preferred meanings, and alternative readings assign meaning that lies outside the dominant value system.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Marlene Sanders & Marcia Rock, *Waiting for Prime Time: The Women of Television News* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), and Nan Robertson, *The Girls in the Balcony: Women, Men and the New York Times* (New York, Fawcett Columbine, 1992).

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leaders' strategy, which she characterizes as one of media pragmatism that built on their knowledge of news writing and the routines of news production to develop press relations. The organization's leaders assumed the role of serving as a political resource to journalists, she said, thereby enabling those leaders to move the organization's activities, positions on issues and other details into the media (pp. 315-316).

The vast collection of women-and-media research has not focused on women's work to change media contents or structures but rather analyzed the content of mainstream (i.e., male-owned and controlled) media's representation of women. This extensive collective effort has rarely produced new conceptual or theoretical developments, one exception being Rakow and Kranich's (1991) study of women in television news which revealed that women most often appeared in coverage when they performed a function other than when they espoused feminist ideas. In other words, women who served as sources in news stories typically appeared as a "sign of support" for something (or someone) or as a "sign of the consequences" of some event. But, they were not allowed to speak on behalf of themselves or of other women in any way that would shed light on gender relations. Women's symbolic representation, they said, was bound up in the larger context of newsmaking, which they characterized as a white male narrative.

**The model of women's media action (MWMA)**

The range, nature and effects of women's efforts to change the news and to create alternative forms of information were investigated by Byerly and Ross (2006) when they set out to learn the various ways that women had undertaken their work and what they believed that work had brought about. They conducted their investigation of women's media activism using a semi-structured interview schedule in face-to-face and Internet interviews with 90 self-defined feminist media activists in the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, India, and 16 other nations. The rich body of data they collected lent itself well to inductive theorizing to determine how this activism was organized and how it functioned within women's liberation movements.

The data showed that between the early 1970s (the start of second wave feminism in the US, and global feminism worldwide) and recent times, feminist media activists interviewed had engaged

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in activities that could be organized into four groups. The authors called these *paths* to connote intentionality in women's direction and purpose. The first they called the "politics to media path" to identify activists who were not trained in media use but rather learned how to use media (e.g., film, radio programs, press releases, etc.) to enhance their feminist political work. The second was called the "media to politics path" to identify media professionals (e.g., journalists, TV producers) who used their insider status to shape media content using feminist issues or analyses. The third was called the "advocate change agent path" for those who sought to use their outsider status to bring about structural changes of some kind in the media (e.g., newsroom policies) or to reveal something specific about women's relationship to media (e.g., new research on news coverage of women). And, the fourth was called the "women's media enterprise path" to designate feminists who established their own publishing houses, news networks, or other woman-controlled media operations. It is the last of these that provides the clearest means to women controlling their own ideas and images for public circulation.

These four paths function both within women's liberation movements and within the larger societies where those movements fomented. Within women's liberation, the work accomplished by feminist media activists taking paths served *a ritualistic function*, announcing critiques of laws and other constraints on women's social participation and women's intent to eradicate those constraints; *a connective function*, linking women across distances and demographics into a complex political and cultural community; an educational function, pushing new ideas into broader circulation; *a social alignment function*, integrating gender concerns into those of race, class and other signifiers of social marginalization; and *a regulatory function*, locating feminist politics within the larger realm of political action.

Byerly and Ross theorized that the communicative product of the work accomplished on the paths of feminist media activism was the creation of a *feminist public sphere* (see Fig. 1), i.e., a discursive space within which feminists could challenge sexist social practices and advance strategies for changing them. The MWMA incorporates Jürgen Habermas' reformulation of the democratic public sphere to acknowledge the dynamic interaction of multiple public spheres through communicative action (Byerly & Ross, 2006, pp. 119-121).

