



# **Unpacking the Narrative:**

## **An Analysis of Media Guides about Responsible Reporting on Sexual Violence**

Juliet Morrison and Dr. Christopher Dietzel



### **Land Acknowledgement**

McGill University is on land which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. We acknowledge and thank the diverse Indigenous peoples whose presence marks this territory on which peoples of the world now gather.

### **Acknowledgement of Funding**

This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and *iMPACTS: Collaborations to Address Sexual Violence on Campus*; SSHRC Partnership Grant Number: 895-2016-1026, Principal Investigator and Project Director, Shaheen Shariff, Ph.D., James McGill Professor, McGill University.

### **Suggested Citation**

Morrison, J., & Dietzel, C. (2023). *Unpacking the narrative: An analysis of media guides about responsible reporting on sexual violence*. iMPACTS: Collaborations to Address Sexual Violence on Campus, McGill University.

# Table of Contents

About Us	4
Introduction	5
Methods	6
Helpful Guidance from the Media Guides	10
Unhelpful Guidance from the Media Guides	14
Discussion	19
Key Takeaways	23
Summary	24
References	25
Appendix	29

# About Us

iMPACTS — led by Shaheen Shariff, Ph.D., James McGill Professor — is a multi-year and multi-sector research project that aims to address sexual violence on university campuses in Canada and internationally. The overarching goal of iMPACTS is to unearth, dismantle, and prevent sexual violence within universities, and ultimately in society, through evidence-based research that informs sustainable curriculum and policy change.

iMPACTS is the first project of its kind to address sexual violence by means of a systemic partnered solution in the fields of education, law, policy, arts, popular culture, news media, and social media. Our multidisciplinary project brings together partners from across these sectors to uncover issues of sexual violence and develop tangible solutions. Together, we consider how sexual violence is perpetuated in society and how universities can work with diverse communities on informed and sustainable responses that place student voice, agency, and education at the heart of policy and curricular change.

## **For More Information**

To learn more about iMPACTS, visit our website: [www.mcgill.ca/definetheline/impacts](http://www.mcgill.ca/definetheline/impacts)

# Introduction

---

Journalists are on the frontlines of shaping the public’s understanding of sexual violence because they contribute to society’s beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes relating to sexual violence. Since certain beliefs and attitudes, such as restrictive gender roles or dominant patriarchal values, can lead to the perpetration of acts of violence (World Health Organization & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2010), the media plays a powerful role in telling stories about sexual violence and influencing how the public responds. This power also comes with the potential for harm. Irresponsible reporting that sensationalizes stories about sexual violence and perpetuates rape myths can retraumatize people who experienced sexual violence and can contribute to misleading societal narratives about sexual violence and rape (Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2004).

This report presents findings from our project, which compiled and analyzed media guides from several organizations that aim to guide journalists in covering stories on sexual violence. Our overarching goal was to review the guides, uncover helpful recommendations, and provide suggestions for improvement. In doing so, we aim to underline the importance of approaching people’s stories in a trauma-informed manner and offer commentary on existing tools for journalists. While we recognize that the complex and demanding nature of journalistic practices can pose constraints on sensitive reporting, we believe the media should cover stories of sexual violence in a way that is nuanced, trauma-informed, and survivor-centric. In critiquing existing media guides, we hope this report will prompt critical thinking about how the media and journalists impact societal discourses and how we have a collective responsibility to expect and encourage a greater trauma-informed approach to journalism on sexual violence.

# Methods

---

We conducted an online search of media guides to uncover information about tips, recommendations, guidelines, and journalistic best practices relevant to reporting on sexual violence. The search was conducted in November and December 2022 by using Google. Search terms included: “media reporting guide on sexual violence”, “tips for exploring sexual violence”, “covering sexual violence”, “reporting on sexual assault”, “toolkit for reporting on sexual violence”, and “educational guide for journalists covering sexual violence”. Guides were also found by citation-tracing and looking through the bibliographies of media resources.

Our search yielded 11 media guides from Canada and the United States that were written between 2004 to 2021. A range of organizations, including journalism institutes, sexual violence resource centres, and provincial/state governments, produced these media guides. The guides ranged from a 2-page tip sheet to a 60-page comprehensive report with additional resources. Most of the guides were targeted at journalists, though some were for both journalists and educators. There were only a few guides aimed at a broader audience of people working in the media. Information about the guides is provided in Table 1 below. In the appendix, Table 2 outlines each media guide's key non-academic sources that it drew upon to inform its recommendations.

To analyze the guides, we followed a feminist, trauma-informed, and intersectional approach. We grounded our analysis on these principles to remain critically aware of the needs of people who experienced sexual violence and the potential harms they could experience, for example, by being revictimized by the media. We looked for issues and information that could harm women and people of minority genders because sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon that disproportionately impacts these populations. Moreover, we scrutinized journalistic practices that could cause harm to people whose identities sit at the intersections, such as Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ people, since sexual violence and related problems often result in compounded harm for those whose intersectional identities are marginalized in society.

