

DV Coverage **Uncovered**

An analysis of current news media coverage of domestic violence

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The news media are one of the main sources from which people gain information about the society in which they live. When the media fail to accurately depict the complexity of domestic violence they contribute to the perpetuation of a culture of violence against women and children. In this article we look at the coverage of domestic violence amongst recent Australian online and printed news media stories.

A news story has recently come to light regarding a doctor who has allegedly mutilated and sexually assaulted women. As described in the initial story to hit the headlines, the doctor was scheduled to surgically remove a lesion from a woman's labia. Immediately prior to the anaesthetic being administered, the doctor whispered in the woman's ear "I'm going to take your clitoris too" (Coulthart 2008a). When the woman awoke from surgery, her clitoris and all external genitalia had been removed. It has since been alleged that this doctor has similarly mutilated, sterilised and assaulted hundreds more women, and caused the deaths of a baby, and of a new mother by refusing to prescribe antibiotics for a post-natal infection.

Unsurprisingly, there have been numerous media reports regarding the horrific practices of the man now referred to as the 'Butcher of Bega' (Fife-Yeomans). With good reason, many of these articles have covered the issue of why this man was practising as a doctor, despite being banned from being an obstetrician in another state, and hundreds of complaints over eleven years.

At the time of writing this article however, what the major news stories are not including, is any analysis of WHY this man was assaulting women in the way that he was. Whilst it is not likely the accused has provided any explanation of his behaviour for journalists to report, it is astounding

that reports are not even mentioning the fact that all of his victims were women, and that he was attacking them in a specifically sexual way. This doctor is routinely described by the various media stories as incompetent, implying that his actions were reprehensible, but the consequences perhaps unintentional, despite the appearance from all news reports on the topic, that the outcomes of his actions were precisely what he intended.

For these actions to be categorised so unequivocally by all as merely incompetence, is yet another invisibilisation of the culture of violence against women. With this in mind, we decided to cast an eye over current news stories regarding domestic and family violence, to assess how the issue is reported in the current climate. Is domestic violence adequately recognised by the media now, and if so, is it analysed within a useful context, or do we still face the same scenario of most cases of family violence being ignored, whilst a select few are sensationalised, to the extent that they are perceived as rare and unusual cases?

Why Media Matters

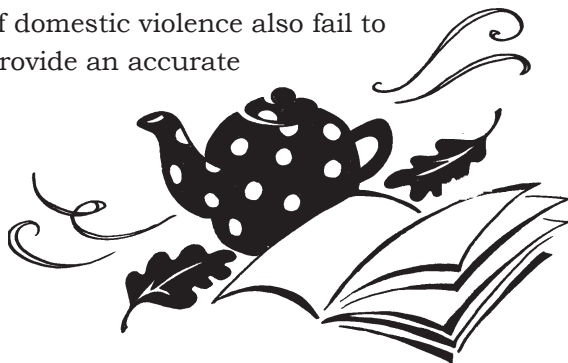
The mass media has been noted as having much power in shaping people's views, their opinions and their



knowledge of society (Bullock and Cubert 2002; Ryan et al, 2006). The news media in particular are viewed with even more authority and are seen as providing people with objective truths about the world, people and events (Franiuk 2008). It is because of this perceived “truth telling” that news coverage of violence against women has been examined by researchers and assessed for how effective it actually is in revealing the truth when reporting on violence against women (Franiuk 2008). Researchers have found that news stories overwhelmingly obscure the truth in stories about men’s violence against women and even more destructively, that the news media shape, maintain and perpetuate the very structures that sustain violence against women (Bullock and Cubert 2002).

For example, Franiuk et al (2008) conducted research into the prevalence and effects of rape myths in print journalism. The researchers found that such rape myths as “women lie about sexual assault” were perpetuated by the media and had a significant impact on the way in which sexual assault victims are treated and viewed. The myths that were circulated in the news media have the power to impact on the way the victim is treated along the entire chain of the criminal justice process, including hospital personnel, law enforcement, juries and judges (Franiuk 2008).

The reporting of domestic violence in the news media has come under particular criticism from researchers and feminist activists. Numerous studies have shown that similarly to the rape myths that are perpetuated through the media, reports of domestic violence also fail to provide an accurate



picture of domestic violence and perpetuate myths about domestic violence. A study conducted by Ryan et al (2006) found the following reoccurring problematic patterns in the reporting of domestic violence by the news media:

- News reports suggest that victims, at least partially, are responsible for their fate.
- Inscribed as crime news, domestic violence reports focus on the sensational. Reporters revert to predetermined framing such as tragic love story gone awry.
- In an exculpatory search for the perpetrator’s motive, domestic violence is psychologised and individuated.
- When coverage focuses on the perpetrator’s motives the victim disappears.
- Coverage obscures social dimensions of domestic violence – ways that society produces and promotes violence against women.
- Applying notions of objectivity mechanically, reporters suggest a false parity in describing domestic violence.

