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### Note:

At the time of this publication, Sarah Jackson was a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the Department of Communication Studies at Northeastern University. Currently, she is a faculty member at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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# Framing Megan Williams: Intersecting Discourses of Race, Class, and Gender in Television News Coverage of Racialized Rape

## Abstract

This study examines mainstream television news coverage of the kidnapping and rape of Megan Williams in late 2007 and coverage of Williams' recantation in 2009. The publicity of this case provides a unique opportunity to scrutinize the under-examined topics of news coverage of white-on-black rape and white female perpetration. Feminist and critical media studies perspectives are called upon to provide an understanding of hegemonic discourses of gendered violence in media discourse. The intersection of race and class with such discourse is examined. Content and discourse analysis methods allow a critical examination of coverage of the Williams' story on four of the most watched television news sources in America. Results reveal disturbing trends in the framing of white-on-black perpetration. Additionally, stark differences in ideological constructions of rape and race are found among the news outlets examined, suggesting that some news sources do more to reproduce raced and gendered discourses of privilege than others.

## Keywords

racialized rape, intersectionality, framing, television news, content analysis, discourse analysis

## Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Comments

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## **FRAMING MEGAN WILLIAMS: Intersecting discourses of race, class, and gender in television news coverage of racialized rape**

**Sarah Janel Jackson**

*This study examines mainstream television news coverage of the kidnapping and rape of Megan Williams in late 2007 and coverage of Williams' recantation in 2009. The publicity of this case provides a unique opportunity to scrutinize the under-examined topics of news coverage of white on-black rape and white female perpetration. Feminist and critical media studies perspectives are called upon to provide an understanding of hegemonic discourses of gendered violence in media discourse. The intersection of race and class with such discourse is examined. Content and discourse analysis methods allow a critical examination of coverage of the Williams' story on four of the most watched television news sources in America. Results reveal disturbing trends in the framing of white-on-black perpetration. Additionally, stark differences in ideological constructions of rape and race are found among the news outlets examined, suggesting that some news sources do more to reproduce raced and gendered discourses of privilege than others.*

**KEYWORDS** racialized rape; intersectionality; framing; television news; content analysis; discourse analysis

On 11 September, 2007 news broke that six West Virginians were being held in the kidnapping, rape, and torture of twenty-year-old Megan Williams. According to official accounts, Williams was held for at least a week while the six perpetrators forced her to perform various sexual acts at knife point. In addition, Williams was reportedly stabbed, beaten, doused with hot water, and called racial slurs while being forced to eat animal feces and drink blood and toilet water. Eventually, Williams was rescued by police responding to an anonymous tip.

Without a doubt, the details of the crime are disturbing in their gruesomeness, but what makes news coverage of the event of particular interest here is the fact that, while Megan Williams is black, all of her victimizers are white. Thus, news coverage of the story had the potential to address not only social dynamics that perpetuate the victimization of women, but those that particularly enable the victimization of black women. Given that mainstream media have largely ignored the victimization of black women at the hands of whites (Benedict 1992; Horeck 2003; Moorti 2002), this study seeks to add a unique contribution to feminist, critical race and critical media work through analysis of the frames newsmakers constructed around such a case.

While statistics show that the vast majority of sex crimes are intra-racial (LaFree 1989), it should be made clear that the rape and gendered abuse of black women by whites has never been unusual in US society.<sup>1</sup> What is unusual is that such cases of white on black sexual violence are deemed newsworthy. In fact, Horeck (2003) has argued that, well into the twenty-first century, "the scene of a black woman being raped by a white man is one that remains unspeakable in popular culture" narratives of rape because the "psycho-sexual history of rape and slavery" has worked to naturalize and mask the sexual victimization of blacks in American culture (p. 36).

Additionally, the presence of several white female perpetrators in the Megan Williams case had the potential to challenge the myth that the motivation behind sexual violence is uncontrolled heterosexual desire. As Horeck (2003) points out, dominant rape narratives traditionally position men and women in oppositional locations, with men possessing the power to victimize and/or protect women while the latter are presumed powerless. These discourses reinforce the very patriarchal culture

that negatively affects all members of society and is in fact to blame for gendered violence (Cuklanz 2000). Furthermore, women are less likely to commit sexual violence (Kitzinger 2004), and therefore critical analyses involving such circumstances are rare.

Importantly, just over two years after Williams' rape and torture received national media attention, Williams issued a statement via her lawyer contending that she had lied about the entire event. However, her recantation was treated as irrelevant by officials who had prosecuted the case based on the plethora of physical evidence that had been collected by police and that proved beyond a doubt that Williams was the victim of the originally described crime. Significantly, all the perpetrators had confessed and several even spoke out from prison after Williams' recantation to acknowledge the reality of the crime.

Despite the legitimacy of the crime, Williams' recantation again presented newsmakers with the challenge of making sense of the complicated story for their audiences. Given the way women, and especially women of color and poor women, are constructed as unsuitable victims and prone to dishonesty (Moorti 2001), news coverage of Williams' recantation has been included in this study to discover how journalists cover such a phenomenon when the crime itself is irrefutable.