*Table 1: Information about the media guides analyzed*

Title	Published	Location	Author(s)	Length	Target audience
How to teach reporting on sexual abuse	2018	United States	Journalism professors (Dr. Candi Carter Olson, Utah State University and Dr. Tracy Everbach, University of North Texas)	6 pages	Journalism instructors
Media guide for reporting on sexual violence	2021	United States	Hawaii Department of the Attorney General and the Hawaii Sexual Assault Response and Training Program	6 pages	Media professionals
Media kit on sexual assault	n.d.	Canada	Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ)	Online kit with 31 sections	Media professionals
Reporting on rape and sexual violence: A media toolkit for local and national journalists to better media coverage	2012	United States	Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women	45 pages	Journalists

*Table 1: Information about the media guides analyzed*

Title	Published	Location	Author(s)	Length	Target audience
Reporting on sexual violence	n.d.	United States	National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	4 pages	Journalists
Reporting sexual assault: A guide for journalists	2004	United States	Statewide Sexual Assault Media Advisory Group, convened by the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence	23 pages	Journalists
Reporting on sexual violence	2011	United States	Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma	2 pages	Journalists
Reporting on sexual violence: A guide for journalists	2017	United States	Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MNCASA)	64 pages	Journalists



*Table 1: Information about the media guides analyzed*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Published</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Target audience</b>
Reporting on sexual violence: Tips for journalists	2017	United States	National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)	3 pages	Journalists
Use the right words: Media reporting on sexual violence in Canada	2015	Canada	Femifesto and Collaborators	54 pages	Journalists, community organizers, educators, and the general public
What's missing from the news on sexual violence? An analysis of coverage, 2011–2013	2015	United States	Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG)	28 pages	Media professionals

# Helpful Guidance from the Media Guides

---

In this section, we present guidance from the media guides that are helpful for media actors and reporters when covering sexual violence. The section is organized by topic, each of which includes a more detailed description of the guidance and an explanation of why the suggestion is helpful. We also note which guide(s) the information came from.

## **1. Do use specific language that reflects the violating nature of the act.**

It is important to recognize that sexual violence is an act of violence rather than a harmless, everyday sexual interaction. Mischaracterizing sexual violence as regular sex rather than a violating, violent, and potentially criminal behaviour risks minimizing the harm and misconstruing it as a consensual, even pleasurable, encounter. Journalists should opt for using terms like “rape” or “sexual assault” instead of “sexual activity” or “non-consensual sex” to accurately convey the violating nature of what occurred.

This guidance came from Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women (2012), Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2011), Femifesto (2015), Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (2004), Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2017), and National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.).

## 2. Do contextualize sexual violence as a public health problem.

Treating sexual violence as a public health problem means acknowledging that sexual violence is a widespread health issue that affects not only the person who experienced sexual violence but also their family and the wider community (Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse, 2011). Journalists can adopt a public health approach by incorporating statistics or quotes from experts into their news pieces. Using a public health approach helps shift the focus away from an individual, isolated incident of assault and towards systemic misogyny, sexism, gender-based violence, and sexual violence.

Additionally, reporters can ask questions about what work is being done to combat sexual violence to incorporate discussions of prevention into their coverage. This presents an opportunity for them to frame and examine an incidence of sexual violence as a social problem. Moreover, this approach allows them to shed light on the risk factors that contribute to the problem, which includes societal discourses, individuals' beliefs and attitudes, socio-economic structures, and institutions that perpetuate harm and/or fail to take action (Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse, 2011).

Contextualizing a story is especially important when a piece includes quotes from an individual who promotes false information and rape myths, for example, claiming that rates of false reports of sexual violence are high or stating that a perpetrator raped a woman because of what she was wearing. These comments should not get airtime or attention—unless to critique them—because they can perpetuate harm and misinformation about sexual violence.

This guidance came from Berkeley Media Studies Group (2015), Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women (2012), Femifesto (2015), Hawaii Department of the Attorney General and the Hawaii Sexual Assault Response and Training Program (2021), Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault (2017), and National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.).

### **3. Do go into interviews with a thorough understanding of the impacts of sexual violence on people who have experienced it.**

Discussing an incident of sexual violence can be traumatic. During an interview, when the individual explains what happened to them, they may get confused or become scattered. They may also get emotional or ask to stop the interview. Journalists should exercise care when speaking with people who experienced sexual violence and be patient to minimize any emotional or psychological harm.

It is important to recognize that trauma, like sexual violence, can affect how information is encoded and stored in the brain (Haskell & Randall, 2019), which may contribute to someone presenting an incomplete or disoriented memory of the incident. Not being able to recall certain elements about the encounter does not mean it did not happen. Rather than focus on the details of the event, reporters can ask about the sensuous and emotional aspects that are easier for people who experienced sexual violence to remember. This will help care for and support the individual and remove pressure from them to give a full narrative report of intimate and potentially traumatic aspects of their experience.

This guidance came from Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2011) and Femifesto (2015).

#### **4. Do recognize that people who experience sexual violence often want to regain agency as part of their recovery.**

Throughout the journalistic process, be flexible and think of ways to promote the agency of the person who experienced sexual violence. This can include: informing them how the interview will proceed, answering their questions about the interview and publication process, providing information about when the story will run, and explaining how the story will be promoted. Before interviewing, ensure the person gives their consent and check in with them throughout the reporting process to ensure their consent is ongoing. Other good practices include letting the person choose the location of the meeting and presenting them with the option to take breaks, as needed.

