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Defining Women in Need: Online Media Coverage of the Violence Against Women Act and Native and Undocumented Women

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Comments
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On March 7, 2013, after some delay, President Barack Obama signed an expanded Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) into law. VAWA, introduced in 1994 and reauthorized by Congress without much fanfare in 2000 and 2005, was allowed to expire in September 2011 after the Senate and House could not agree on new provisions. At issue in the delayed renewal was the expansion of protections to Native American women living on reservations, undocumented women immigrants, and LGBTQ women.

Given the symbolic annihilation of Native women in mainstream American media generally, and the increased demonization of undocumented women in the last decade, I examine how legislative discord over the expanded VAWA was explained to the public online. I compare general-audience (aka “mainstream”) news sites’ coverage to that of Latinx-targeted sites, a feminist pop culture site, and a Native American-owned and operated news site to gauge how journalists and community members made sense of the story for their audiences. The way violence against women, particularly that experienced by the most marginal in society, is framed reflects cultural (mis)understandings of the intersections between violence, victimhood, and ethnicity. These frames have implications for policy, as well as for broader conversations about national belonging and gendered violence.
Below, I contextualize Native and undocumented women's experiences with violence alongside literature on media framing of violence against women more generally. I then turn to a framing analysis of my varied sources that compares and contrasts how the debate over the expansion of the VAWA was presented for audiences consuming particular types of online news. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the framing of this debate.

**Native and Undocumented Women, Violence, and the News**

As Beth Richie and Lisa Marie Cacho have detailed, women of color have never enjoyed the full protection of the law, least of all ample or accurate representation in the news. Media have long played a central role in legitimizing the colonialist, patriarchal, white supremacist logics of law and order that result in people of color being viewed, more often than not, as criminal and "ineligible for personhood." The ongoing reinforcement and centering of dominant cultural discourses that marginalize anti-racist, feminist, class-conscious ways of knowing have material implications for social policy, public opinion, and political outcomes. Exclusionary frames that privilege certain voices and offer limited interpretations of race, immigration, national belonging, violence, and gender—among other things—proliferate in mainstream news content.

Specifically, mainstream journalists rarely connect their coverage of violence against women to the larger contexts of institutional sexism and racism due, in part, to news values and social norms that focus on reporting "just the facts" of a particular event, treating violence as an individual, rather than social, issue. For example, journalists' coverage of victims often ignores the existence of continued racial, class and/or gender hierarchies within institutions tasked with responding to violent crime, such as law enforcement agencies and courts. These omissions dismiss the impact of such inequalities and enable frames that blame victims. Such frames are particularly acute in cases when victims, because of these very hierarchies, are stereotyped as culpable or are without mainstream allies, rendering them voiceless in mainstream news coverage of gendered violence.

Sujata Mootti has detailed, for example, how contemporary news reports of sexual violence push women victims and survivors to the margins of stories, instead centering the voices and interpretations of "officials" and "experts" like police and lawyers (who are overwhelmingly male, cisgendered, and white). In this way, victims often become defined solely in relation to their male victimizers' identities and skewed understandings of their victimhood. Generally excluded from news coverage are discourses of gendered violence that include a feminist, or at the very least female, perspective. The voices of survivors and advocates are even more invisible. Alongside this critique of the male-centric nature of news reporting, women of color have long offered critiques of the ways white feminists who have gained access to mainstream conversations on sexual violence, domestic violence, and other forms of gendered oppression have centered white women's experiences, perpetuating the invisibility of women of color and their intersectional experiences.

These trends in how violence against women, and women of color particularly, are addressed in the public sphere are not news, so to speak, but embedded in America's cultural record. For example, in her examination of crime news from the early 1800s to the present, Carole Stabile found that dominant understandings of race, gender, and class have long influenced how newsmakers construct definitions of victimhood and criminality. Stabile finds that "fictions of white terror have consistently displaced the material realities of white terrorism" in news reporting. Specifically, white female victims of violence have not only been overrepresented by newsmakers, but have also been constructed in a particular political location in which their victimhood justifies heavy-handed institutional and individual acts that restrict the agency of women and men of color. Such data follows a trend in which whites are overrepresented as victims in mainstream news more generally.