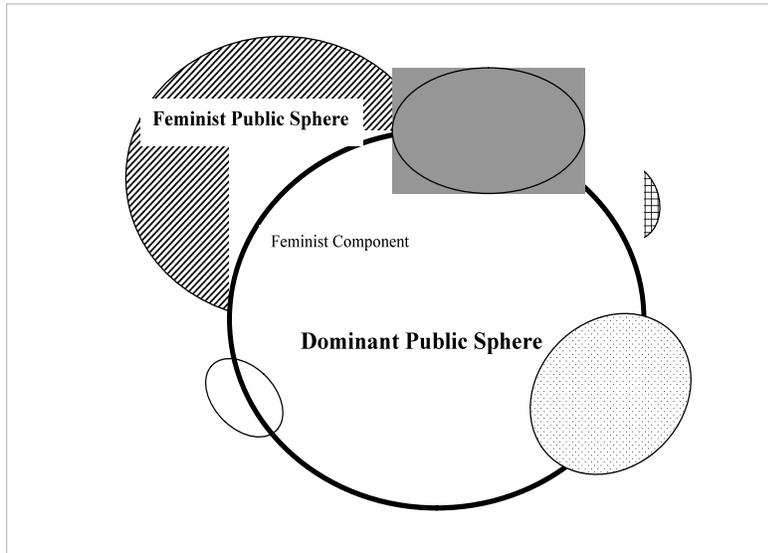


Fig. 1 Conceptualization of feminist public sphere and its relationship to both dominant and other public spheres. (Source: Byerly & Ross, 2006, p. 120).

Byerly and Ross’s cross-national study was the first to conceptualize a collection of change-related activities as “media activism” and to explore how those activities had been used to advance feminist agendas in the particular period associated with second wave feminism. The study described the work of their informants but fell short of examining any particular set of feminist media activities represented by this work. Rather they relied on the subjective assessments of their informants as to their activism’s outcomes. Among the 90 informants, a third said that they believed that their media activism had led to more woman-focused media content today. Approximately a fourth said they believed that their activism also contributed to stronger public consciousness about feminism (Byerly & Ross, 2006, pp. 110-111). Some fewer percentages said their work had mobilized followers and, in some cases, helped to open doors for women in media professions.

### **Communicating violence against women**

Feminist media activists' belief that they changed the way women's experiences are understood and addressed institutionally today through news coverage challenges scholars to ask whether and how this has occurred. New findings from an ongoing investigation, conducted by the authors for this article, on the way that the news media have reported violence against women suggest that there has been feminist impact on news reporting.

The term “violence against women” is a modern umbrella concept that covers a wide range of hurtful sexual and physical experiences that women have historically experienced at the hands of men. Until the 1960s, women largely suffered in silence from these abuses but women's liberation movements pushed them into the forefront of their work. This transition of men's violence against women from private to public spheres was motivated by intellectual contributions by women like Susan Brownmiller (1975), whose groundbreaking book *Against our will: Men, women and rape* detailed the evolution of rape in western culture. Also at work were women's consciousness-raising groups, which were being held around the nation; these created safe places for women to talk about the specific acts they had experienced, and to name those acts in their own words. Donat and D'Emilio (1992) note that a new language of sexual assault emerged through this process, both in relation to victims and perpetrators, and that language tended to redefine how rape and other forms of sexual violation were identified and understood. Terms such as sexual assault, acquaintance/date rape, wife battering, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape/incest survivor, among others, did not exist before feminists coined them and gave them definitions (Byerly, 2008). Feminist communication theorists Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) have noted the importance of naming in women's liberation. Giving names to harms they experienced, for example, allowed women to constitute and interpret these experiences and to speak in an authentic voice about how they had been affected. These authors identify language as an essential site of struggle, saying that words “encode and embed gendered meanings in language” (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004, p. 99).

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This was also true for the aspect of the anti-violence movement referred to as the “battered women’s movement.” Domestic violence historian Susan Schechter (1982) said that this movement caused those both inside the movement and in the larger society to see victims in a new light. She recounts what happened when consciousness-raising groups encouraged women to speak about their experiences, then to take turns commenting. This led to a new analysis of rape and battering experiences that called men’s violent behavior into question, that led to establishment of victim hotlines and other support services (including shelters), and that would bring about legislation outlawing wife battering and rape, as well as related acts, constituting these as crimes. She noted that central to the revolutionary process that these activities represented was “replacing a sexist ideology with a feminist one and pushing for institutional reform” (p. 37). But the news media, Schechter said, was both a help and a hindrance to accomplishing these things. Reporters saw that rape victims and battered women were “good news” material because of the sensational aspect of their experiences, but reporters sometimes made the women look foolish. Still, she said, reporting began to legitimize the movements (and problems they brought forth), enabling women’s groups to get money and other resources to set up shelters and advocacy services (p. 73).