Whenever possible, journalists should allow the individual to see their quotes or some parts of the story. The individual will then have a better understanding of how their experience is being depicted, and it will help them avoid surprises that have the potential to harm. This approach can also be useful for fact-checking the story and ensure that the person's agency was maintained throughout the process. Overall, collaborating with the individual from the beginning to the end can help them develop trust with the journalist and make them feel more comfortable sharing their story, which can also improve journalistic relationships and make people feel more at ease about working with journalists in the future.

Lastly, as we discuss below, it is good practice to talk with the individual about what kind of language they would like to be used to describe their experience. For example, ask the individual if they prefer to be identified as a “victim” or “survivor.”

This guidance came from Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2011), Femifesto (2015), Hawaii Department of the Attorney General and the Hawaii Sexual Assault Response and Training Program (2021), and Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (2004).

# Unhelpful Guidance from the Media Guides

---

The points below reflect guidance that are unhelpful or harmful for media actors to implement when covering sexual violence. Each point identifies an unhelpful guidance and explains why the guidance is unhelpful. As such, these points are presented as practices journalists should not do (i.e., “Do not...”). Where applicable, we suggest an alternative approach instead.

**1. Do not default to using the word “victim” to describe someone who experienced sexual violence. Do not use “survivor” if the perpetrator has been convicted.**

Journalists should use the term preferred by the individual who experienced sexual violence. It is important to consider the implications of depicting someone as a “victim” or a “survivor” because of the meanings embedded in these terms. Some people may also have strong feelings about these terms and may not want to be depicted as one or the other.

Using “victim” may encourage victim-blaming tropes that imply the person who experienced sexual violence is at fault for the assault. “Victim” may also perpetuate the false idea that the individual should feel embarrassed for what happened to them. On the other hand, using “survivor” may lead people to believe that the individual who experienced sexual violence has recovered from their trauma. As a result, people may offer them less empathy, discourage them from speaking out, or fail to help them seek out needed resources (Matchett, 2022).

It is important to note that the legal system often uses “victim” when a case has been brought for investigation. However, many people who experience sexual violence do not pursue a criminal route, and either “victim” or “survivor” can work in a media story (Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, n.d.). Thus, when reporting about an individual who has experienced sexual violence, journalists should ask which term they like best and respect the individual’s preference.

**2. Do not search for details about the life of the individual who experienced sexual violence to illustrate how “ordinary” they were.**

Although details about an individual’s personal life can be useful when portraying their story, focusing on their background may encourage victim-blaming narratives (Benedict, 1993), as people may look for “clues” to explain or justify the sexual violence, rather than paying attention to the harm the perpetrator committed. This practice purports that individuals—often women and girls—should avoid getting raped instead of recognizing the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that lead people to rape. In other words, victim-blaming shifts the onus away from the perpetrator and towards the individual who experienced sexual violence. Do not imply or engage in victim-blaming.

An alternative is emphasizing the perpetrators’ actions. Journalists can characterize the incident by, for example, describing how the perpetrator committed the assault, explaining the types of violence the perpetrator enacted (e.g., physical, emotional), and investigating their background. Of course, not all people who experienced sexual violence will be comfortable with information about the incident being published, so be sure to check with them before sharing intimate, personal, or explicit details.

### **3. Do not mischaracterize perpetrators of sexual violence as “exceptional”.**

Media coverage about perpetrators of gender-based violence tends to depict the perpetrator as an exceptional case or a “sick man” (Featherstone, 2021). Narratives such as these suggest that perpetrators of sexual violence are outliers in how they comport themselves and interact with society. These narratives can also create suspicion in cases where the perpetrator seems ordinary or is a high-profile person (Caringella-Macdonald, 1998). There is not a unique, specific category of people who are perpetrators—they can come from any background and hold any variety of identities. Thus, including details about the perpetrator in the story may help dispel the myth that perpetrators of sexual violence are exceptional.

### **4. Do not ignore how photos can reinforce rape myths.**

Although reporters are not always involved in decisions about which photo accompanies a piece, journalists should be aware of how images can perpetuate rape myths. Photos that allude to sexual violence in dark, secluded, urban areas can perpetuate the myth that sexual violence mainly occurs by strangers in isolated areas, which is not the case. Most people who experience sexual violence know the perpetrator, and assaults often happen in their home or the perpetrator’s home (Lovett & Kelly, 2009). Photos of people who experienced sexual violence in a cowering position on the ground imply that they are powerless and unable to seek help (Schwark, 2017). Photos like these can reinforce rape myths, perpetuate inaccurate assumptions, and have a lasting effect on public perception.

For this reason, this guidance is important not just for reporters and journalists, but also for photojournalists, multimedia staff, layout designers, and editors.



## 5. Do not overlook intersectionality.

People's experiences with sexual violence differ; not every individual who has experienced sexual violence has experienced it in the same way. In this sense, it is important to be cognizant of intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes that people with minority identities confront additional barriers and have less privilege than people with majority identities. Intersectionality further recognizes that people with minority identities experience compounded harms because they are marginalized in society, including by individuals, institutions, and systems.