Contrastingly, as early colonial narratives of discovery and progress played out and justified the exploitation of people of color's bodies, women of color were denied access to cultural tropes of victimhood, being constructed instead as sexually deviant and un-rape-able. Coverage of the appallingly widespread victimization of women of color in America is largely absent from historical accounts, while contemporary coverage of the violence experienced by these women often appears through frames of victim blaming and/or cultural pathologizing. Contemporary debates about gendered violence that hinge on determining which women deserve state protection—like those about the Violence Against Women Act—clearly reflect how these nefarious histories and cultural frameworks, and ongoing work to deconstruct them, are directly tied to policymaking.

For example, the original VAWA did not allow tribal courts to try non-Natives for felony acts of violence against Native women; overlooking the
fact that Native women might feel safer approaching tribal courts rather than white-dominated systems, particularly if the perpetrator was white. Andrea Smith and Luana Ross, along with others, have detailed the barriers faced by Native women who are victims of abuse. The colonial-inspired institutionalization and sanctioning of sexual violence (from rape to sterilization) against Native women has led to an especially high suspicion of state-based solutions and a vulnerability to abuse that results from ongoing communal trauma. Moreover, unlike undocumented women, who in recent years have become the focus of increasing, albeit highly derogatory, media attention, Native women continue to be largely ignored in mainstream news coverage of policy issues while occasionally appearing in media more generally as objects of cultural appropriation and consumption. The invisibility of Native women in American politics is stark, but their invisibility as viable victims of violence is especially relevant here given that Native women experience violence at rates higher than any other ethnic group and that this violence, unlike that in other groups, is most often perpetrated by out-group men.

The original VAWA also did not offer any specific protections to women whose immigration status might be used to further victimize them. Undocumented women’s lack of legal status and insecure living conditions, for example, make them particularly vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment and assault, phenomena they experience at rates far above that of other working women. Likewise, domestic abusers often use the tenuous immigration status of undocumented women to coerce them into staying in abusive relationships under threat of deportation and/or separation from their children. Further, as Sara McKinton notes, immigrant women seeking asylum are evaluated by subjective gender and race-based criteria about the legitimacy of their victimhood, leaving women who are unable to perform cultural expectations of U.S. citizenship out of amnesty-based protections.

These various conditions are exacerbated by the fact that immigrant women often fear reporting violence and exploitation committed against them because of increasingly antagonistic, nativist rhetoric in the United States that has led to legislative attempts to further criminalize immigrants. This rhetoric is highly visible in news narratives of immigration wherein immigrant women are characterized as posing a unique and alien threat to the nation because of their reproductive abilities. Women from Mexico and Central America in particular are often subject to racialized assumptions about their sexuality and role in the immigrant family that construct them as binary to an idealized, citizenship-eligible form of womanhood. And, despite protesta-

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Method

I collected over two months of online news stories, beginning on January 1, 2013 and ending on March 7, 2013 the date the expanded VAWA was signed into law. The mainstream news websites included in this analysis are MSNBC.com, FoxNews.com, and CNN.com. Cable news websites were selected because an increasing number of Americans, across many demographics, report getting their news online. At the same time, and despite the increased ease of journalistic inclusivity and information porosity online, research suggests that mainstream news sites largely recycle their own content and that of other dominant news media.

I collected and coded every article from these mainstream sites that made mention of the Violence Against Women Act during the time period noted above. Particular attention was paid to the presence and absence of discourse that addressed the victimization of Native American and immigrant women, overall frames regarding the VAWA, and general trends in authorship and quoted sources. Following this analysis, I collected data for the same time period from the websites Indian Country Today Media Network, a site targeting Native readers that describes itself as “your essential Native American news and information site”. FoxNews Latino and NBC Latino, two sites targeting Latinx readers but within the umbrella of mainstream ownership, and Jezebel, the popular feminist-inspired pop culture site.

Findings

Coverage of VAWA: An Overview

A preliminary content analysis reveals several striking trends in coverage of the debate over the expansion of the Violence Against Women Act. First, despite their limited resources, the staff at Indian Country Today Media Network (ICTMN) published more stories (N=48) on the VAWA than any other outlet examined here. This coverage outnumbers that of even the most comprehensive mainstream source, CNN (N=14), by three-and-a-half times. Jezebel, another nontraditional news site, covered VAWA more (N=10) than each of the remaining sources: FoxNews.com (N=9); MSNBC.com (N=7); FoxNewsLatino.com (N=6); and NBCLatino.com (N=1). The differences in volume suggest that editors’ decisions about quantity of stories was influenced more by their sense of importance of the issue to their readers rather than by the extent of their economic or other traditional news-making resources.