**News on sexual and domestic violence**

Findings from the present authors’ ongoing quantitative and qualitative study of news coverage of violence against women in mainstream news show that feminism succeeded in instilling a new language about these experiences and crimes in the news – at least in the nation’s agenda-setting newspaper. For the present research, we examined the *New York Times* index every other year, between the years 1960 and 2000, to determine when and to what extent the *Times* was adopting feminist terminology in reporting on issues and crimes associated with domestic violence. Terms used for indexing were determined to mirror the language in the news stories being indexed; hence, the index was judged to be an accurate indicator of how news stories themselves were communicating the behaviors that feminists were reformulating through their activism. We used two sets of search terms: those commonly used for indexing by the *Times* prior to the emergence of anti-violence movements of the early 1970s, and those articulated by feminists in the anti-violence movement. Search terms before 1970s included

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rape, sexual perversion, assault in marriage, child assault and child neglect. Sexual perversion was often (but not always) associated with homosexual activity, such as two men being caught in a park known to be frequented by homosexuals.

The new terms for these behaviors associated with rape and physical abuse articulated by feminists included sexual harassment, battering, battered wives, wife abuse, domestic violence, dating – sex crimes, child abuse, child neglect, and incest. The last three of these (concerning children) were included in that both child battering and incest (intra-family sexual assault of children) were among the issues pushed strongly into public discourse by feminists working in both the battered women’s movement and the anti-rape movements. A total of 2800 stories over a 40-year period were found to contain one or more feminist terms for violence against women. Terms were entered into a spreadsheet by year and sorted for frequency over time. Figure 2 shows findings for the use of feminist terminology beginning in 1970, around the time that the anti-violence campaigns against sexual assault and domestic violence were mobilizing.

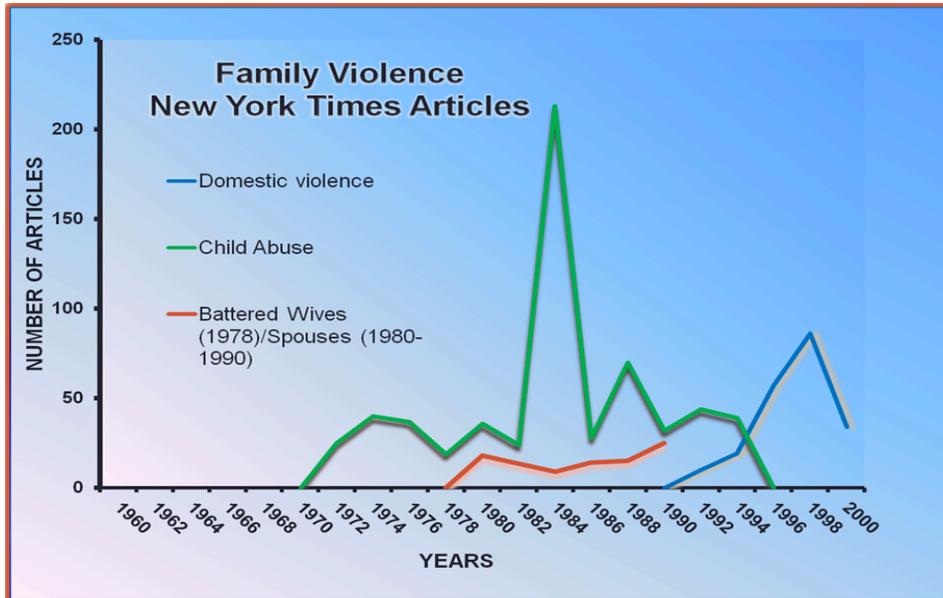


Fig. 2 *New York Times* indexing of feminist terms associated with domestic and sexual violence of women and children.

