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Sex Crime and the Media

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The term “sex crimes” refers to violent acts of a sexual nature, ranging from exhibitionism and voyeurism to sexual assault and rape. Media reporting of sex crimes has historically been marked by silence and sensationalism. While sexual violence has historically been a forbidden topic, marked by silence and denial, its taboo nature has also created a history of selective sensationalist coverage of particular sex crimes. These sensational crimes are generally marked by additional features that add to their sensational status. Crimes involving strangers, extreme violence, inter-racial crimes, and/or celebrity assailants and victims are far more likely to receive media coverage. This selective reporting means that media coverage produces a picture of sexual violence that is almost completely opposite to reality and that sends distorted messages about the existence and causes of this violence. While the majority of perpetrators of these assaults are known to the victims, media reports focus on the danger of strangers. While the majority of sex crimes occur in spaces such as the home, media reports focus on the dangers of the outside world. At worst, these patterns of reporting can reinforce cultural prejudices that acquaintance or date rape, or sexual crimes which occur in the context of ongoing relationships, are less “real,” less serious, and less deserving of serious attention. Media coverage has also been heavily criticized for focusing on the actions and responsibility of victims, suggesting that victim behavior, such as drinking, flirting, or being in the “wrong place at the wrong time” precipitates sexual violence.

Recent decades, however, have seen significant change to the reporting of sex crimes. Media coverage of sexual violence has been a focus of feminist campaigning since the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, many media organizations changed their policies around matters such as naming victims of alleged sexual violence, and they revised guidelines on how these crimes were to be reported, although the patterns listed above are still prominent. There has also been a growth in feminist voices and views in media reporting, as well as increased focus on the responsibilities and failings of the criminal justice systems. More recently, the growing influence of social and online media has increased the diversity of voices and perspectives around sexual violence, with both feminists and

survivors of such violence becoming more prominent, although online misogyny and victim-blaming have also become more prominent. There has also been a growth, particularly in recent years, of media coverage of previously ignored allegations of sex crimes involving celebrities and/or politicians. The most famous of these is, perhaps, Jimmy Savile in the United Kingdom, but there are also prominent examples in the United States, such as Woody Allen and Bill Cosby. These cases have raised significant concerns about media responsibilities in cases that remain unresolved by the legal system, with debates between those who highlight the media's ability to spur the criminal justice system to action and those who warn of the dangers of trial by media, particularly to the rights of the accused.

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