According to Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) framework of intersectionality, intellectual interrogations that seek to examine race and/or gender must carefully consider the ways racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism work in and through one another—rather than individually—to construct experiences and meaning in our society. Considering the clear intersectionality at play in the Megan Williams case—the poverty of the victim and perpetrators, the inter-racial nature of the crime, the gendered violence in which women and men acted as perpetrators—this research takes as given what Mia Consalvo (1998) has called “the relevance of integrating analysis of the intersections of identity to ... analysis of media coverage” (p.209).

After a discussion of relevant literature, I present the results of an original study in which I examine national television news coverage of the Megan Williams case to discover if and how media frames reinforce and/or challenge hegemonic social constructions of rape and racism in coverage of racialized rape.

### **Mainstream News Framing, Rape, and Race**

I would like to clarify what I mean when referring to the “mainstream” news media in the context of this study. Mainstream news can also be termed the “dominant” news in that it includes news mediums that are rooted in white, patriarchal, capitalist culture (Squires 2007). In the United States, this culture has, and continues to, dominate the primary economic, political, and logistical means of information creation and dispersal.

Like other central institutions in the United States, the field of journalism has a history of professional and representational exclusion of people of non-European descent, women, and the poor, with definitions of news worth being based in upper-middle-class, white, male positionality. As a result, and despite the increased visibility of people of color and women in the news, the acceptance and perpetuation of worldviews that reinforce race, class and gender privilege, while disregarding the experiences of marginalized members of our society, remains the norm (Newkirk 2000). Specifically, news coverage of people of color, women, and the poor tends to frame members of these communities

as deviant or weak, thus naturalizing their secondary social positions (Benedict 1992; Entman & Rojecki 2001).

Such frames, Entman (1993) notes, result from a process in which journalists “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation of an issue or event” (p. 52). In other words, journalists (consciously and unconsciously) embed certain discursive and thematic devices in their reports that enable particular understandings of a story while disregarding devices that might result in alternative understandings (Kinder & Sanders 1996; Scheufele 1999).

Further, news frames carry over from broad cultural conceptualizations to personal and political understandings of reality (Gorham 1999; Hall 1997; Iyengar 1991; Poindexter, Smith & Heider 2003; Squires 2002). Thus, the dominance of white, elite, male perspectives in the news has material implications for social and political policy and can reinforce the marginalization of anti-racist, feminist, class-conscious ways of knowing (Coover 2001; Entman 1989; Gilens 1999; Lester & Ross 2003).

Given the complicated nature of public understandings of gendered violence and the way these understandings intersect with ideologies of race, sexuality, class and ethnicity, coverage of rape in the news must be understood as performing important ideological work within our society (Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997). Similarly, Horeck (2003) suggests that our society has a cultural investment in rape narratives, both factual and fictional, because they enable and reinforce normative ideologies of sex, race, and class difference. Thus, the framing of gendered violence must be interrogated for its ideological work, especially in cases rarely reported on or examined such as those involving women of color (Consalvo 1998; Horeck 2003).

Specifically, media coverage of rape and other forms of sexual violence has been found to influence social attitudes and legal measures regarding these phenomena. Kitzinger (2004) has shown that media coverage has “profound implications for what people could imagine, what they could say and what they felt they could do” about child sex abuse (p. 44). Similarly, LaFree (1989) has documented the way the social construction of rape can lead to inequalities in the legal pursuit of justice in rape cases. In particular, legal sanctions against black suspects are the harshest while the pursuit of justice for victims deemed non-normative, either by way of their behavior or race (or both), is lax.

Benedict (1992) has detailed the way newsmakers construct rape victims as either angelic and blameless or responsible for their victimization depending upon the social identities and lifestyles of the individuals involved. This construction of rape victims as either “virgin” or “vamp,” “good girl” or “bad girl,” innocent victim or deserving accomplice has been found over and over in studies of news framing of rape and gendered violence (Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997).

Further, the economic and professional demands of the newsroom reward journalists for focusing on atypical, sensational cases of sexual violence and thus have traditionally misrepresented violence against women as a crime only committed by deviant and sick loners (Consalvo 1998; Meyers 1997). While awareness of the prevalence of acquaintance rape has significantly increased since the 1970s, media representations of rapists continue to emphasize their difference compared to idealized constructions of masculinity. Such representations fail to present challenges to the patriarchal social order that is to blame for gendered violence (Cuklanz 2000; Kitzinger 2004).

Further, the episodic and elite-driven nature of news not only results in frames that individualize rapists, but also those that perpetuate the blaming of victims (Iyengar1991). For example, news reports of violence against women often focus on superficial details about occurrences before and after the crime, relationships between victims and perpetrators, the geographic location of the crime, and the state of mind of the parties involved (Horeck2003; Meyers 1997; Moorti 2002). Reporting that fixates on such legally irrelevant questions problematically frames the victim as having had some control of the violence perpetrated against her (Consalvo 1998; Moorti 2002).

Moreover, in news reports of rape, women's voices, including the victims', are often pushed to the margins in favor of "official" interpretations by so-called experts. The perspectives of feminists, social workers, rape survivors and counselors are rarely included in such reports (Moorti 2002). Additionally, because rape is a crime it tends to be covered by male journalists (Benedict 1992). Thus, not only do rape victims become defined in relation to their male victimizers but also in relation to the patriarchal definitions of victimhood presented by male police officers, lawyers, judges, psychologists and reporters.