People with minority identities and/or from marginalized communities often experience compounded harms that exacerbate their experiences of sexual violence. Sexual violence intersects with racism, xenophobia, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, and other identity-based harms to magnify the violence and impacts of such violence. Compounding harms can happen during an individual's experience of sexual violence and afterwards. For example, Black women are more likely to be revictimized when disclosing an incident to medical professionals (Campbell, 2005). Trans people who experienced sexual violence have reported that police officials purposefully misgender them when they tried to access help (Guadalupe-Diaz & Jasinski, 2017). Being attentive to intersectionality means recognizing how an individual who has experienced sexual violence, especially an individual with a minority identity and/or from a marginalized community, may face additional harm during and after the incident. Journalists should be careful not to exacerbate such harm.

Moreover, there is less media attention on the stories of BIPOC, trans people, low-income people, and unhoused people's experiences with sexual violence (Femifesto, 2015). It is vitally important for the media to be aware of the disproportionate rates of sexual violence experienced by these individuals, and journalists should work to ensure they are covering their stories adequately and with dignity.

## **6. Do not forget about resources, especially resources with an intersectional lens.**

The point about intersectionality extends to the resource section of the media guides. Resources can be helpful for people who experienced sexual violence or community members looking to learn more, but they should not be presented as applicable to everyone. Remember: there exists a diversity in individuals' experiences with sexual violence, and certain individuals experience compounded harms because of their intersectional identities.

In addition to offering additional information about sexual violence, media guides should provide resources that recognize how sexual violence can be a product of interlocking forms of oppression and specify which resources are specific to marginalized communities. Providing intersectional resources is especially important because marginalized individuals confront the most barriers and have the most negative experiences when interacting with law enforcement or medical professionals (Brubaker et al., 2017). These barriers and negative experiences can make it additionally difficult for individuals who experienced sexual violence to come forward, receive support, and share their stories.

In Canada, there is high prevalence of sexual abuse against Indigenous women, and they have a fraught relationship with the police, two problems that have been consistently documented in reports and publications about missing and murdered Indigenous women (McDiarmid, 2019; Palmater, 2016). It is critically important to present specific resources relevant to Indigenous people. As an excellent example, Femifesto's (2015) guide highlights Indigenous-specific resources and provides information about provincial and national organizations (p. 47–48).

# Discussion

---

There was significant variation in the recommendations offered by the media guides for journalists reporting on sexual violence. While some media guides provided detailed recommendations, many other guides offered broad advice. As such, media guides can be improved by being more specific with their suggestions. Offering concrete examples to journalists that clearly explain why certain approaches in reporting or interviewing are better than others is helpful for media actors as they interact with people who experienced sexual violence and report on their experiences.

Each guide approached the issue of reporting on sexual violence differently. Some stated that the media industry plays a significant role in shaping public discourse and, thus, has as imperative to recognize sexual violence as a public health issue that can be prevented. For example, the Chicago Taskforce on Violence against Girls and Young Women (2012) cited "The Effect of News 'Frames'", from Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2008), which explains that a public health model:

"may shift the consumer's perception of crime and violence from a sense of risky, random inevitabilities to a focus on base rates, risk factors, and potential prevention strategies (Thorson, Dorfman, & Stevens, 2003). Such a frame is posited to promote greater public awareness of the context for crime and violence (i.e. when, where, and how it is likely to happen) and, in turn, increase support for public health and preventative measures."

In contrast, other media guides believed it was their responsibility to inform journalists about how rape myths could be unintentionally perpetuated and cause stigma. A few guides did not explain why it is important to have responsible reporting on sexual violence. Overall, the variations in how media organizations framed and discussed reporting on sexual violence reflects the broad range of recommendations these guides suggested for people working in the media industry.

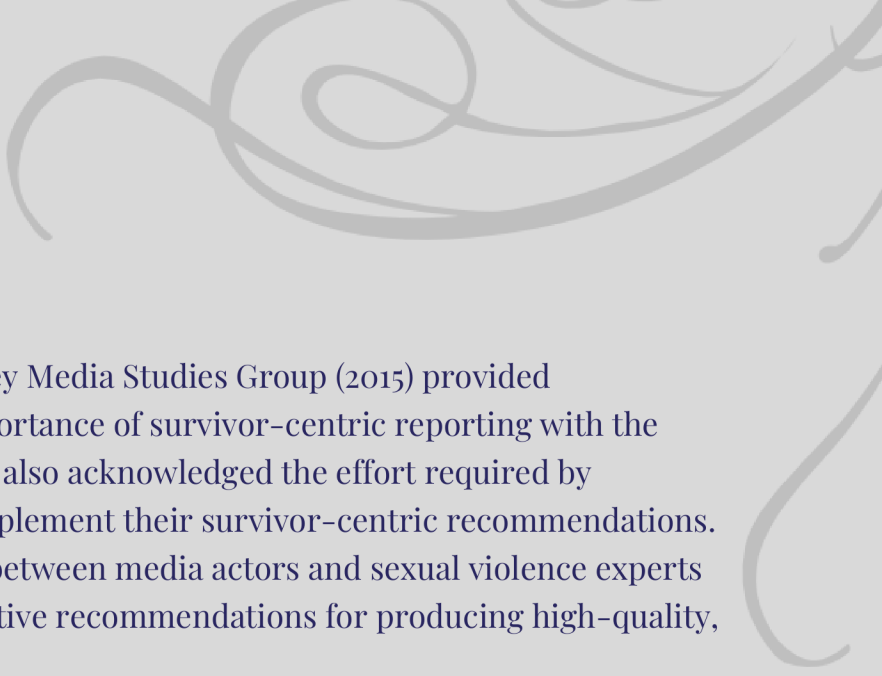
Language was identified as a critical component of responsible reporting that journalists must pay attention to, and that recommendation about language was reflected across all media guides. Although all guides gave instructions about using proper language when referring to people who experienced sexual violence and reporting on sexual violence, these are not the only issues necessary to consider. Societal discourses can influence how people understand and interpret a story (van Dijk, 2009), so journalists should recognize how the framing of a story and other reporting practices matter. For example, reporting through a public health model is essential. A public health model reframes discussions of sexual violence around prevention, rather than isolated crimes (Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse, 2011). Such an approach reflects how sexual violence can impact everyone, including individuals, communities, institutions, and society as a whole. This means that addressing sexual violence requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach with input from diverse key stakeholders (Egen et al., 2020).

