

Media and Bystander Responsibility

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I began research for this article on the premise that members of media are part of the communities on which they report. In this capacity, they have a responsibility to use their connection to one of the most influential institutions in this country to activate greater community intervention and prevention of domestic violence. To do this with integrity, I felt they had to challenge or at least question advertisements or entertainment programming that demeaned women, passed off homophobic remarks or actions as humor, perpetuated myths about domestic violence, and endorsed bullying or coercive displays of "jealous love." In addition, instead of detached coverage of domestic violence, I expected members of the media to hold their news organizations accountable when they practiced irresponsible journalism, for example:

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- careless reporting involving erroneous quotes by survivors of domestic violence and their advocates,
- sensationalizing and packaging a story and a victim at the expense of her dignity and integrity,
- omitting details that seem irrelevant to a reporter or editor and consequently distorting realities faced by the battered partner,
- interviewing the wrong people (batterer's family and friends), who create a favorable impression of the perpetrator, while not interviewing people known to the battered partner,
- providing news coverage that implies or overtly blames the victim for staying in the abusive relationship,
- treating the case as an isolated incident of violence instead of connecting it to a long history of violence in the relationship or to the prevalence of domestic violence in the community.

My premise is not far-fetched. The last decade shows that many news organizations and entertainment media have changed how they treat domestic violence. We see evidence of this in news as well as some entertainment media, e.g., in safety planning segments on television and radio talk shows focusing on domestic violence, public service announcements following made-for-TV movies about violence in intimate relationships, contact information for local and national hotlines in television, magazine or newspaper special reports, and survivor stories accompanied by suggestions for people needing assistance. These changes are a direct result of nearly 20 years of national, state and local advocacy to bring home the reality that domestic violence is widely prevalent.

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Yet the media have not gone far enough. As important as it is for news organizations to provide contact and resource information, it is a minimal step. The media are not doing anyone a favor by giving this information. It is their civic duty to keep the public informed about their options given the dangers of domestic violence, as, more than likely, many people who are reading or watching the news are also experiencing domestic violence or know someone who is a victim or survivor. A comparison can be made to providing telephone numbers regarding product recall when the Food and Drug Administration declares a warning. It should be standard practice by now for newspapers, journals and televisions to include lists of resources in situations of public danger. Domestic violence reporting is no exception.

On the other hand, irresponsible journalism continues to compromise the relationships that survivors of domestic violence, their families and advocates have with media, as illustrated by this Pennsylvania case:

Immediately after the murder of my daughter, the news article in the Sunday paper had no mention of domestic violence. They blamed it on a bad relationship. To make it worse, when I opened the paper, they had put a picture of the person who killed her in the "In Memoriam" section with a poem. I wrote a letter to the editor with my phone number. They never published my letter but they called me and said that they did not realize he was the person who killed my daughter. So there was no apology, no acknowledgment of their insensitivity, or how they failed to humanize my daughter. There was no picture of her, they did not talk about the person she was, the family she had, about the single she cut at 20, and how well she did in school. TV news reporters also honed in on the bad relationship. They talked to her neighbors and the police. They never asked us, her family or her best friends, what we knew about the relationship. Even if it was a month down the road, they could have asked what was going on in this relationship. The initiative should have come from the media because they were the ones covering it.

– Pauletta Vaughn (2007), Survivor and Activist to end violence against women

By incorrectly naming what had happened and making Vaughn's daughter, Aubria, a victim of a bad relationship instead of long term abuse, the media ended up revictimizing her and mistreating the survivors of her murder, her family, giving them ample reason to distrust media.

Imagine what victims and survivors of domestic violence and their families could experience if all media (mainstream, alternative, large and small) saw newsgathering as an opportunity to help shape bystander responsibility. In Aubria's case, neighbors knew what was happening. As one neighbor said on television, "It was the usual Friday night stuff" (Vaughn, 2007). What if we got to hear reporters asking neighbors, "What did you do when you heard them arguing?" "Was it just plain arguing or was it more serious?" "Could you have done anything to help the victim?" "Why didn't you get involved?" "Why do you think you didn't sense anything was wrong?" These questions are not meant to point fingers. Rather, if neighbors who are usually passive onlookers are going to be asked their opinions, then why not use their passive bystander as a teaching moment about how to prevent or intervene instead of treating the domestic violence tragedy as an anomaly?

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Who Is a Bystander?

In the famous 1964 case of bystander apathy, Catherine Genovese was stabbed to death. She was a bar manager returning home in the early hours of the morning when the attacker surprised her. The first person who heard her cries for help raised the window of the apartment and yelled out at the unseen assailant, "Let the girl alone." Subsequently the attacker drove off but he returned to find Catherine trying to get into her building and stabbed her again. During the 30-minute period between when she was first stabbed and when she finally died, 38 people saw or heard what was happening and did nothing. No one called the police. No one stepped out to assist Catherine. No one stepped in to confront the killer. And when one person eventually called the police, it was too late. The middle-class, white neighborhood in Queens where this situation unfolded was made up of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and included many European immigrants. When the press asked the 38 people why they did nothing, their responses ranged from: "I didn't realize how serious it was" to "I thought it was a private matter," to "I don't know." But mostly people said, "I didn't know what to do."¹

In 1968, the phenomenon of bystander apathy was first raised by social psychologists, John Darley and Bibb Latane who conducted a study to see how strangers in a room would respond to a person in crisis. They found that in a crisis, most people assume someone else will do something or someone else is more qualified or better equipped to intervene. Many will also wait to see how others respond before they take action. Some are uncertain that their help is wanted and prefer avoiding the embarrassment of their assistance being rejected. Subsequently, the term bystander came to be associated with passive onlooker, a person who chooses not to be involved in a situation of injustice because of apathy or indifference (Latane & Darley, 1970).