More than half (N=5) of FoxNews.com articles were direct reposts from the Associated Press and Reuters wire services. Had FoxNews.com not included these wire service stories, their coverage would have been the least among mainstream online cable news sources with only four stories on the VAWA written by Fox staff or contributors. CNN was the only mainstream source in which women writers authored the majority of stories on VAWA, and unlike FoxNews.com and MSNBC.com, CNN quoted more women than men on the Act in their coverage—though the vast majority of these sources were white female politicians.
sentence. NBCLatino and FoxNews Latino each included one Latinx-authored VAWA article. Jezebel, the only source to include exclusively women authors, included only one woman of color author, Ruth Hopkins, a regular contributor to ICTMN. Both CNN and FoxNews included African American authors with MSNBC, a company that widely markets itself as representing a progressive take on the news, including no authors of color on the topic of the VAWA.

These initial findings are telling. First, the websites of three of the largest and most profitable news corporations in America published 30% fewer stories on the VAWA combined than Indian Country Today Media Network. Further, taken individually, the quantity of coverage on these sites is staggered by that at ICTMN, and even Jezebel, with its modest ten stories, outpublished two out of three of them. This suggests editors and journalists at mainstream organizations did not deem the contentious debate over extending VAWA protections to vulnerable groups, or even the impact of its delay, of any special significance. Further, white writers far outnumbered writers of color in mainstream coverage of VAWA, where newsroom diversity quite literally evidenced itself in black and (mostly) white, rather than including members of the groups VAWA extensions sought to serve.

While men or unidentified "ICTMN Staff" wrote most ICTMN VAWA articles, Native people authored all but one. In fact, ICTMN was the only source examined here in which the ethnicity of the writer and their closeness with vulnerable communities was highlighted regularly. As is the usual practice of the organization, all bylined articles listed tribal membership and/or the role of the writer in Native communities.

While the preponderance of male authors at ICTMN (who made up nearly 78% of named bylined authors) seems to replicate mainstream approaches to covering social issues, the tone of coverage reveals a very unique sense of institutional reflexivity about the role of women's voices in the news organization. Ray Cook, ICTMN's opinion editor, wrote in a column that touched on the significance of the VAWA passage and looked forward to the future of the publication:

Our work is to interpret our collective political, social, economic, spiritual/medicinal and educational realities... We are doing that with an increase in women's perspectives... as the ICTMN owners give breath to our Iroquois notions of what a woman's role in our life is. Moral compass and practical guides.

In the same column Cook recalls the role of men in the traditional Iroquois Women's Shuffle Dance, "The men sing to assist... And that's all we do, assist. That is what we call, man's work; to simply and reliably assist and get out of the way the rest of the time." Beyond acknowledging the need for more women authors in his organization, Cook's sentiments here reflects a profound and direct challenge to Eurocentric, patriarchal gender roles in society at-large.

Other male and unidentified authors at ICTMN included similar cultural narratives about the important role of women in Native communities and relied heavily on women advocates, politicians, and community members as sources and/or subjects in VAWA coverage. These stories described women survivors and advocates as "courageous" or "warriors" alongside other empowering language. ICTMN was also the only source to include articles authored by women of color activists, including Winona LaDuke and Suzan Shown Harjo, and quotes from multiple Native survivors of violence telling their own stories and discussing their paths toward advocacy for the VAWA. Together, ICTMN gave Native women's voices an important platform by treating them as experts on issues of violence and gender.

What is especially significant in the example set by ICTMN is that the publication provides a model of how male journalists can treat women's victimization with complexity and depth. Certainly much of this approach reflects anticolonial ways of knowing that Native American journalists bring to their work, and culturally embedded journalistic norms that encourage journalists to make clear links between the victimization of women and histories of racial oppression. In fact, ICTMN was the only source examined here to explicitly name white men as the group most responsible for perpetrating vi-
violence against Native women—a naming supported by empirical evidence. Columnist Haley B. Elkins, for example, wrote of VAWA opponents that “requiring a Native woman to file in U.S. District Court because her abuser is ‘white’ translates to ‘Yes, white men should be allowed to go onto reservations and rape women as they please,’” while a reprinted column from Suzan Shown Harjo reported that “nearly 90 percent of the perpetrators of violent crimes against Native women are non-Indians—60 percent are white men—and Native nations can’t touch them.”