There are other practices that journalists should integrate into their work. As stated above, being flexible in the reporting process can help give agency back to the individual who experienced sexual violence. This approach can help them set boundaries and can mitigate practices that might re-traumatize them. Respecting the individual can also make the person who experienced sexual violence more comfortable throughout the reporting process. Journalists and other media actors should complete training about how to report on issues of sexual violence. Where possible, training should be provided to all members of the media organization to ensure that the entire newsroom is aware of the complexity of sexual violence and that the responsibility of trauma-informed storytelling does not fall to the reporter alone. All these recommendations are valuable and should be incorporated into future media guides for responsible reporting on sexual violence.

Few guides discussed the need for intersectionality or how the realities of marginalized individuals may differ. Given that members of marginalized communities are at a greater risk for sexual assault and face increased barriers to reporting (Brubaker et al., 2017), it is critically important for journalists to incorporate intersectionality into their reporting practices. Journalists' reporting should accurately reflect the disproportionate rates of sexual violence against marginalized communities and how experiences of sexual violence intersect with identity-based harms and systemic harms, such as racism, xenophobia, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Most media guides addressed journalists. Given the range of media actors who work on an article or multimedia product, guides should address a broader range of people involved in media production. This includes (but is not limited to) reporters, editors, photographers, layout designers, social media staff, interns, and managing editors. In only targeting journalists, the guides overlook all the other people who influence the media production process. Moreover, guides should offer tailored recommendations for each media actor since each role has unique responsibilities. The absence of tailored recommendations hinders the potential positive impact of the recommendations and it risks rendering them less effective. This is especially true as those higher up in the production process make final decisions about a story. Without being equipped with best practices when reporting on issues of sexual violence, decision-makers may unintentionally overlook trauma-informed, intersectional, and survivor-centered approaches, and they may fail to present the story through a public health model.

The guides that were the most specific and comprehensive with their recommendations were also the ones that were collaboratively prepared with input from journalists and sexual violence centres. The guides from Femifesto (2015) and the Berkeley Media Studies Group (2015) provided clear insight about reporting on issues of sexual violence and called on a broad range of media actors to cover stories in a sensitive, flexible manner.



Notably, Femifesto (2015) and the Berkeley Media Studies Group (2015) provided recommendations that balanced the importance of survivor-centric reporting with the realities of daily media production. They also acknowledged the effort required by multiple levels of the editorial staff to implement their survivor-centric recommendations. Society will benefit from collaborations between media actors and sexual violence experts because they can craft realistic and effective recommendations for producing high-quality, appropriate coverage of sexual violence.

Lastly, it is important to note that the recommendations offered here are informed by our analysis of the 11 media guides as well as our understanding of current literature in the field. We intend to conduct empirical research on journalistic best practices to further investigate issues related to media reporting on sexual violence. Our future research may uncover additional, different, and/or more specific recommendations for how to support individuals who have experienced sexual violence and how to engage in ethical, respectful, and trauma-informed media practices.

# Key Takeaways

---

1. Media guides on responsible reporting of sexual violence are valuable resources for journalists who cover stories about sexual violence. However, most guides concern a limited range of media actors and fail to consider the influence of actors across the media industry. Recommendations for responsible reporting should address everyone involved in the media production process.
2. A major focus of the media guides is on language. These 11 guides emphasize that language matters and that journalists should opt for wording that accurately conveys the incident of sexual violence, while avoiding perpetrating rape myths. Journalists and others involved in reporting on sexual violence should prioritize language and work with those who experienced sexual violence to ensure the words used are trauma-informed and survivor-centric.
3. Few media guides discuss intersectionality or recognize how members of marginalized communities face compounded harms and, therefore, they fail to consider the diversity of people's experiences with sexual violence. More work needs to be done by journalists, reporters, and other media actors to ensure intersectionality is integrated throughout the reporting process.
4. Several guides discuss adopting a public health approach for more nuanced and accurate coverage of sexual violence. In recognizing sexual violence as a societal problem rather than an individual one, journalists can highlight root causes and emphasize prevention. This is effective because it underscores the pervasiveness and complexity of the problem, as well as how it can be tackled.
5. The media guides that offer actionable, survivor-centric recommendations were also the ones that were collaboratively prepared between sexual violence experts and media actors. Media organizations should partner with experts, local groups, and other key stakeholders to ensure their practices and recommendations are evidence-based and community-informed.