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One of the most interesting aspects of *Times* indexing is the use of the terms “battered wives” and “battered spouses” from 1978 to 1990, and the replacement of these terms with the now more familiar “domestic violence” around 1990. The spikes in coverage some years were associated with an abundance of coverage of particular cases, both in the New York City area and nationally. A footnote to this shift in language would be that today’s more common use of the term “domestic violence” ironically obscures the gendered reality of the problem, that being that men’s abusive behavior harms women.

Stories about rape accounted for the majority of the stories published in the *Times* for the years examined. Figure 3 shows the substantial increase in the volume of stories about rape and sexual assault over a 40-year period. A closer qualitative reading of the major stories in these years offers greater detail about the kind of stories the nation’s agenda-setting newspaper was following, as well as the extent to which feminist leaders and organizations shaped the direction, content and vocabulary used in these stories.

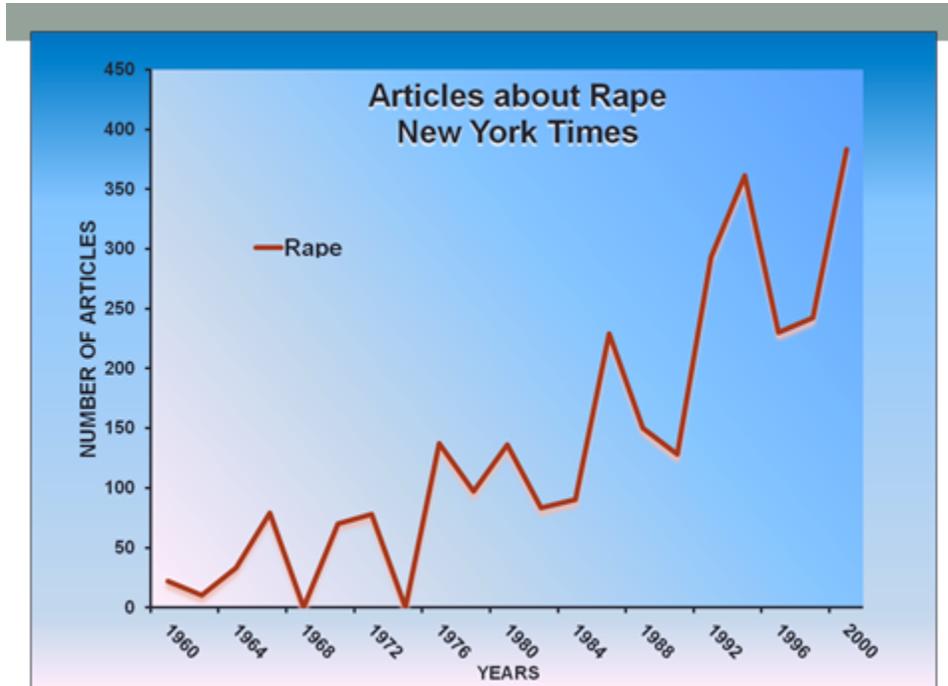


Fig. 3. *New York Times* indexing of stories specifically about rape and child sexual assault.

### **Coverage of rape stories**

*New York Times* coverage of rape increased in direct proportion to the mobilization of feminist local and national campaigns to bring the problem to public attention through rape crisis centers and through National Organization for Women's state-by-state campaign to reform rape laws. News, an event-driven enterprise, followed legislative events like those in 1974 surrounding Westchester Republican Alvin M. Suchin's introduction of a bill in the New York State Assembly to eliminate the need for witness corroboration in rape cases. Originally introduced by Suchin in 1970, the bill passed in 1974 by a vote of 130 to 0. The majority of the *New York Times* coverage of the reform of the rape law that year focused on the passage of the bill but once the bill had become law, coverage shifted to the case of Peter Williams, the first person to be convicted under the new law. *Times* national level coverage in 1974 focused on the state-by-state legislative campaigns led by feminists to forbid inclusion of rape victims' prior sexual history in court proceedings.