Particularly important to cases such as this is the way crime news, from the early 1800s to the present, has constructed definitions of victimhood and criminality at the intersections of dominant understandings of race, gender, and class (Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997; Stabile 2006). Specifically, members of the lower-classes, including people of color (who are usually assumed to be lower class even if they are not), are constructed as both naturally more prone to perpetrating violence and as less legitimate victims (Benedict 1992; Horeck 2003; LaFree 1989; Meyers 1997).

News narratives often treat poor and working-class white men—like Tim Blackwell, who shot his wife Susana in a Seattle courthouse—as "losers" whose violent behavior reflects their failure to perform middle-class masculinity (Consalvo 1998). Poor- and working-class women, like Cheryl Araujo, the victim of the New Bedford, Massachusetts "Big Dan's" gang rape, are also constructed as failures in terms of both race and gender identity (Benedict1992). Because such women often work outside the home, maybe single mothers, and sometimes have white ethnic or immigrant backgrounds, their victimization is often explained away by blaming individual behavior that is constructed as deviant from ideal white womanhood (Meyers1997).

Further, Horeck (2003) and Meyers' (1997) findings suggest that the implicit labeling of individuals as "white trash" through class stereotyping in media narratives can be understood as a racialization of lower-class whites that further enables news discourse to portray them as outside of normative whiteness. Such normativity generally assumes the innocence of middle- and upper-class white men and women, erroneously suggesting that those who perform socially sanctioned forms of masculinity and femininity cannot become rapists or rape victims (Stabile 2006).

At the same time, the seemingly natural logic of race and gender normativity as defined through whiteness results in blacks being constructed oppositionally in media narratives of rape. Specifically, men of color are usually portrayed as natural perpetrators and women of color as "un-rape-able" because of dominant racist stereotypes regarding the animalistic nature and sexual promiscuity of blacks (Benedict 1992; Stabile 2006).

Stabile (2006) argues that "fictions of white terror have consistently displaced the material realities of white terrorism," in news reports of violent crime (p. 2). Overwhelming evidence shows that

white female victims of rape have not only been overrepresented by newsmakers, but have also been constructed in a political location whereby their victimhood justifies heavy-handed social and political actions against marginalized groups. In particular, the link between mythological racialized discourses of rape and the unjust lynching and punitive social control of African Americans is undeniable (Benedict 1992; Horeck 2003; LaFree 1989; Moorti 2002).

Moorti's (2002) study of news coverage of both intra- and inter-racial rape found differential frames applied to black suspects and white suspects, as well as an apparent flexibility of definitions of "true" victimhood for both white and black victims depending upon the social location of the suspected rapist. Like other scholars, Moorti finds that in cases involving white victims and black suspects dominant racist assumptions align in news coverage to demonize the suspects and purify the victim.

Conversely, accounts of black female rape victims are completely absent in historical news coverage and generally only appear today in problematic frames of victim blaming or black male perpetration (Moorti 2002; Stabile 2006). For example, in news coverage of the Mike Tyson black intra-racial rape case, Moorti found that racial stereotypes were evoked to demonize Tyson while frames "whitened" the victim enabling her "true" victimhood. However, legitimate victim status is fleeting for African American women even in intraracial cases; after Tyson was convicted, the victim was framed by media makers according to stereotypes of black female promiscuity and unreliability.

Importantly, contemporary studies that investigate news coverage of rape have been unable to include cases that involve black victims and white perpetrators because of the way the press ignores the victimization of women of color by white men (Benedict 1992; Moorti 2002; Stabile 1996). According to Meyers (1997), "the representation of African American women who are victims of violence occurs within the convergence of white supremacist and male supremacist ideologies" (p. 33), thus, the interrogation of news coverage of the Megan Williams' rape has much to contribute to feminist and critical race analyses of public discourses of rape.

## **Method**

Content analysis and discourse analysis have been used both independently and simultaneously to examine the meaning-making process of media discourse. Commonly, content analysis is understood to be a quantitative process in which the contents or characteristics of a specific media text are counted and compared in order to gain understanding of how meaning is constructed through language (Jensen 2002). Discourse analysis is a qualitative process in which specific aspects of a media text are examined not simply for their numerical presence or absence but for the implicit meaning of their inclusion or exclusion, the cultural understandings they assume and recall, and the larger narrative or discursive structure in which they construct meaning.

According to Kim Christian Schroder (2002), "an important, if implicit ambition of many discourse and content studies has been to infer from the properties of media texts to their probable 'effects' on or...their relative contribution to social and cultural processes at large, with specific reference to public opinion or the reproduction of ideology" (p. 116). Given that my goal is to examine how ideological frames of the Megan Williams case were constructed with the implication that these frames contribute to public understandings of race, class and sexual violence among other things, I have made use of both methods.

This analysis includes transcripts collected via LexisNexis from two broadcast news networks and two cable news channels; NBC, ABC, CNN and Fox News Channel. Data was collected for two date ranges. First, the four-month period of 1 September, 2007 to 31 December, 2007 was examined because preliminary searches revealed that the first mentions of the Megan Williams case appeared on September 11 and the last on December 17. The additional days at the beginning and end of this data set were added to insure the inclusion of all stories that mention Megan Williams.

Second, given Williams' recantation of her story in October 2009, a data set from 1 September, 2009 to 31 December, 2009 was collected to insure the capture of all coverage of the recantation and for parity with the original data set. Within each of these date ranges, every story from NBC, ABC, CNN and Fox News that explicitly referenced the name "Megan Williams" was included in analysis. The collected data include both reports in which the Megan Williams case was the primary story and those that presented the case as secondary to some other primary news topic.