# Summary

---

There are a range of media guides, toolkits, and tip sheets that aim to be a resource for journalists reporting on stories of sexual violence. These guides are generally valuable, especially since journalists do not often receive training about trauma-informed practices at journalism schools (Dworznik & Garvey, 2019). Our analysis revealed several ways in which media guides can be improved, notably by crafting recommendations for a range of media actors, not just journalists. All those involved in the process should be trained about issues of sexual violence and how to take a trauma-informed, intersectional, survivor-centered approach that recognizes sexual violence as a public health issue. Guides can also be improved by providing specific recommendations and clearly explaining why those recommendations are useful.

Recommendations must be tangible, so it is important for media guides to outline how recommendations can be incorporated into the media production process. Organizations looking to create their own media guides or update existing versions should work with sexual violence resource centres and/or experts from the field to ensure that their recommendations are comprehensive, nuanced, and sensitive to the diverse experiences of individuals who experienced sexual violence. Lastly, incorporating a range of perspectives into developing a media guide can lead to more actionable practices that are both survivor-centric and attune to the realities of how media gets produced.



# References

---

Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse. (2011). *Sexual abuse as a public health problem*. <https://www.atsa.com/sexual-abuse-public-health-problem>

Benedict, H. (1993). *Virgin or vamp: How the press covers sex crimes*. Oxford University Press.

Berkeley Media Studies Group. (2015). *What's missing from the news on sexual violence? An analysis of coverage, 2011-2013*. <https://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/issue-22-whats-missing-from-the-news-on-sexual-violence-an-analysis-of-coverage-2011-2013/>

Brubaker, S. J., Beasley, B. A., Keegan, B., & Slovinsky, T. (2017). Teaching and learning guide for: Measuring and reporting campus sexual assault: Privilege and exclusion in what we know and what we do. *Sociology Compass*, 12(2), e12556. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12543>

Campbell, R. (2005). What really happened? A validation study of rape survivors' help-seeking experiences with the legal and medical systems. *Violence And Victims*, 20(1), 55-68. <https://login.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/loginauth=shibb&url=https://searches.scohost.com.ezproxy.net.ucf.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cmedm&AN=16047935&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Caringella-MacDonald, S. (1998). The relative visibility of rape cases in national popular magazines. *Violence Against Women*, 4(1), 62-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801298004001005>

Carter Olson, C., & Everbach, T. (2018, February 12). *How to teach reporting on sexual abuse*. MediaShift. <http://mediashift.org/2018/02/4-step-guide-teach-reporting-sexual-abuse/>

Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls & Young Women. (2012). *Reporting on rape and sexual violence: A media toolkit for local and national journalists to better media coverage*. <http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf>

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011). *Reporting on sexual violence*. <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>

Dworznik, G., & Garvey, A. (2019). Are we teaching trauma? A survey of accredited journalism schools in the United States. *Journalism Practice*, 13(3), 367–382.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1423630>

Egen, O., Kollar, L. M. M., Dills, J., Basile, K. C., Besrat, B., Palumbo, L., & Carlyle, K. E. (2020). Sexual violence in the media: An exploration of traditional print media reporting in the United States, 2014–2017. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 69(47), 1757–1761.  
<https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6947a1>

Featherstone, L. (2021). Rape, feminism and culture in the 1970s. *Sexual Violence in Australia, 1970s–1980s: Rape and Child Sexual Abuse*, 63–81. [https://link-springercom.prox-y3.library.mcgill.ca/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-73310-0\\_3](https://link-springercom.prox-y3.library.mcgill.ca/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-73310-0_3)

Femifesto. (2015). *Use the right words: Media reporting on sexual violence in Canada*.  
<http://www.femifesto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/UseTheRightWords-Single-May16.pdf>

Guadalupe-Diaz, X. L., & Jasinski, J. (2017). “I wasn’t a priority, I wasn’t a victim”: Challenges in help seeking for transgender survivors of intimate partner violence. *Violence Against Women*, 23(6), 772–792. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801216650288>

Haskell, L., & Randall, M. (2019). *Impact of trauma on adult sexual assault victims: What the criminal justice system needs to know*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3417763>

Hawaii Department of the Attorney General and the Hawaii Sexual Assault Response and Training Program. (2021). *Media guide for reporting on sexual violence*.  
<https://ag.hawaii.gov/cpja/files/2022/01/Hawaii-Media-Guide-FINAL-01-12-2022.pdf>

Institut national de santé publique du Québec. (n.d.) *Media kit on sexual assault*.  
Gouvernement du Québec. <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/sexual-assault>

Lovett, J., & Kelly, L. (2009). *Different systems, similar outcomes? Tracking attrition in reported rape cases across Europe*. Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University. [https://cwasu.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/different\\_system-s\\_03\\_web2.pdf](https://cwasu.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/07/different_system-s_03_web2.pdf)

Matchett, B. (2022). *Victim or survivor: Do labels matter? A poststructural discourse analysis of North American undergraduate students' beliefs on sexual violence labels and their societal implications*. [Master's thesis, Dalhousie University]. <https://dalspace.library.dal.ca/bitstream/handle/10222/81914/BrittanyMatchett2022.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

McDiarmid, J. (2019). *Highway of tears: A true story of racism, indifference, and the pursuit of justice for missing and murdered indigenous women and girls*. Atria Books.

Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. (2004). *Reporting sexual assault: A guide for journalists*. [https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a\\_guide.pdf](https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a_guide.pdf)

Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (2017). *Reporting on sexual violence: A guide for journalists*. (2nd ed.). [https://yourcallmn.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/11/MNCASA\\_Media\\_Manual\\_2017.pdf](https://yourcallmn.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/11/MNCASA_Media_Manual_2017.pdf)

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2017). *Reporting on sexual violence: Tips for journalists*. <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/reporting-sexual-violence-tips-journalists>

National Sexual Violence Resource Center and Centers for Disease, Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *Reporting on sexual violence*. [https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/sites/all/themes/veto\\_bootstrap/assets/sv-landing/SV\\_MediaGuide-508c.pdf](https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/sites/all/themes/veto_bootstrap/assets/sv-landing/SV_MediaGuide-508c.pdf)

Palmater, P. (2016). Shining light on the dark places: Addressing police racism and sexualized violence against Indigenous women and girls in the national inquiry. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 28(2), 253-284. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Ph=hein.journals/cajwol28&i=269>

Schwark, S. (2017). Visual representations of sexual violence in online news outlets. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, e774. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00774>

Sexual Assault Kit Initiative. (n.d.). *Victim or survivor: Terminology from investigation through prosecution*. <https://sakitta.org/toolkit/docs/Victim-or-Survivor-Terminology-from-Investigation-Through-Prosecution.pdf>

van Dijk, T. A. (2009). *Society and discourse: How social contexts influence text and talk*. Cambridge University Press.

World Health Organization & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. (2010). *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: Taking action and generating evidence*. World Health Organization. [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44350/9789241564007\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=8CA1A3D4B8FCB2ADCE314399A1E3A3D5?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44350/9789241564007_eng.pdf;jsessionid=8CA1A3D4B8FCB2ADCE314399A1E3A3D5?sequence=1)

# Appendix

## *Media guides and key non-academic sources used*

Below is each media guide this report analyzed. Listed underneath each entry are key non-academic sources that the guides drew upon to inform their recommendations. We chose not to list academic sources to keep this section brief and highlight the grey literature contributing to the conversation about best practices for covering sexual violence.

### **How to teach reporting on sexual abuse (2018)**

Link to this media guide: <https://mediashift.org/2018/02/4-step-guide-teach-reporting-sexual-abuse/>

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011, July 15). *Reporting on sexual violence*. <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>
- RAINN. (n.d.). Key terms and phrases. <https://www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases>

### **Media guide for reporting on sexual violence (2021)**

Link to this media guide: <https://ag.hawaii.gov/cpja/files/2022/01/Hawaii-Media-Guide-FINAL-01-12-2022.pdf>

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Carter Olson, C., & Everbach, T. (2018, February 12). *How to teach reporting on sexual abuse*. MediaShift. <http://mediashift.org/2018/02/4-step-guide-teach-reporting-sexual-abuse/>
- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011, July 15). *Reporting on sexual violence*. <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>
- Institut national de santé publique du Québec. (n.d.). *Covering sexual assault in the media*. <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/sexualassault/media/covering-sexual-assault-media>

### Media guide for reporting on sexual violence (2021) cont'd.

- Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (2019). *Reporting on sexual violence: A media guide for Maine journalists*.  
[https://www.mecasa.org/uploads/1/0/1/7/101776612/mecasa\\_media\\_guide\\_-\\_updated\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mecasa.org/uploads/1/0/1/7/101776612/mecasa_media_guide_-_updated_2022.pdf)
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Reporting on sexual violence*. National Sexual Violence Resource Center.  
[https://vetoviolenecdc.gov/sites/all/themes/veto\\_bootstrap/assets/sv-landing/SV-MediaGuide-508c.pdf](https://vetoviolenecdc.gov/sites/all/themes/veto_bootstrap/assets/sv-landing/SV-MediaGuide-508c.pdf)
- RAINN. (n.d.). *Key terms and phrases*. <https://www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases>

### Media kit on sexual assault (n.d.)

Link to this media guide: <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/sexual-assault>

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Berkeley Media Studies Group. (2011). *Issue 19: Case by case: News coverage of child sexual abuse*. <https://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/issue-19-case-by-case-news-coverage-of-child-sexual-abuse/>
- Lee Thomas, V., & Owen, K. (2011). *Family violence in the news. A media toolkit. 2nd edition*. Child and Family Services Ballarat Inc and PACT Community Support for the Grampians Integrated Family Violence Committee, Ballarat.  
<https://anrows.intersearch.com.au/anrowsjspui/handle/1/18422>
- Schewe, P. A. (2007). Interventions to prevent sexual violence. In *Handbook of Injury and Violence Prevention* (pp. 223–240). Springer Science + Business Media. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-29457-5\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-29457-5_12)
- World Health Organization & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. (2010). *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: Taking action and generating evidence*. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/44350>

## Reporting on rape and sexual violence: A media toolkit for local and national journalists to better media coverage (2012)

Link to this media guide: <http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf>

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2008a, January 1). *The effect of news “frames.”* <https://dartcenter.org/content/effect-news-frames>
- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2008b, April 1). *How news is “framed.”* <https://dartcenter.org/content/how-news-is-framed>