These articles adopted a feminist frame, exemplified by an October 30, 1974, article quoting Democrat legislator Betty Wilson of Union County, California, who argued for the bill with feminist conviction during a debate on the Assembly floor, saying, "Women are treated on the witness stand as predators, as perpetrators of the crime instead of victims....They are made to feel like prostitutes who are fair game for anyone" (*New York Times*, 1974, pp. 95). In the same article, Betty McGee, coordinator for the Rape Committee of the Manhattan (NY) Women's Political Caucus, is also quoted as saying that rape reports to police had increased 51 percent, pushing the New York City Police Department to create a sex crimes analysis unit to improve the department's treatment of rape victims and the handling of their cases. What stands out in the *Times* coverage of rape in 1974 is its attention to developments on the part of city and state institutions that had corresponded to feminist initiatives. These involved activities by police, prosecutors and local governments. One article noted New York City District Attorney Richard H. Kuh's effort to obtain federal funds to combat sex crimes, a New York City proposal to establish four rape treatment centers, and a news conference in Police Plaza highlighting ways to combat rape. *Times* reporting brings to light the leadership by feminists in politics as well as in

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their media relations. Some of these developments were announced at press conferences organized by the New York Women's Rape Coalition (Maitland, 1984, pp. 34).

In 1976, *Times* news continued to follow police response to pressure brought on by women's groups in their legislative campaigns to improve the handling of rape cases. In New Jersey, the State Law Enforcement Planning Agency, the agency responsible for administering federal funds to police municipalities throughout the state, made sex crimes its top priority by funding several projects to combat sex crimes and rape. Such projects included \$150,000 in 1975 and \$300,000 in 1976 for developing sex crime units. In 1975, the New Jersey counties of Mercer, Atlantic, and Hudson received the allotted federal funds to pilot sex crime units at the County Prosecutor level. That same year, six additional counties in New Jersey received funds for similar pilot programs. Stories routinely foregrounded feminist views, often quoting leaders, such as a February 22, 1976, article in which Leslie Palm, a representative of the Northern New Jersey chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) said, "Mostly what I want to see change is the public's attitude. The victim is persecuted by family, friends, relatives, they hush it up. They make the victim feel ashamed. They make her feel like she asked for it" (Maitland & Schnelder, 1976, pp. NJ1). That year New Jersey passed two laws on rape, one to shield the identity of rape victims in public record, another to prohibit admission of a victim's sexual history by defendants in rape trials.

In the mid-1980s, several high profile scandals brought the issue of child sex abuse, especially in primary schools, into the news, including local and national stories concerning child sex abuse in schools and day care centers. Most voluminous in news coverage was the McMartin Preschool case in Manhattan Beach, California, where seven teachers and administrators were charged with more than 200 counts of child sex abuse against 14 children who attended the school. News coverage in the case continued until charges were dropped in 1986. In the Bronx, an employee of the Praca Day Care Center was sentenced to 25 years for sexually abusing five students who were students at the school. The increased news coverage of child sex abuse scandals, according to the *Times*' own reports, helped to pressure the National Institute of Justice to study the judicial system's handling of children's testimony in sexual assault cases. The *Times* also reported on a study by the Child Welfare League of America that

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found reported incidents of child sexual abuse had risen 59 percent from 1983 to 1984. In 1986, Florida Senator Paula Hawkins detailed her own child sexual abuse in her book *Children at risk: My fight against child abuse, a personal and public plea*. A spontaneous surge in news stories in 1986 arose around rape on college campuses. One of the more high profile cases involved the University of Minnesota basketball teams after three players were arrested for sexual assault and the head coach resigned. National level stories included a gang rape at a fraternity house at San Diego State University in California.