In total, thirty-three ( $n = 33$ ) television news transcripts were collected for the 2007 dates, and three ( $n = 3$ ) for the 2009 dates, for a total of thirty-six ( $N = 36$ ) transcripts for analysis. The computer software Concordance was used to examine explicit framing devices in each transcript by searching for trends in the numerical occurrence of words and phrases, the proximity of certain words and phrases to one another, and by counting and categorizing story sources (See Appendix Table A1 for story source characteristics and A2 for key search terms).

Implicit framing devices were examined using in-depth discourse analysis. During this process I carefully read through each transcript taking note of the overall structure, plot, context, and cultural implications in the presentation of the stories. Particular attention was paid to the words, referents, tone, narrative connections, and other linguistic and contextual characteristics of the stories, as well as the reported meaning of the crime and the inclusion and/or exclusion of certain causal interpretations and historical, social, and political contexts. Together, the use of these methods allowed for an emergent discovery of the frames used by newsmakers to construct social understandings of the rape of Megan Williams and her later recantation.

## **Results**

### ***Broadcast Networks***

Based on the LexisNexis search, ABC and NBC reported only two, brief stories on the Megan Williams rape (ABC,  $n = 1$ ; NBC,  $n = 1$ ). This is noteworthy in and of itself given the significant attention white victims, like Laci Peterson and Natalee Holloway, received on these networks (Fontaine & Parmley 2007; Wolfson 2005). Further, previous cases of gang rape involving white victims, like the "Big Dan's" case and the Central Park jogger case, received unprecedented amounts of media coverage (Benedict 1992). Thus, the minimal coverage presented by the networks contributed to the paucity of discourse acknowledging the victimization of black women in US society.

ABC's official source on the story was the white, male sheriff for Logan County, West Virginia, but quotes from Megan Williams' mother and father were also included. ABC was the only news source examined here that provided a quote from Megan's father, whose existence went unacknowledged on NBC, CNN and Fox. NBC relied on two official sources in their reporting of the story, the previously mentioned sheriff and a female legal analyst, both of whom are white.



## Avoidance of Rape and Racism

Neither ABC nor NBC used the word “rape”; instead both used more vague descriptions that undermined the intensity of the crime. ABC stated that Williams had been “physically, mentally and sexually abused,” and NBC defined the crime as a “sexual assault.” ABC called Williams a “victim” only once, NBC not at all. In addition to avoiding an explicit discussion of rape, both networks avoided using the terms race, racism or racist, preferring descriptions that only implied that race was a factor.

Both networks mentioned the use of a “racial epithet” but avoided the explicit identification of white racism as a factor in the inter-racial nature of the crime. While ABC identified Williams as black multiple times and stated that the likely motive for the crime was “because she was black,” no mention of the race of the perpetrators was made. NBC stated that the case might be treated as a hate crime “because the woman is black and those under arrest are white.” Unfortunately this construction downplays the severity of hate crimes by incorrectly suggesting they simply involve people of different races rather a victim targeted by perpetrators out of racism.

The avoidance of the term “rape,” or words explicitly signifying racism by journalists at both networks disabled the acknowledgement of sexual violence or racism as social phenomena. ABC’s failure to acknowledge that the perpetrators were white and NBC’s failure to label Williams a victim suggests that dominant ideologies that ignore the realities of how black women experience racism and sexism were very much in play.

## Sensationalism and Exceptionalism

The ABC story specifically focused on the “trailer in rural West Virginia” where the “unimaginable” crime scene was found. Such discourse framed the crime as unique and unreal calling it “unspeakable,” “out of a horror movie,” “hard to comprehend,” and “incomprehensible.” Overall, NBC uses fewer words suggesting exceptionalism but did call it “shocking” and quoted the sheriff that he had “never seen anything this gross,” an odd characterization for the sexual victimization of a woman.

Sensationalistic framing of the crime by newsmakers at these networks reflects what Benedict (1992) has described as a “reversion to pre-1970s focus on sex crimes as individual, bizarre, or sensational case histories” (p. 252). Such coverage allows for the “voyeuristic finger-pointing” of viewers at the perpetrators, who in this case were othered by their class (“trailer in rural West Virginia”), while undermining the possibility of the treatment of racialized rape as a societal problem.

## ***Cable News Channels***

It might be logical to surmise that CNN and Fox News Channel would present more coverage given the twenty-four-hour news cycle they are required to fill. However, Fox News only mentioned the Megan Williams’ case twice (Fox, n=2), and then, only in passing relevance to other topics central to their reports. Conversely, CNN presented thirty-two (CNN, n = 32) stories on the Megan Williams case, twenty in which analysis of the case was the primary focus and twelve in which references to the case were made amid a larger context. CNN was the only news source examined here that included 2009 coverage of Williams’ recantation.

This clear discrepancy in the frequency of cable coverage of the Megan Williams story suggests that while CNN deemed the story newsworthy enough for it to become serialized, following the story for a length of time, and even offering follow-up two years later, Fox News did not even deem the case newsworthy enough to be a stand-alone episodic story (as it was on ABC and NBC), but instead constructed its newsworthiness as contingent to other topics.