Thus, ICTMN names the racialized legal system and its reinforcement of white privilege that makes it easier for white men to abuse Native women with little fear of legal repercussion. Other news sites never offered this kind of blunt assessment of the overrepresentation of white perpetrators, preferring instead to use the less-specific euphemism “non-Native abusers” in passing to identify perpetrators.

Ultimately, ICTMN unequivocally offered a more expansive picture of violence against women than any other source examined here. Below I discuss the primary frames used by ICTMN writers and writers at other online news sources. I suggest that ICTMN offered readers a radically alternative set of interpretations for understanding violence against women than those available in other sources.

A “Legacy of Widespread and Egregious Human-Rights Abuses”

*Indian Country Today* primarily framed the renewal of VAWA through institutional and historical critiques of the disenfranchisement of Native peoples by the American government. This frame connected the abuse of Native women to broken treaties, issues of sovereignty and self-determination, and represented Native people, and particularly Native women, as engaged in ongoing resistance to U.S. colonial policy. Within this frame Native women were treated as legitimate victims without being deprived of their agency, while systems of oppression including colonialism, racism, sexism, and to a lesser extent heteronormativity were connected to explain the Native experience with the U.S. legal system.

In constructing this frame ICTMN writers called on Native collective memory of histories of oppression, connecting violence against Native women and families and opposition to an expanded VAWA to Indian boarding schools, forced sterilization, the violation of treaties, and other human rights abuses and legal challenges to sovereignty. Overall, the liberation of Native women from violence, particularly violence at the hands of the state and non-Indian actors, was constructed as necessary to the dignity and autonomy of actively resistant Native communities.

For example, columnist Gyasi Ross connected the Idle No More movement to the necessary passage of the VAWA, writing of the “sustained Indigenous Resistance to the rape, pillage and exploitation of this continent and its women that has existed since 1492.” Similarly Winona LaDuke wrote that, “The ability of a tribal government to protect those who are most vulnerable is crucial to the dignity of a people.” A column by Steve Russell compared the federal government to the “man behind the curtain” in the Wizard of Oz and attributed the 1978 Supreme Court decision in Oliphant v. Suquamish Tribes that removed tribal jurisdiction over non-Indians to a “reliance on racist stereotype”, noting that this decision “lives on in the failure of Congress to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act.”

News reports in ICTMN also connected Congress’ failure to reauthorize the VAWA in 2011 to other legislative decisions, ranging from environmental policy to health care. One article, for example, reported that, “Native women have played a significant role in the political firestorm surrounding abortion, and they continue to fight for the Violence Against Women Act” while several others focused on how early treaty definitions of sovereignty related to the specific question of VAWA extensions for Native women.

In the two most explicit constructions of this frame, ICTMN quoted directly from Amnesty International’s “Maze of Injustice” report on indigenous women and sexual violence, and a TED talk on violence against Native women by Whisper Kish. These lengthy quotations, appearing in separate stories, clearly reflect ICTMN’s focus on connecting violence against Native women to historical legacies of institutional neglect and abuse:

> Indigenous Peoples in the U.S.A. face deeply entrenched marginalization—the result of a long history of systemic and pervasive abuse and persecution. Sexual violence against indigenous women today is informed and conditioned by this legacy of widespread and egregious human rights abuses. It has been compounded by the federal government’s steady erosion of tribal government authority and its chronic under-resourcing of those law enforcement agencies and service providers [that] should protect indigenous women from sexual violence.

We must move beyond simply acknowledging that sexual violence against Native women exists, and become accountable to the reason why; the root cause emanating from the inherent relationship between American colonialism and its perpetual assault upon Native women’s self-determination through unprecedentedly brutal sexu-
al violence... This is a call to action to become accountable to the original mothers and daughters of this land.