All of the above effects are exacerbated if the victims are poor or working class women and/or women of colour (Ryan et al 2006).

Meyers (1994, 1997) conducted research into news media coverage of domestic violence and concluded that: “News coverage of domestic violence is framed to support the status quo: a system [that] is grounded in patriarchal ideology and designed to sustain male domination over women.”

In the next section we will pay closer attention to the Australian news media’s coverage of domestic violence and analyse the extent to which the media in Australia support or critically challenge the myths and stereotypes related to violence against women.

DV in the Australian news

Articles on domestic violence are relatively frequent in today's major papers, usually prompted by a specific incident of abuse, or the release of a research paper or government action. General stories such as these tend to acknowledge the violence as domestic, although they also often use minimising phrases such as "domestic aggression" or "domestic outbursts", or even "volatile relationships", locating any problem in the nature of the relationship rather than identifying any abusive party. Whilst women and children are sometimes identified as being the "primary victims" of family violence, there is a standard omission of acknowledging perpetrators as usually males. Instead of noting the frequency of husbands and fathers being the abusers, generic terms are used, such as "spouse" or "between parents".

Reports such as these often cite statistics to back up their argument, and quote experts such as Phil Cleary, Jane Ashton and various police officers. Occasionally they will also include a referral to the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service.

Unfortunately, for every news report on family violence which is reasonably accurate and helpful, there are others which perpetuate the stereotypes and myths about DV. These pieces tend to be based on personal opinion rather than any research or factual information, but still serve to undermine the points made in the more credible articles. For example, a female advice columnist addressing the topic of physical aggression within relationships declares all physical conflict – with the exception of self-defence – to be unjustified, however she spends the bulk of her response minimising men's violence against women, and portraying men as the frequent victims of "slap-happy" women, who "misuse our cultural abhorrence of violence against women" (Matthews, 2008).

There are also articles which appear to be simply stating the facts, but actually indicate a clear bias, such as recent reports that more women are now accused of domestic violence. An online news report (AAP 2008a) for example, cited the statistics and included a very brief explanation from the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, but ended the article with a statement by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) director, that "it's possible that people are becoming less tolerant of violence by women than they used to be".

This supposed phenomenon is quite clearly the outcome of 'pro-arrest' police policies, whereby both perpetrators and victims of DV, and sometimes victims alone, are the ones arrested when it is not immediately clear to attending police what has happened, or what the history of the couple may be. There are numerous reasons why women are mistakenly being arrested as the aggressors in DV situations, all clearly articulated by domestic violence workers who have a thorough knowledge of the issues. Some reports (for example Baker, 2008 and 'Women pushed to the brink') did cover the topic thoroughly, with explanations from DV experts to contextualise the claims, however many also drew heavily on quotes from BOCSAR, and a co-director of the Men's Health Information and Resource Centre, both of whom suggested women are indeed the perpetrators of much family violence.

While this declaration resulted in several news articles, the prevalence of male violence against women, by comparison, seems so accepted in the Australian news media that it often does not even



warrant a mention. As these reports have shown, the media actually obscure the facts by suggesting that women are in fact the perpetrators of violence. One of the most pervasive ways in which the news media fail to portray a clear picture of family violence is in cases where men have murdered their partners.

Domestic violence or just another homicide?

Over the past few months there have been numerous reports in the Australian media on the murder of women by their partners. All of the news articles analysed framed the story as a crime report, providing the facts of the murder, as an individual event, without providing a context. For example, a report published in the *Herald Sun* on 22 November 2007 stated that a man had appeared in court after being charged with murdering his wife. The woman's body was found in a house with two of their five children. The report stated where the crime took place, and the name of the victim and the accused. Similarly, an article that was published on the Channel Nine news website on 18 February 2008, gives details of a man who had murdered his wife, who was pregnant at the time. The article mentions that the man had pleaded guilty to shooting his wife in the head and dumping her body in parkland. The man had first claimed his wife was missing, before confessing to her murder. Neither of these two examples mention domestic violence, nor do they place the murders in any sort of context of violence against women.