In this and other college-related incidents, feminist leaders of rape crisis centers and other organizations were frequently quoted, bringing a new analysis of sexual assault, from a women's perspective, into public discourse. This is exemplified by quotes like this one from a February 17, 1986, article by Carol Tracy, a lawyer and former director of the Women's Center at the University of Pennsylvania, who stated, "Many of the men seem to believe that having intercourse with a woman who is semiconscious, unconscious or severely intoxicated is sex rather than rape, because she is not fighting back" (Brozan, 1986, pp. B8). Feminists introduced the concept of date rape in the college cases coming forward. In a November 16, 1986, article highlighting the issue of date rape at Wesleyan University, as well as other colleges, Women Against Rape member Jennifer Alexander said, "[Many men who commit date rape] do not understand that their behavior is criminal.... They have been raised in a culture where they know that no one will hold it against them if they commit date rape" (Kerstein, 1986, pp. CN8).

### **Reformulation theory**

While these findings suggest the need for more systematic research (e.g., to examine the quality of news stories, to determine which cases were drawing substantial news attention, to determine whether other news media were following suit in the use of feminist terminology, etc.), they also suggest the need for deductive radical theory building to explain the impact of feminist activism on news. Deductive theories are based on preliminary findings and are then tested in empirical research (Miller, 2004). In this case, the preliminary findings are those arising from analysis of the *New York Times* index for a 40-year period.

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The radical theory may appropriately be called the Reformulation Theory to explain how feminist political activity serves to reframe (i.e., reformulate) the social meaning of women's experiences in women's own terminology. Reformulation Theory arises out of the findings from the authors' ongoing study of news coverage of violence against women as associated with second wave feminism. However, the theory could also offer an analytical framework for other social movements that pose a fundamental shift in public discourse and institutional response. In the case of the present study, Reformulation Theory provides a way of gauging whether and to what extent feminist media activism (associated with violence against women campaigns) changed public discourse after that activism began in the early 1970s. Those campaigns renamed a social phenomenon (i.e., men's violence against women), and provided a fundamentally new analysis of that phenomenon (i.e., that violence is used to subjugate women), and it provided a new language for talking about rape and other abuse. That new language contains the movement's values and ideology, countering the former understanding of the phenomenon from a patriarchal perspective (e.g., that women deserve abuse, that they bring it on themselves, that men have rights to women's bodies, etc.). Using Reformulation Theory, we are able to conclude that the second wave feminist anti-violence movement had successfully embedded feminist ideology in American journalism by the end of the 1970s, at least in the U.S. agenda-setting newspaper, the *New York Times*. Whether the *Times*' adjustments in its own journalism created a ripple effect in both the kind and amount of coverage for violence against women in other U.S. and other nations' news media must be questioned in future empirical research of course.

Yet feminists appear to have successfully created access to and thereby used the news to bring both greater attention to such violence through public discourse and the institutional changes that followed. These events continue to reverberate in important ways today. That early coverage sparked by feminism created the journalistic mechanisms for both routine coverage of local cases, as well as high profile cases like the Navy's sexual harassment scandal of women officers by men at the Tailhook convention in the 1980s, the Catholic church scandal involving the sexual abuse of boys by clergy (in the U.S., Ireland and other nations) that broke in the early

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1990s, and the most recent case in 2012 of former Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky's abuse of boys over a period of years (and the university's cover up).

The findings that the initial positing of Reformulation Theory are based on are not meant to suggest that the coverage of sexual abuse and domestic violence were (or have become) uniformly pro-feminist or that they necessarily broke with the longstanding tradition of poorly covering these crimes. In fact, a respectable body of research by Meyers (1997), Cuklanz (1992) and others shows the ways that victims of these crimes – particularly women of color – continue to be neglected and misrepresented in news coverage, both television and newspapers. The fact that changes in news coverage of these crimes has occurred alongside the longer tradition of omission and misrepresentation (particularly of victims) shows the nature of dialectical gendered struggle in social institutions. Much more research is needed to explore that struggle, perhaps in case studies that can examine gender dynamics within specific newsrooms. Reformulation Theory also offers numerous theoretical comparisons, something that lay beyond the scope of the present article. For instance, what are the overlapping concerns that Reformulation Theory shares with Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) or Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971), both of the latter also concerned about the social dynamics associated with adoption of new ideas? Still tentative in its development and application, Reformulation Theory provides a new analytical framework to specifically examine and explain radical transformations led by feminist (and perhaps other) activists and opens broader theoretical space for other forms of inquiry.

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