Alongside such narratives, and as previously noted, much of ICTMN coverage highlighted the work of Native women advocates. For example, after the expanded VAWA passed, Renée Roman Nose reported that:

Deborah Parker, Vice-Chair of the Tulalip Tribes Board of Directors, has been a tireless advocate for the passage of VAWA for more than two years. Her efforts and courage helped put a face to the importance of passing VAWA... when she stepped forward and shared her own story, becoming a national warrior seeking protection for all Native women.

Finally, it is worth noting that while ICTMN coverage of VAWA focused largely on Native experiences and concerns, authors also reported on, largely in passing, the interconnectedness of the necessary protection of Native women with undocumented immigrant and LGBTQ women. Steve Russell wrote that in objecting to the expanded VAWA Republicans were “inviting the Democrats to throw lesbians, immigrants, and Indian women under the bus.” Renée Roman Nose quoted a dual tribal member, who said that, “the passage of VAWA, with the Native provisions included, as well as provisions for protection of LGBT and undocumented immigrant women, finally gives hope for justice, hope for the protections and safety that all women deserve.”

Pop Culture Feminism and VAWA

Jezebel.com represents an interesting phenomenon as it reflects the contemporary mainstreaming and monetizing of a traditionally alternative approach to sharing and shaping information. Jezebel, owned by Gawker Media, calls itself a blog “For Women. Without Airbrushing”, and actively covers issues typically associated with second-wave feminism, like reproductive rights and sexual violence, and topics not always aligned with the second wave, such as pop music, celebrity, fashion, and reality TV. Jezebel’s editor Jessica Coen describes the site as having “a lens that is more irreverent and more critical than traditional women’s media.” Jezebel’s founder, Anna Holmes, has argued in the lingua of feminism that the site contributes to “smashing the patriarchy”, and many members of the public have celebrated it accordingly.

Given the resources available to Jezebel as part of a larger media group, the ten stories it published on the VAWA seem especially thin compared to the amount of coverage from ICTMN. Despite the fact that Jezebel touts itself as a woman-focused site, it ran approximately the same number of stories about VAWA as individual mainstream sites.

Jezebel’s coverage of the delay around the passage of the VAWA employed the site’s usual snarky tone. The majority (8) of its articles took a direct, and often sarcastic and insulting, jab at the male politicians who delayed the passage of the bill. Jezebel’s headlines reflected this tone, offering, for example, “Shit Politicians Say About the Violence Against Women Act” and “Republicans to Formally Train Themselves to Shut Up About Rape.” Likewise, Jezebel authors referred to politicians as “batshit crazy” and “confused by anything remotely related to women” and asked their readers rhetorical questions like “How many years do you get for throwing a pie in a politicians face?”

While Jezebel’s coverage presumed women of all types as legitimate victims, normalized a communal outrage and disgust to any way of thinking that lead someone to oppose the expanded VAWA, and was entirely authored by women, it was also severely limited by the site’s embrace of entertainment-style writing and lack of diverse voices. Only one of Jezebel’s VAWA articles was authored by a woman of color, Ruth Hopkins, who also wrote for ICTMN on the topic. Hopkins’ piece was one of only two at Jezebel that discussed in detail the specific experiences of Native and/or immigrant women and/or the legislative logistics of extending protections to them.

When Jezebel writers did mention Native and immigrant women, it was generally in passing and to point out the distastefulness of Republican politician’s perspectives on women and violence. For example, one article sarcastically led, “As you may recall, Congress failed to reauthorize the bill by the end of 2012 because Republicans were super concerned about new provisions that would protect undocumented immigrants, Native Americans, and the LGBT community. (God forbid!)” However these groups or the specific legislative questions around them were never mentioned again in the rest of the article.

This was a common approach among Jezebel writers who primarily turned to chastising politicians for failing to support victims of violence and more generally reporting on legislation related to women as a general category.

Jezebel’s primary discursive frame focused on establishing the neglect of women by politicians, especially Republican politicians, on the whole, connecting VAWA to other “women’s issues” like birth control and abortion access, the role of women in the military, and rape culture. Interestingly, despite their identity as a women’s blog, Jezebel writers neither highlighted the work of women advocates around VAWA nor used women as sources. Only one ar-
article in Jezebel quoted a woman advocate and zero quoted or named a survivor of violence as compared to half (5) that quoted at least one (and sometimes more) male politician. Thus, in prioritizing the shaming of those who opposed VAWA’s expansion in their stories, Jezebel reproduced the marginalization of women’s voices even as they clearly demonstrated a commitment to publishing women writers.

