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PQMA Response to Dr. Kim Meltzer's Lecture "New Media and Journalism"

Problem: The sexual harassment and abuse of female journalists has been referred to as a “code of silence” in the journalism community (“Attack,” 2001; “Lara,” 2011). These attacks are more prevalent in corrupt, war-torn countries, many of which already lack laws that protect the rights of women (“Attack”). However, the assaults usually go unreported because female journalists fear that their gender will become a liability and that they will be viewed as weak by male colleagues and editors and lose job assignments (Matloff, 2007, p. 2). These fears and the lack of documentation of the sexual abuse experienced by female journalists has led to an almost complete lack of protocol or training in the journalism community surrounding sexual assaults on the job, leaving journalists with “...no sections on sexual harassment and assault in the leading handbooks on journalistic safety, by the Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists,” (Matloff, 2007, p. 2). As an informal, “interpretive community,” journalism more or less creates its own rules through a combination of internal and external discussions within the community itself, with reporters absorbing “... rules, boundaries, and a sense of appropriateness about their actions without ever actually being informed of them by superiors” (Zelizer, 1993, p. 221). However, rules cannot be created in this informal, discursive way when no discussion is occurring.

Earlier this year, CBS News Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent Lara Logan broke the “code of silence” by speaking publicly about her violent sexual attack in Egypt in February 2011. Logan was reporting on the celebrations following the resignation of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak when she was separated from her crew and attacked, physically and sexually, by an Egyptian mob (“Lara,” 2011). Following Logan’s very public discussion about her experience, including a *60 Minutes* interview, the journalism community started its external debate on the matter, as journalists began to publicly discuss and write about the prevalence of sexual assaults on the job and the fears of plummeting status in their community that keep female journalists from reporting these assaults.

Question: Did going public with her sexual assault change Lara Logan’s status in the journalism community?

Method: Viewing journalism as an informal, self-regulated community, the way that its members critique and assess each other are through internal and external communication and external acknowledgments of achievement, such as esteemed recognition and awards (Zelizer, 1993, p. 225; Meltzer, 2011). Therefore, analyzing the external communication via published articles by Logan and external acknowledgments awarded to Logan before and after her attack will show if her standing in the journalism community changed, and if so, how it did.

The same kind of quantitative textual analysis that Dr. Meltzer discussed in her lecture

“New Media and Journalism,” (Meltzer, 2011) and that was used in King’s and Zayani’s paper (King and Zayani, 2008) would be an appropriate method to use to analyze the external communication in this study. An important barometer that journalists would use to watch for a change in Logan’s status in the journalism community would be a change in her own work. Thus, I would search for all articles filed by Logan the eight months before and after her sexual assault became public on February 15, 2011.

The analysis of the articles would look at a number of specifics to see if the depth of her reporting had changed. The number of articles filed should be counted. The location of the articles is also important. If the number of front-page, headline news stories changed it would indicate to the journalism community a change in her status as a reporter. As would a change in the location of her reporting. If Logan, a chief foreign affairs correspondent, was suddenly confined to reporting from the United States, that would also affect her perception in the journalism community. Secondly, I would analyze her external acknowledgments to see if there was a change in the number of esteemed recognitions and awards presented to her in the eight months before and after her attack.

Answers/Analysis: As an informal, self-regulated community, it is the perception of her status among other journalists that really determines her status in the community. A change in the depth of her reporting would be the informal cue that the journalism community would use to gauge whether her status had changed since going public with her sexual assault. Another question to answer using the same quantitative textual analysis method would be, did Logan’s public admittance of her assault change the debate within the journalism community on this issue?

The answers, of course, would also produce more questions. If the location of her reporting did change, maybe the change was self-requested, maybe her experience led her to request less dangerous assignments. Also, the awards and esteemed recognition presented to her after the attack could be directly linked to the attack, such as recognition of bravery in journalism, meaning that the event itself, rather than her actual journalism, is prompting the subsequent awards. There would be a number of additional questions that would arise through this research, and studying the actual effect on female journalists of reporting sexual assaults would help to determine if their fears of a decrease in status are founded and may help to establish protocol and training in the community on this issue.

Works Cited

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