The young wife from Northeast India was allegedly raped: The visual and textual framing of rape reportage in Indian media and the ‘social justice’ debate

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Abstract

On February 27, 2015, a woman was raped inside one of Delhi’s most ‘secure’ hospitals where even the nation’s Prime Minister goes for his medical check-up. The incident of this rape was reported by most of the English print, TV and online media within minutes. Almost all of them used similar text to describe the act of rape, to describe the crime, the victim and the accused. While in the case of the accused, his profession was mentioned and a subtle reference made of his religion, in case of the victim, her age, ethnicity, marital status and exactly what her husband does, how she was brought to Delhi and exactly how she was raped – was outlined. Most of the headlines of the articles or opening lines, mentioned the incident as “alleged rape” and almost all visuals accompanying the story were “representative” pictures that were sketches or drawings of
a woman sitting crouched in fear in a corner of a room. This paper attempts to understand the use of evolving discourse and framing in rape reportage in India’s English language media, through the case study analysis of this particular incident.

I use a basic content analysis, by studying and analyzing the headlines and reports of 15 different news reports from print newspapers and news websites that appeared on February 27 and 28, to look at patterns and trends in terms of language framing that emerges from it. I then speak to 5 crime reporters and editors of English language newspapers and websites who covered the event, to understand: What kind of language do reporters think they use to describe rapes and why? How do reporters think they describe rape victims and what do they feel about the way rape reportage is covered in Indian media? What do they feel about media’s traditional role as a champion of social justice, in context of rape reportage in Indian media?

The study is important, especially since the rise of instances of rape and sexual assault is a growing global concern and the issue is particularly serious in India. Recent reports of India’s National Crime Records Bureau indicates that women reporting instances of rape have gone up by over 50% between 2001 and 2011, but this number (27,612 reported cases in 2011), constitutes 1% of total estimated women aged between 15 and 49 years who are raped in India every year. By the NCRB’s own estimates over 5.2 million women aged between 15 and 49 years are raped or sexually abused in India each year. The judiciary and the government – largely male-dominated – have not always shown a proactive spirit in tacking this menace. A 1998 survey for instance found that 68% of judges (surveyed) believed 68% ‘provocative attire’ was an invitation to rape.
Historically, the English language press in India had stayed away from covering rape cases in detail. However, since 2012, when the gang rape and murder of a young woman in New Delhi shook the nation, the coverage of rape in Indian media has gone up.

It is in this context that this paper aims to understand the role of the media in communicating events of rape to a larger audience and why rapes, rape victims and rape scenes are framed in a particular way.