Several research studies into the coverage of domestic violence murders have found that news reporters rarely provide substantive contextualised insight into the underlying issues of domestic violence; instead reporters frame the story as a crime report, relying on police for their information sources (Ryan et al 2006). News reports that rely on police as their main source of information have been criticised by the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2002) as police are not necessarily neutral sources of information about domestic violence murders and have been seen to "...carry misinformation about the dynamics of abuse and may inaccurately frame the incident" (Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2002). Police have also been found to describe who was involved and the evidence but seldom place the crime in a community context.

As seen in the news articles found in the past few months in Australian news media, reports of domestic violence murders seem to present the criminal facts of the murders, describing who was involved and what is alleged to have happened, but they do not give any indication of the context in which the murders took place and they do not situate the murder in terms of domestic violence. Instead these reports reinforce the myth that the fatal violence just happened out of the blue, rather than being the culmination of a history of violence and controlling behaviour. Meyers writes that the separation of the violence from its context "...denies the pain and abuse that battered women endure, and it makes the cause of death appear inexplicable or the result of a man's suddenly having 'snapped'" (1997). They also do not mention that over half the women who are murdered by their male partners have in fact left or are trying to leave the relationship at the time they are killed (Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2002). The news reports published in the Australian media do not show these

murders as being a part of continuing violence against women, instead reinforcing the idea that domestic violence murders are due to individual and/or family pathology (Bullock and Cubert 2002). This focus on, and thereby excusing of, the individual can be clearly seen when the perpetrator in question is a person of notoriety.

Celebrity DV

“Don’t call the police, don’t call the ambulance, he’s famous...” (in ninemsn 2008)

The media like nothing more than news of a “celebrity” involved in a personal scandal and it is perhaps in these instances where stereotypes about domestic violence are really drawn upon, as commentators from all areas weigh into the debate, irrespective of their (lack of) understanding of the issues.

The most recent example of this is the former footballer Wayne Carey, who has a history of assaulting women and has recently been arrested in relation to smashing a glass in his girlfriend’s face. The papers and online news sources are rife with stories about Carey’s violence toward his partner, seemingly covering it from every angle possible. And yet, with the exception of an article about Carey’s childhood experience of family violence, none of the reports, at the time of writing this article, are addressing his actions as domestic violence.

Variouly referred to as “behaving badly” (Dubecki, 2008; Riley, 2008); “appalling behaviour” (Wilcox, 2008) “*their* antics”, “*the couple’s* actions” (our emphasis) (Rolfe, 2008) and “*his* freshest hell” (our emphasis), it seems no-one wants to declare Carey a perpetrator of domestic violence. Most articles refer to Carey as a “disgraced footballer” (Dubecki, 2008; Wilcox, 2008; Rolfe, 2008) however they temper this with descriptions such as “legend” (ninemsn staff) “premiership

captain” (Rolfe, 2008) “champion” and “King” (Dubecki, 2008).

All the tired old excuses are again used to defend Carey’s violence against his partner, Kate Neilson and unsurprisingly, many suggest that she is responsible for his violence, by not leaving him. Sadly, several of the writers who proffer excuses for his actions, whether directly or indirectly, are women, including one with previous experience in a refuge. Another female writer, whilst encouraging Neilson to leave Carey, makes statements such as “I understand passion and the heat of the moment. I understand how emotions get the better of us” and suggests that the reason she should leave him is because the violence is recurring. This reporter makes it clear that a first instance of violence by a partner should be forgiven. She also ridicules Kate Neilson, likening her to “a love-sick teen” (Riley 2008).

At the time of going to print, a very limited number of reports had started to identify Wayne Carey’s actions as domestic violence. While this analysis only covered print media, it is worth noting that Andrew Denton, interviewing Carey on *Enough Rope* on ABC 1, televised on March 31, insisted on naming Carey’s behaviour as violence against women and domestic violence, and pressed him more than once to consider whether the descriptions fitted. The ex footballer would not engage with those terms (just as he was not yet capable of using the expression “counselling” for the “talking he was doing with people”) and at one stage said he had never thought about what he did like that. The program’s extended interview format was



immensely revealing of the hollowness of the expression “I take full responsibility for what I’ve done” repeated again and again.

Carey’s father was described as “a hard man” and family or domestic violence assiduously avoided by the Carey siblings, who spoke of their childhood, never being able to bring friends home to play, and their mother’s flight to a refuge.

The news is one of the main sources from which people gain information about the world, events and the society in which they live. When the news media fails to accurately depict the complexity of domestic violence it contributes to the continuation of a culture that ignores the impact of domestic violence on women and children’s lives. A US based domestic violence organisation, Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, has worked with the news media to develop guidelines to improve journalists’ coverage of family violence. Perhaps it is time for the Australian news media to start to take responsibility for its contribution to the invisibility of domestic violence and its part in the perpetuation of stereotypes and myths of violence against women.

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