Plentiful research has found a conservative slant in Fox News coverage of politics and war and a preference by Fox News viewers for information that reinforces rather than challenges dominant ideologies (Aday 2010; Harmon & Muenchen 2009; Iyengar & Hahn 2009; Morris 2005; Parker, Foster, Krohn & Williams 2009). However, these data—the choice by newsmakers at Fox to largely ignore a story of black victimization significantly covered by one of its primary competitors, along with the framing of the story discussed below—is the first to demonstrate that the channel’s construction of rape is more entrenched in white supremacist gender values than that of other news sources.

### *Coverage on Fox News Channel*

Fox News made reference to the Megan Williams rape amid coverage of the Jena Six case and a November 2007 civil rights march led by the Reverend Al Sharpton. In both cases, no sources official or otherwise were called upon to discuss the Megan Williams story, leaving it instead in the hands of anchors Alan Colmes and (mostly) Sean Hannity.

Neither Fox reference to Megan Williams mentions the racial slur used by the perpetrators or explicitly calls her a “victim.” Interestingly, Fox is the only source examined here that did not implicitly or explicitly recall the class positions of the perpetrators.

### *Reverse Racism*

While Fox’s first mention of Williams’ victimization accurately describes it as a “brutal rape” and Williams is once characterized as an “innocent girl,” the short reference is sandwiched between two prolonged accounts of racial violence that focus on white male victims and black male perpetrators. In particular, the Jena Six case is framed simply as a “brutal attack” on a white victim by black perpetrators rather than a series of racially charged events that were initiated by white violence against blacks. Furthermore, Hannity reports on the “mob assault” of a “13-year-old white boy” by “black teenagers.” Notably, both the cases involving white victims are reported as unquestionable fact (despite lack of resolution in either), while the word “alleged” is used in reporting the crime against Williams.

Such discourse, and the placement of the Williams’ story between these others, undermines black victimhood by suggesting a “reverse racism” frame for understanding racial violence in America. Such frames have become common in the supposedly “postracial” era and play off old stereotypes of a blacks threat to the supposedly natural order of white America. At the same time, this framing minimizes the prevalence of anti-black violence committed by whites and individualizes racism (Winant 2004).

## Discrediting Black Claims

In the same initial coverage of the case, Hannity refers in passing and without substantiation to Williams as having “psychological disorders,” a contention that both throws the legitimacy of the crime into question and enables a blame the victim frame by identifying Williams’ mental state as being somehow relevant to her victimization.

A month-and-a-half later, the second Fox News reference to the Megan Williams case begins with Alan Colmes reporting that “[Al] Sharpton points to the Jena Six case, the Megan Williams incident, and the growing number of nooses on campus across America” as justification for stricter enforcement of hate crimes legislation. While this acknowledges a trend of racist action in the United States, the brevity of the reference to Williams and the use of the word “incident” fail to fully acknowledge the crimes committed against her. Fox viewers who were unfamiliar with the Megan Williams story may have come away from this particular reference without any understanding of what the “incident” refers to.

Significantly, in the same story, Sean Hannity states, “You mean Reverend Jackson who offered a scholarship for the woman who was the accuser in the Duke case—or the same Reverend Sharpton who went out there and falsely accused Steven Pagonis in the Tawana Brawley case? Shouldn’t they be held accountable?”<sup>2</sup> Not only does this discursive move discredit and call for the social sanctioning of those arguing that the Megan Williams rape was evidence of a larger trend of anti-black US racism, Williams and the reality of the crimes committed against her are also discredited by drawing a parallel to cases in which black women are commonly understood to have falsely accused white men of rape.

Undoubtedly, Hannity’s choice to recall these two cases instead of any of the plethora of high-profile cases involving racial violence that had recently occurred (e.g. Sean Bell, Genarlow Wilson), constructs African American claims of racism as invalid and suggests instead that whites regularly become the victims of deception by blacks, and in particular black women. Such discourse is clearly rooted in the maintenance of what Collins (2000) calls “white supremacist patriarchy” given the way it completely reverses and conceals the reality of how fictional racialized rape narratives have been used to justify the murder and incarceration of black men and the institutional sexual assault of black women (Benedict 1992; Horeck 2003).

Fox offered no coverage of the 2009 recantation by Williams, a finding that initially appears contrary to the thrust of the ideological frames Fox relied on to undermine the validity of black victimhood and construct whites as victims. However, the fact that the torture remained an indisputable fact agreed upon by both officials and the perpetrators likely discouraged coverage of the recantation on Fox. Further, the lack of follow-up supports the fleeting way Fox covered the story and suggests an unwillingness to treat the case as newsworthy as all.

## Coverage on Cable News Network (CNN)

CNN was the only news source examined in this study that provided serialized coverage of the Megan Williams kidnapping and rape (n=29) and some coverage of her recantation (n=3). This suggests that newsmakers at CNN deemed William’s victimization more newsworthy than did newsmakers at the broadcast networks or at Fox. Notably, this is consistent with the network’s history of prolonged

coverage of sexual violence. Horeck (2003) contends that CNN established itself as a news channel through its groundbreaking (but problematic) coverage of the “Big Dan’s” gang rape trial in 1983.

Overall, CNN presented only fifteen (n=15) black sources compared to thirty-three (n=33) white ones in stories on the Megan Williams rape, and only five (n=5) female sources compared to twenty-four (n=24) male sources. CNN was the only source examined here that presented a direct quote from Megan Williams, and then only once.