## Reporting on sexual violence (n.d.)

Link to this media guide: [https://vetoviolenecdc.gov/sites/all/themes/veto\\_bootstrap/assets/sv-landing/SV-MediaGuide-508c.pdf](https://vetoviolenecdc.gov/sites/all/themes/veto_bootstrap/assets/sv-landing/SV-MediaGuide-508c.pdf)

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, June 22). *Fast facts: Preventing sexual violence.* <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/fastfact.html>
- Maine Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (2013). *Reporting on sexual violence A media guide for Maine journalists.* [https://www.mecasa.org/uploads/1/0/1/7/101776612/mecasa\\_media\\_guide\\_-\\_updated\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mecasa.org/uploads/1/0/1/7/101776612/mecasa_media_guide_-_updated_2022.pdf)

## Reporting on sexual violence (2011)

Link to this media guide: <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>

No sources listed.

### **Reporting on sexual violence: A guide for journalists (2017)**

Link to this media guide: [https://mncasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Reporting-on-Sexual-Violence\\_A-guide-for-journalists.pdf](https://mncasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Reporting-on-Sexual-Violence_A-guide-for-journalists.pdf)

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011, July 15). *Reporting on sexual violence*. <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>
- Lonsway, K. A., & Archambault, J. (2013). *Suggested guidelines on language use for sexual assault*. End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI). [https://evawintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2013-06\\_TB-Language-Use-for-Sexual-Assault-1.pdf](https://evawintl.org/wp-content/uploads/2013-06_TB-Language-Use-for-Sexual-Assault-1.pdf)
- Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. (2004). *Reporting sexual assault: A guide for journalists*. [https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a\\_guide.pdf](https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a_guide.pdf)
- National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2015). *Talking with survivors, info and stats for journalists*. [https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2015-01/publications\\_nsvrc\\_factsheet\\_media-packet\\_talking-with-survivors\\_o.pdf](https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/2015-01/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_talking-with-survivors_o.pdf)

### **Reporting on sexual violence: Tips for journalists (2017)**

Link to this media guide: <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications/reporting-sexual-violence-tips-journalists>

No sources listed.

### **Reporting sexual assault: A guide for journalists (2004)**

Link to this media guide: [https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a\\_guide.pdf](https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a_guide.pdf)

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Johnson, Barbara and The San Francisco Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (n.d.). *Media guidelines for coverage of sexual assault and domestic violence*.



## Use the right words: Media reporting on sexual violence in Canada (2015)

Link to this media guide: <http://www.femifesto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/UseTheRightWords-Single-Dec3.pdf>

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime. (2012). *If the media calls: A guide for crime victims and survivors*. [https://crevc.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2012/02/Media\\_Booklet\\_Web\\_Version2016\\_en.pdf](https://crevc.ca/wpcontent/uploads/2012/02/Media_Booklet_Web_Version2016_en.pdf)
- Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women. (2012). *Reporting on rape and sexual violence: A media toolkit for local and national journalists to better media coverage*. <http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf>
- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011, July 15). *Reporting on sexual violence*. <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>
- Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (2013). *Reporting on sexual violence: A guide for journalists*. [https://mncasa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/06/Reporting-on-Sexual-Violence\\_A-guide-for-journalists.pdf](https://mncasa.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/06/Reporting-on-Sexual-Violence_A-guide-for-journalists.pdf)
- Witness. (n.d.). *Conducting safe, effective and ethical interviews with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence*. <https://library.witness.org/product/guide-to-interviewing-survivors-of-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>

## What's missing from the news on sexual violence? An analysis of coverage, 2011–2013 (2015)

Link to this media guide: <https://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/issue-22-whats-missing-from-the-news-on-sexual-violence-an-analysis-of-coverage-2011-2013/>

Non-academic sources cited in this media guide:

- Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers. (2014, September 22). *Talking about prevention*. <http://www.atsa.com/pdfs/Prevention/TalkingAboutPrevention.pdf>

**What's missing from the news on sexual violence? An analysis of coverage, 2011–2013 (2015) cont'd.**

- Chicago Taskforce on Violence Against Girls and Young Women. (2012). *Reporting on rape and sexual violence: A media toolkit for local and national journalists to better media coverage*. <http://www.chitaskforce.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Chicago-Taskforce-Media-Toolkit.pdf>
- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. (2011, July 15). *Reporting on sexual violence*. <https://dartcenter.org/content/reporting-on-sexual-violence>
- Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. (2004). *Reporting sexual assault: A guide for journalists*. [https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a\\_guide.pdf](https://barcc.org/assets/pdf/Journalists-a_guide.pdf)
- Minnesota Coalition Against Sexual Assault. (2013). *Reporting on sexual violence: A guide for journalists*. [https://mncasa.org/wpcontent/uploads-2022/06/Report-ing-on-Sexual-Violence\\_A-guide-for-journalists.pdf](https://mncasa.org/wpcontent/uploads-2022/06/Report-ing-on-Sexual-Violence_A-guide-for-journalists.pdf)
- National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. (2015). *Six pillars of prevention*. <http://www.preventtogether.org/Resources/Documents-/PreventionCoalitionPillarsFinal2015.pdf>