



News Headlines

Every day, we are faced with a myriad of victim-blaming stories. A brief visit to three of the major news outlets uncovered no fewer than twelve inappropriate headlines or by-lines. From placing emphasis on a victim's alcohol consumption to casting their abuse into doubt through misplaced quotation marks, each tells a stark tale of the media's attitude towards those experiencing violence.

“Ethopian teenager who says she was raped by seven men...”

“155% rise in children groomed by sex gangs.”

“A beautician was left scarred for life after a fellow clubber glassed her when she refused to dance with him, it is claimed...”

“The woman was attacked while drunk...”

“Left demands answers from senior Labour trio over links to child sex group”

“Drama teacher charged with having sex with schoolboy she met while directing production of hit musical”

Though the last refers to the female abuse of a male, it is still an important example of how sub-editors choose to represent the sexual assault and violence towards children, young people and minors who are legally unable to consent to sexual activity.

In fact, victim blaming happens so often in today's media that many people are increasingly immune to it. In creating a hierarchy of “worst examples”, are the ones at the top of the list those that shock, or the ones so subtle that they infiltrate the public consciousness at an unnoticed level? In fact, is it healthy to create a hierarchy at all, or should we challenge each and every instance?

Every single article, headline or comment that involves victim blaming is important. Each and every instance damages confidence in society, encourages self-doubt and self-blame. Each case reinforces society's belief that male perpetrators and their reputations should be protected. There is a tendency to assume “innocent until proven guilty” which neglects to respect the needs of the victim.

In a society where over 90% of sexual assaults are thought to go unreported, it is imperative that women are believed and treated with the dignity that they deserve, so that they feel valued as members of the community and so that they have the confidence to work with authorities in the knowledge that they will be supported if or when they feel that they want to take further action.

Why does so much victim blaming exist in the media, particularly with regard to sexual assault



and court cases? It is largely, as we know, both a symptom and cause of the gender inequality that exists, and created by the personal contexts of the journalists and editors. But more than that, the culture of legal action in which we live, where the press is held accountable for every comment and by-line printed about public figures, it is understandable that they would be wary about false accusations and anything that could cost the company. Unfortunately – and wrongly, of course – many editors find it far easier to side with the well-known personality, than to go with an anonymous member of the public who has little method of recourse.

However, there are ways to avoid litigation without blaming the victims of abuse and without holding them accountable for their own experience. There is language that can be used to report cries and allegations that allow women to retain confidence in the system.

Many instances of victim-blaming in recent headlines have been linked to three areas. But it is essential that sub-editors and journalists are not just challenged, but offered alternatives.

Firstly, all reports concerning children and minors who have been victims need to be referred to as instances of rape or sexual abuse. It is not sex, they are not having relationships with their abusers. If a young person is under the age of consent, then they cannot consent. Lack of consent is called rape.

If a person is in a position of responsibility, they are the ones who should ensure that any infatuation, signs of sexualised behaviour towards them (which can in itself be a warning sign of other abuse) or other unusual activity is referred up the chain, to the designated child protection officer. All persons working with young people receive extensive safeguarding training, from those involved in youth organisations such as Girlguiding or The Scout Association, to those working in schools. People in positions of care must not be mitigated by apparent flirtation – they are the abusers when acting in these cases, not the young person.

In cases purporting to allegations of sexual assault, it is imperative that the language used validates the information given by the victim whilst maintaining the legal boundaries. For example, terms such as ‘claims’, in addition to quantifiers such as ‘apparent’ and various quotation marks that lay doubt on the case should be replaced by neutral terms such as reports, allegations and – most preferably in a legal situation – charges. It is too easy for a journalist’s need for synonyms to open up connotations about the plausibility of the case.

Thirdly, a better understanding of this country’s legal system needs to be conveyed in writing. Not guilty does not mean innocent. A perpetrator can only be convicted if the crime can be proven beyond reasonable doubt which, in cases where the crimes may have been twenty or thirty years in the past, can be extremely difficult. Even more so when the people to be convinced are a jury made up of those exposed to victim-blaming on a daily basis.

Inconclusive evidence does not make someone innocent, and it certainly doesn’t make their allegations a “flight of fancy”, as they have been referred to in some parts of the media. Not guilty simply means that the jury wasn’t absolutely, 100% certain of the crime.

Subeditors need to be cautious when using the word innocent, or commenting on the victims in



these cases of male violence against women. They must be accurate – speak of guilty or not guilty, or even not proven, but the word innocent is not an alternative for this, nor is the assumption that the victims in these cases have been “inventing” the trauma that they have experienced.

Headlines and by-lines needn't be less “sensational”. They needn't abandon the principles of snappy sound-bites and high sales. They needn't be wordier nor must they risk legal action for reporting unsubstantiated or unproven claims. But editors, sub-editors and journalists must respect the basic human rights and dignity of victims and adopt a stance of neutrality that ensures those experiencing abuse feel supported rather than distrusted.

[This piece was written prior to the media reports about a 14yo child charged with rape of his mother and so the associated headlines are not included in this analysis.]