Overall, Jezebel’s coverage of the VAWA debate displayed alternately compelling and troubling feminist discourse. While certainly Jezebel’s coverage treated women as legitimate victims and worked actively to publically shame those who might act in ways that suggested otherwise—an important counternarrative to those that traditionally blame victims—this coverage only very superficially addressed women’s experiences of violence, and hardly addressed the specific experiences of women of color. Further, Jezebel’s framing did not provide women, survivors or otherwise, with visibility as experts who can and do speak out and fight back against their experiences with violence.

VAWA as Another Instance of Political Gamesmanship

Together, mainstream websites overwhelmingly framed the challenges being faced in the renewal of VAWA as part of a game of political sportsmanship in which various politicians used VAWA as a sticking point to take political or strategic stands, only some of which were actually related to violence against women.

For example, FoxNews contributor Juan Williams wrote about the “next big political drama” that would potentially exist if actress Ashley Judd ran for senate against Mitch McConnell, reporting, “Judd is uniquely positioned to paint McConnell as out of touch with female voters. He recently led a group of 22 male Republicans [sic] senators in voting against the Violence Against Women Act.” Williams’, and similar coverage from his FoxNews peers, said no more about VAWA, providing no details about anything related to the act and certainly no mention of the vulnerable groups its expansion sought to aid. Thus, no article written by a Fox contributor did more than name the VAWA in passing as part of covering the general contention between Democrats and Republicans or Congress and President Obama.

Two articles published on FoxNews.com did engage the political and logistical specifics of VAWA in some depth, but both of these were Associated Press authored articles reposted by Fox. Both AP wire stories quoted a Native American amid their coverage—one a survivor of domestic violence, the oth-

er Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma—and one quoted a female anti-domestic violence advocate. These two wire stories thus provided some depth of coverage and diversity of sources not otherwise available on FoxNews.com.

Every MSNBC.com story on VAWA was brief and focused on the “legislative meat grinder”, highlighting the conflict between Republicans and Democrats on VAWA and a variety of other legislative issues. As a result, MSNBC stories occasionally quoted politicians but included no quotes from survivors or advocates or any representatives of Native or immigrant communities. In fact, the only woman quoted in all of MSNBC’s VAWA coverage was the result of reporting on a tweet from Nancy Pelosi saying “We did it!” after the expanded VAWA passed.

Further, while most (n=5) of MSNBC’s stories mentioned the contentions over extending protections to Native women briefly, only one story noted the stipulations related to protecting undocumented women. This mention was brief and embedded in a larger story on the use of the “Hastert Rule” in the House of Representatives after the GOP version of the bill failed: “Democrats claimed the House GOP bill did not do enough to protect illegal immigrants, gay men and women, or Native Americans.” Thus, by focusing on the political back-and-forths of Congress, MSNBC coverage of the VAWA continued to overlook undocumented women, failing generally to provide a platform for people of color and women on issues of violence, and providing no discussion of the social conditions that make Native and immigrant women vulnerable.

While predominantly relying on the same political gamesmanship frame as its peers, CNN offered readers the most complex mainstream coverage of the expanded VAWA thanks to some writers who, within this frame, reported specifics regarding how the act works alongside details related to Native and undocumented women’s vulnerability. Further three editorials—all authored by women—broke with the gamesmanship trend by making the case for the passage of VAWA with a moral, rather than political, framework. These three editorials described violence against women as a wide-scale social issue needing to be addressed. These editorials were not, however, matched with any in-depth news stories about this social issue: an equal number of news stories on CNN.com only mentioned VAWA in passing without mentioning any of the provisions at stake for women of color. As a result, CNN’s online audience might receive vastly different frames of the VAWA controversy depending on which stories they retrieved from the site.
Only one story on CNN, by Tom Cohen, included a woman of color, Democratic Representative Gwen Moore, as a source. In describing the contentious debates in the House on VAWA Cohen reported that:

Moore of Wisconsin, herself a rape victim, paraphrased the question of rights activist Sojourner Truth, a 19th century escaped slave and civil rights advocate. "Ain't they women?" Moore shouted in reference to Native American, undocumented immigrant and LGBT women.