### Contradictory Inclusion of Race

In its 2007 coverage of Williams’ victimization, CNN provided more of a social context for the story than the other sources examined here, referencing it twelve times amid discussions of other cases of racialized violence and civil rights violations. Like Fox, CNN related the story to the Jena Six case and coverage of civil rights and hate crimes marches; however, CNN’s coverage did not dismiss the existence of racism or fixate on white victims. Thus, CNN’s successful framing of the story as a part of a larger social trend of racial injustice (including also relating it to the Sean Bell and Genarlow Wilson cases and a rash of nooses being hung throughout the country) is progressive compared to its competitors’ disregard and denial of institutional racism.<sup>3</sup>

CNN presented a discussion of hate crimes in relation to the Megan Williams’ case more than any other topic (n=73). However, these reports undermined the relevance of racial motivations in the case, ignored the possibility that gendered violence could be considered a violation of civil rights, and rearticulated discourses that suggest a prior relationship between victim and perpetrator make the crime less severe. For example, it was frequently reported that prosecutors were concerned “that the victim’s prior relationship with one of the suspects makes hate crime charges nearly impossible.” According to such logic, most of the thousands of racially motivated lynchings that have occurred in the United States cannot be considered hate crimes!

Further, one only has to replace “hate crime” with “rape” in the above quote to see how such constructions play off old myths of violence against women that use the existence of a prior relationship to undermine victimhood. Such framing serves as a particularly good example of how dominant race and gender narratives intersected to undermine the severity of the crimes committed against Williams.

Notably, CNN reported on the use of racial slurs by the perpetrators in only four (n=4) of its 2007 stories and only one of its 2009 stories. The fact that the defense attorney for the perpetrators explicitly stated Williams’ race played a role in her being chosen for victimization was only included in two (n=2) stories. Such underreporting is troubling given the relevance these facts would likely play in public understandings of the role racism did or did not play in the case and if it should be considered a hate crime. Thus, despite contextualizing the crime within a larger acknowledgement of racist action in close to 40 percent of its stories, CNN’s extensive focus on why the case was not being tried as a hate crime undermined the significance of racism to the story.

## Class Matters

Nearly half of all stories that mentioned the Williams' case on CNN, and the majority of those that solely focused on it, (n=15), constructed the class of the perpetrators as relevant to understanding the crime. The "rural" location of the "trailer" and/or "mobile home" where the crimes took place was cited frequently, and once the location of the crime was described as a "shack." Kitzinger (2004) has detailed the way "story placing"—the descriptions of place employed by journalists when reporting on cases of sexual abuse— gives credibility to specific understandings about the event that tend to play into dominant and factually incorrect ideologies about who commits sexual violence and where it happens. Thus, the focus by newsmakers at CNN on the trailer contributed to the classbased othering of the perpetrators and framed racialized rape as an anomaly that only happens outside of normative white society.

## Victimhood in Flux

CNN used the term "rape" to refer to the crime fifteen times (n=15) in their coverage, but used "sexual assault" twenty-seven times (n=27) and "sexual abuse" eight times (n=8). Thus, the crime was defined as a rape less than half as often as it was not described as such.

CNN explicitly defined Megan Williams as a victim at least once in almost every story in their 2007 coverage (n=28). Nevertheless, Williams' victim status appeared in flux. CNN did not suggest in any way that the rape or other violent acts committed against Williams might be false as Fox did. However, CNN's initial coverage of the crime spent a significant amount of time asking legally irrelevant questions about what type of previous relationships she had with her torturers and how she "ended up in the trailer." This line of questioning was pursued in the majority, (n=13), of the stories solely focusing on the case; a disturbing trend considering the way such questions tend to enable victim blaming.

Williams' victim status became even more tenuous in CNN's 2009 coverage of her recantation. In these three stories, only one labeled Williams a victim, and then, despite reassurances from officials that the physical evidence in the case was irrefutable and convictions valid, this description came with the qualifier "alleged," a term usually reserved for cases that have yet to be tried in a court of law.

The lengthiest of the three stories that addressed the recantation, called upon a criminal defense attorney not related to the case to comment on the impact the recantation might have. The attorney, Sylvia Pinera-Vazquez, is the only woman of color treated as an official source in any of the data collected here. Unfortunately, in her lengthy discussion with Rick Sanchez she suggests that Williams "may have some mental issues" and that "since the beginning, they [the prosecutors] thought that Ms. Williams had embellished her story," contentions not reported by CNN in 2007. Thus, in a bizarre contradiction, Sanchez is reassured by the attorney that the physical evidence and confessions in the case are solid and the original understanding of the case is correct while Williams is simultaneously undermined by suggesting her original statements (despite their alignment with the evidence and confessions) were untrue.

Additionally, coverage of Williams' recantation by CNN implied multiple times that Williams was seeking to benefit from her rape. Reporter Brooke Baldwin described the original coverage of the case as Williams' "cause célèbre," and the Latina defense attorney asked "Is she going out seeking some sort

of book deal?" The suggestion that Williams could in any way benefit from being raped and tortured undermines her victimhood and reflects the way women who are deemed non-normative are framed as having fraudulent motives for levying rape charges, even when such charges are irrefutable.