Here, Cohen’s reporting momentarily offers a nod to feminist histories and the intersectional experiences of race and gender oppression. He also quoted both the National Congress of American Indians on violence as experienced by Native women at the hands of non-Native men, and Human Rights Watch on the unique vulnerabilities faced by immigrant farm workers. While this type of source inclusion was not the norm in CNN articles, it does represent a significant improvement from that offered on other mainstream sites.

While a tiny amount of total mainstream coverage (n=3), all from CNN editorials, treated violence against women generally as a reflection of cultural and social dysfunction around gender and power, no coverage of VAWA on mainstream sites spoke to xenophobia, racism, or colonialism as contributing factors to the violence women experience. This reveals a reluctance by mainstream news media to identify the intersections of gendered violence and race/ethnicity, and marginalizes the experiences of Native and undocumented women.

Making Sense of Mainstream Owned Latinx-Target Coverage of VAWA

Unlike either Indian Country Today or Jezebel, dominant-owned news targeting Latinxs provided neither in-depth discussion of the experiences of people of color with state-sanctioned violence or a focus on women’s rights issues within politics. Further, members of the Latinx community working on immigrant rights and/or women’s rights issues were wholly absent from this coverage. Rather, like most mainstream coverage, VAWA was most often mentioned in passing in relation to other topics.

For example, half of all stories on mainstream-owned Latinx-targeted sites focused on the rising visibility of Republican Latino politicians Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, only mentioning the vote against VAWA by both men in passing. While these stories reflected the differing ideological frameworks of their sources, with Raul Reyes of NBC Latino offering a blistering critique of Ted Cruz and a staff-authored FoxNews Latino article offering high praise for the Texas politician, neither engaged VAWA nor addressed the experiences of women of color in any depth.

Along with Reyes, Elizabeth Llorente of FoxNews Latino was the only other bylined author in mainstream Latinx coverage. Llorente, in an article that uniquely focused on undocumented LGBT people, only mentioned VAWA in passing and discussed neither the stipulations in the act seeking to protect immigrants or Native women, but rather solely noted that the act would “expanded protections to gays and lesbians.” This coverage suggests that even when the intersectional identities of a particular group are clearly central to the story, the acknowledgement of intersectional experiences with violence are not necessarily reflected in the reporting and information made available.

The majority of mainstream Latinx stories were drawn from Associated Press reports or the Spanish news agency EFE. Like FoxNews.com coverage, AP content on FoxNews Latino did some of the more thorough reporting on VAWA, with two articles using the mainstream political sportsmanship frame but also including sections specific to the experiences of undocumented and immigrant women. One, after discussing general political contentions over the bill and the question of Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz’s objections to the tribal provisions, noted:

“Besides the tribal provision, the bill contains another hotly debated measure. It gives undocumented immigrant women who are domestic violence victims to U.S. citizen or permanent resident husbands a chance to apply for a visa. This part of the law has traditionally drawn widespread opposition from Republicans, the argument being that it rewards illegal behavior. But many in law enforcement have supported it because it allows for a section of the population that traditionally stays mum to report crimes. Abused immigrant women are less likely to report abuse for various reasons, such as fear of deportation, according to a report National Institute of Justice.”

Just two of the articles in mainstream Latinx website coverage provided any such detail regarding the experiences of undocumented women and/or Latinas with violence.

In the case of FoxNews Latino’s inclusion of EFE coverage, two briefs on the passage of VAWA noted the expanded protections for Native women but made no mention whatsoever of anything having to do with immigrants. Thus, FoxNews Latino’s dependence on content from a Spanish news agency
actually reproduced the invisibility of undocumented women and immigrants more generally. No undocumented or immigrant women survivors were used as sources in any mainstream Latinx coverage of VAWA.

Together, these findings from mainstream Latinx-targeted websites suggest that attempts by mainstream news corporations to specifically target historically neglected populations in their coverage of gendered violence (and likely all issues) falls severely short of actually including members of those communities and/or engaging in nondominant, or even critical, ways with the social conditions that create intersectional experiences. Instead, this coverage more closely mirrors dominant frames that mostly bypass in-depth discussion and offer readers no serious acknowledgement of race or other identity-based forms of oppression.