At no time did any CNN coverage of Williams' recantation suggest that it might have been motivated by the extreme and lasting psychological trauma normally experienced by rape victims. Significantly, highly publicized rape cases like Williams' have been found to further traumatize victims by repeatedly recreating the events in media discourse and through the intensive questioning of victims by police, lawyers and reporters (Benedict 1992).

### Sensationalism and Exceptionalism

CNN consistently used sensationalistic language to describe the crime. Williams' victimization was described as a "horror movie," "hard to imagine," "perplexing," "bizarre," "strange," "shocking," "hard to comprehend" and similar descriptions forty times (n=40). Rick Sanchez added the gem that "some of this is so bad that, to be honest with you, I can't describe this to you on television," Brooke Baldwin concurring that "some of the offenses [are] so horrific that we can't even talk about it." Such discourse supports Horeck's (2003) contention that while sexual violence evokes disgust in public narratives, it is also treated with fascination and imbued with entertainment value that encourages audiences to fantasize about the specifics of the crime.

In order to explain the crime, CNN called upon a white, male psychologist who stated, "I think these are career criminals who became monsters by their own making...They have rejected all social mores." Such language, which both pathologizes and sensationalizes the perpetrators, works alongside their class othering to present only individual-level explanations for their actions. That the perpetrators are "monsters by their own making" completely absolves society of any responsibility for their racist and sexist actions.

### As for White Female Perpetrators?

The above discussed individualizing of the perpetrators combined with gender stereotypes in CNN's single attempt to interrogate the presence of female perpetrators in the crime. The same psychologist contended that, "women usually aren't career criminals. However there are a few who have taken on the characteristics and traits men have...sometimes they're also under the effect of men or possibly the influence of drugs and alcohol." This construction not only disturbingly implies that racialized rape is a normative "characteristic" of men but also suggests that white women are only capable of racism and sexual violence when in an altered state of mind or manipulated by men.

After this statement, anchor Sanchez adds to this frame by stating that the crime against Williams would have been "somewhat understandable if it was only men attacking a woman." The idea that heterosexual gang rape is understandable calls on disturbing myths about rape that construct it as an act of uncontrolled sexual desire rather than a form of gendered terrorism (Benedict 1992). At the same time, such constructions both invoke homophobia and frame the female perpetrators as even

more deviant than their male counterparts exactly because of the norms of feminine behavior they violated.

This finding is particularly striking as the presence of white female perpetrators could have prompted a conversation by newsmakers about the fact that rape has everything to do with power and little to do with (hetero)sexual lust. Instead, an opportunity to interrogate the power dynamics and social norms within which sexual violence occurs was altogether missed.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, mainstream television news reported on the story of Megan Williams' rape with an obvious lack of marginalized voices, providing twice as many total white (n=36) than black (n=18) sources and nearly four times as many male (n=30) than female (n=8) sources. These results support previous findings that mediated depictions of both racism and rape remain the purview of white males.

Neither of the broadcast networks examined here treated the story as particularly newsworthy or provided, in their minimal coverage, any social contextualization of race or gender-based crimes. While newsmakers at CNN did attempt to address racism by contextualizing the crime against Williams amid discussion of other racist actions, this attempt fell flat by failing to acknowledge hierarchies, histories, and intersections of race and gender.

Uniquely, Fox News Channel provided its viewers with frames that not only ignored racism and sexism but arguably encouraged these phenomena by providing a contextual frame that called on old stereotypes of blacks as a threat to white safety and neoconservative myths of reverse racism. Such framing entirely obscured the possibility of any recognition of the reality of racial or gender hierarchies in the United States. This finding supports Aday's (2010) contention that Fox News Channel should not be considered a "mainstream" news source at all but rather a form of "alternative" information that represents ideologies so traditionally hegemonic they cannot be considered within the contemporary dominant norm.

The fact that the terms "rural" "trailer" and "mobile home" were used more often (n=20) than the terms "racism," "racist," and "race" combined (n=14) or the term rape (n=18) reflects an insistence by mainstream newsmakers to "other" the perpetrators of the crime via their class while presenting a serious lack of relevant informational focus and revealing a general discomfort with addressing race and gender inequality.

The term "gang rape" was never used in any of the stories examined here despite the fact that it adequately describes what happened to Megan Williams. This finding, along with work that has analyzed coverage of "Big Dan's" and the Central Park jogger gang rape cases suggests that the term "gang rape" has become so racially coded in US society that it is only applied when the perpetrators of a crime can be explicitly identified as ethnic or racial others (Benedict 1992). Despite the class othering of the tortures of Megan Williams their whiteness seems to have saved them from being labeled gang rapists by media makers.

It is further notable that not a single source drew a parallel between the crimes committed against Williams and lynching. This omission is striking given that while the torture of Williams did not

result in death, as lynching is generally understood to, the sexualized, racialized and group-based nature of the violence is undoubtedly similar (Horeck 2003). Because lynching is thought of as a crime committed against black men, it is likely that Williams' gender identity, as well as a general discomfort with treating racism as a widespread issue, dissuaded newsmakers from constructing understandings that might have recalled histories of lynching.

Altogether, conventional rape narratives specifically evidenced themselves in news coverage of the Megan Williams rape in the way the perpetrators and their crime were treated as exceptional cases rooted in individual pathology. At the same time the undermining of Williams' victimhood, while evidenced differently among and between the networks and cable channels, also reflects a reliance by newsmakers on problematic conventional discourses of rape that do more to interrogate the victim than the suspects. Additionally, this work reflects a serious marginalization of female, and especially feminist voices. Thus, these findings support contentions by Benedict (1992) and Cuklanz (2000) that despite evidence of progressive moves toward representing rape between the 1970s and 1990s, contemporary rape narratives seem to be sliding backward.

Distinctively, this study offers a rare look at how the victimization of a black woman by male and female white perpetrators is ideologically constructed by newsmakers. Findings here suggest that along with maintaining many conventional narratives of rape, contemporary newsmakers seem particularly unable (or unwilling) to frame stories of racialized sexual violence in such a way as to take into consideration the way hierarchies of gender and race intersect, often violently, in black women's lives.

Further, these findings evidence ideological differences by source in television newsmakers approaches to covering the racialized rape of black women, a subject that should be investigated in more detail in the future. Given what we know about the way news narratives influence public understandings, the possibility that some viewers may be more exposed to media frames of rape that either altogether ignore or actively subvert the realities of intersectional hierarchies in our society seems an especially important topic for consideration.

## NOTES

1. The United States of America has a particular history of not only ignoring but sanctioning sexual crimes against black women and of failing to convict whites of such crimes (Collins 2000; Roberts 1997).
2. In 1987 fifteen-year-old Tawana Brawley accused a group of six white men, including police officers, of raping her and smearing her with feces. The Rev Al Sharpton served as one of Brawley's advisers through the case. A grand jury later dismissed the Brawley case citing evidence that in fact Brawley may have fictionalized the entire event (Harris 1989). In 2006 three white Duke University Lacrosse players were accused of raping an African American woman at a house party. While initially labeled a possible hate crime, the North Carolina Attorney General later declared the players innocent due to inconsistencies in the woman's story and "overreaching" by the District Attorney initially assigned to the case (Beard 2007). Both cases received large amounts of media attention, in part because of the intervention of high-profile black figures like Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. This attention is notable because of the general lack of news coverage of African American women's sexual victimization;



coverage of these cases arguably contributed to racist cultural stereotypes that construct black women as deceitful, sexually deviant, and un-rapeable.

3. In 2006, twenty-three-year-old Sean Bell was shot to death outside a New York nightclub by five police officers in a hail of fifty bullets. The officers claimed to believe Bell was in possession of a gun but evidence confirmed Bell was unarmed (Wilson 2008). Genarlow Wilson a seventeen-year-old African American high school student was sentenced to ten years in prison in 2006 after a jury found him guilty of child molestation for engaging in consensual oral sex with a fifteen-year-old white girl. The age of consent in Georgia was sixteen. The verdict carried a mandatory sentence of ten years in prison and required Wilson to register as a sex offender for life. Wilson was released after serving two years upon the Georgia Supreme Court's decision that the original sentence was cruel and unusual punishment (Goodman 2007).

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1**

Story characteristics by source.

	ABC	NBC	CNN (07'/09')	Fox News	Totals
Black Sources	2	1	13/1	0	17
White Sources	1	2	32/1	0	36
Other race/ethnicity sources	0	0	0/1	0	1
male sources	2	1	21/3	0	30
Female sources	1	2	4/1	0	8
Primary story	1	1	173	0	22
Secondary story	0	0	12/0	2	14
Type of coverage	Episodic	Episodic	Serial	Episodic	

**Table A2**

Frequency of key terms by source.

	ABC	NBC	CNN (07'/09')	Fox News	Total
Sexual violence terms:					
victim	1	0	28/9	0	29
rape	0	0	12/4	2	14
sexual assault*	0	1	26/2	1	28
sexual abuse*	1	1	8/1	0	10
terrorism	0	0	0/0	0	0
gang rape	0	0	0/0	0	0
Racism terms:					
racism	0	0	3/0	3	6
racist	0	0	0/0	0	0
race	0	0	6/0	2	8
racial slur	0	0	4/1	0	4
racial epithet	1	1	0/0	0	2
racially charged	1	0	0/1	0	1
hate crime	1	2	73/2	1	79
lynching	0	0	0/0	0	0
Class-coded terms:					
trailer	1	0	7/3	0	8
mobile home	0	0	5/0	0	5
rural	1	1	1/1	0	3

**Table A2 – continued**

	<b>ABC</b>	<b>NBC</b>	<b>CNN(07/09')</b>	<b>FoxNews</b>	<b>Total</b>
Sensational and exceptionalism terms:					
Horrific	1	0	10/3	0	11
Unusual	0	0	1/0	0	1
Confusing	0	0	1/0	0	1
Perplexing	0	0	1/0	0	1
Unimaginable	1	0	0/0	0	1
Unbelievable	0	0	2/0	0	2
Shocking	0	1	2/3	0	3
Unspeakable	1	0	1/0	0	2
Incomprehensible	0	1	0/0	0	1
Bizarre	0	0	1/3	0	1
Monsters	0	0	1/0	0	1
Strange	0	0	1/0	0	1
Horror movie	1	0	6/0	0	7
Hard to imagine	0	0	2/0	0	2
Beyond comprehension	0	0	2/0	0	2

\*variations of these terms were counted in these results including “sexual assault,” “sexually assaulted,” “sex assault,” “sexual abuse,” “sexually abused,” and “sex abuse.”