Discussion

Together these findings reveal how discussions about gender and victimhood are being reproduced, navigated, and transformed in mainstream and alternative online spaces. The contribution of mainstream websites to public knowledge of the Violence Against Women Act was severely limited by a focus on political sportsmanship. Mainstream news sites relied heavily on official sources who were largely male and white, while offering few complex interrogations of violence against women generally or violence experienced by Native and undocumented women specifically. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson and others have shown, the tendency of contemporary journalism to frame politics and policy as competition and gamesmanship not only constrains public engagement with important social issues, but also limits the diversity of voices.

Thus, while public debates on violence against women and the specific vulnerabilities of Native and undocumented women represent great progress in our national consciousness, they also reflect both political and media systems that continue to marginalize those most vulnerable to violence and treat the lives and experiences of women as pawns in very narrow ideological battles. In particular, it seems that the journalistic practices that encourage horse-race/gamesmanship framing in elections, like the overdependence on elite sources, also result in anemic reporting on issues that impact women of color.

Even stories created by news sites with the explicit aim of targeting Latinxs reproduced mainstream frames. Efforts at inclusivity on mainstream Latinx-targeted sites were limited to the occasional community-relevant facts or focus on an elite (male) community member that, while acknowledging some community-based concerns and experiences, fell short of offering any depth or culturally critical perspective. These findings suggest self-imposed ideological and logistical limits on efforts by traditional media to incorporate previously ignored demographics and worldviews. Given the high visibility of immigration as a topic in U.S. politics, the invisibility of immigrant voices across sources, mainstream and alternative, in the VAWA conversation is particularly acute.

The only sites in this study that went beyond the usual framing and sources were Indian Country Today Media Network and Jezebel. Both offered unique discourse on gender and violence by providing readers context not available from mainstream sources. Native journalists in particular provided more comprehensive, community-focused, and advocacy-based coverage than that found elsewhere. Native coverage of VAWA included explicit critiques of and discursive connections to colonialism, racism, and misogyny. Although at ICTMN male writers outnumbered their female counterparts, these writers depended on women as sources and paid particular attention to the agency and resistance of Native women, turning the usual male-dominated nature of public debate on its head. The editors and writers at ICTMN explicitly rejected white supremacy and misogyny, enacting through their coverage community-based resistance.

To a lesser extent, editors and writers at Jezebel contributed to alternative ways of understanding violence against women by mocking politicians who were oblivious to their own complicity with sexism. However, Jezebel reproduced dominant narratives by centering elite, white men in their coverage (albeit to critique them), perpetuating the marginalization of women of color in mainstream feminist spaces by including only a cursory nod to their experiences with violence and work as journalists and advocates.

Clearly the mainstream mediated public sphere in America—even in less-limited web-based spaces—continue to inadequately report on issues of gendered violence especially as experienced by women of color. At the same time, counterpublics based in anti-colonial and feminist ways of knowing have developed a strong and evolving presence online that, while certainly not free from mainstream influence and impulse, work directly to challenge and broaden mainstream narratives.
Notes


5. Stabile, 2006 (see note 4).


7. Moorti, 2002 (see note 6).


10. Stabile, White Victims, Black Villains, 2 (see note 4).


24. Squires, 2007 (see note 2).


28. I recognize the limitations of examining English-language, corporate-owned Latinx news sites and believe it crucial to examine alternative Spanish-language media sources as well. However, the resource limitations of this project only allowed the former, which offer unique insight into mainstream attempts to reach marginalized communities.

29. In the case of the single non-Native ICTMN author, Ryan D. Dreveskraht, discursive efforts were made to legitimate his involvement in the community by identifying him as the author of legal articles specific to Indian Country and member of an American Indian owned law firm.


31. Ibid.


34. Gyan Ross, "The Idle No More Movement for Dummies (or, 'What the Heck Are All These Indians Acting All Indian-ey About?')", Indian Country Today Media Network (Jan. 16, 2013). http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/01/16/idle-no-more-movement-dummies-or-what-heck-are-all-these-indians-acting-all-indian-ey


42. Nose, Mar. 1, 2013 (see note 32).


51. Ibid.


54. These EFE inclusions also suggest that web-editors at Fox News Latino assumed Spanish-European interpretations of American news would be fitting for their audience. An odd
choice given American Latinxs' experiences with racialization and colonization by both the U.S. and Spain, and the apparent exclusion of news content from Central or South American countries.