¹ From various media reports on the case.

Activating Bystander Potential

In 2005, Victoria Banyard, Elizabeth Plante and Mary Moynihan conducted a different study and concluded that bystander response is less about apathy and more about preparedness. Participants in their study showed greater willingness to take action if they had been made aware of how harmful and undeserved violence is, if they had been taught to recognize signs of violence, and, most importantly, if they had been trained on how to make interventions. These pre-existing factors helped generate bystander confidence because they understood what was happening, who the victim was, and felt greater certainty about what steps to take and that their intervention would be helpful to the victim (Banyard, Plante & Moynihan, 2005).

Although Banyard, Plante and Moynihan's study looked at responses to acquaintance rape on campus, their findings and analysis are useful for battered women's advocates because it offers the hopeful message **that bystanders represent an unharnessed potential waiting to be galvanized.**

This model for working with bystanders can change the relationships between outreach educators and their constituencies because it changes the approach to bystanding. The goal now becomes making intervention more accessible so that people will be less afraid to try to it.

Media's Potential

Media could change the dialogue from focusing on the victim's responsibility to the community's responsibility. For instance, a reporter could say, what can I, as a member of community and not just as a reporter, do to learn about this issue. He could go to the domestic violence organization and get information, get their perspective. But members of the media don't think this is their role and they don't recognize that they have a role. They see it as the domestic violence agency's role to do this work, to convince the press that there's a domestic violence angle, or educate the public.

– Cheryl O'Donnell (2007), former Director of Communications, National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)

Battered women's advocates already work on raising public awareness and providing information that bystanders can use. The media can serve as a mechanism to help people internalize this information. People can learn how to do effective intervention if they are

regularly exposed to examples of successful interventions and preventions, e.g., through news coverage, movies, telenovelas, and survivor narratives they can integrate into their consciousness.

For instance, when an abusive partner kills his current or estranged wife or girlfriend and the children, newspaper and television news reporters repeat the mistake that police invariably make by attributing such killings to a domestic

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“dispute.” As Survivor and Activist Pauletta Vaughn points out, “A domestic dispute is a disagreement. Anyone can have one. It’s normal. There’s no abuse there. But domestic violence, that’s different.” Reporters can avoid such mistakes by reframing their approach to domestic violence coverage, which helps reframe the questions, which leads to different story angles. Again, reporters like to gather soundbites and quotes from neighbors, whose responses to multiple family killings tend to be, “I had no idea there were problems,” “What would lead him to do something like this?” “They seemed like a normal family,” or “They didn’t seem to get along so I didn’t make anything of it when I heard some loud pops from over there.” As pointed out in an earlier example, these types of responses are opportunities for reporters to turn the mirror back on society instead of on the victims.

Objectivity vs. Advocacy

Thus far, I have assumed that media should want to be advocates against domestic violence and want to help move bystanders to action. But three of the five media people I spoke with chafed at the notion of being advocates because they believe it compromises their objectivity and integrity as journalists.

I used to think that objectivity was another term for remaining neutral, which is not true. One can be objective and take sides, even the wrong side. For instance, a reporter can gather anecdotes from survivors of domestic violence and statistics from a local domestic violence program showing that domestic violence in that community reflects the national trend, i.e., that men are more likely to perpetrate domestic violence than women and are more likely to feel entitled to using domination and coercive tactics to control their partners even to the extent of committing acts of cruelty. True objectivity would mean that the findings by the reporter are presented in a way that helps the public understand that men are by and large the perpetrators of domestic violence, even against partners who have left them. But news organizations make decisions that are not solely guided by the cardinal rules of journalism – accuracy, timeliness, relevance, and urgency. Personal values, beliefs and experiences also influence decisions. All journalists bring the familiar and the feared to their news gathering and reporting.

This combination of influences affects the tone and slant of a story; where the story is placed in a newspaper or newscast; how much space, time or prominence it is given compared to other stories; how the issue is framed; who is presented sympathetically or unsympathetically. A headline with a particular bias can change the way the public responds to a survivor’s account of what happened, just as repeated use of certain images or a replay of a soundbite can affect the public’s views on a case, even if these are presented out of context.

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Perhaps the anxiety being expressed by the reporters I spoke to is more about compromising the ideal of objectivity rather than objectivity itself, because without this ideal there would be no aspiration to maintain a balanced view:

Sure, my job is to be fair and balanced but we're not computers, we're products of our backgrounds. We all have opinions. So we need to admit that right off. The best way to inform readers is to be compassionate and to be fair and balanced, truthful and honest. But everyone knows domestic violence is wrong. It's against the law. Control and power and intimidation hurt people. Is there a good side to murder? No. So there's no good side to domestic violence. Not every story has two sides. Maybe there's two sides to a particular case because someone can claim to be the victim of domestic violence and is actually the perpetrator but there aren't two sides to the issue. That's where reporters are wrong when they say I've got to keep an open mind about everything.

– Terry McCon (2007), Wala Wala Bulletin²

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... media advocacy can take an unapologetic and consistent stand against violence in the way stories on domestic violence are investigated, filed, edited, framed, headlined, and followed up

headlined, and followed up – not just for special Domestic Violence Awareness Month features, but as a general principle. With local media in particular, this kind of coverage signals the honorable use of media's position to pro-actively shift the public from being news consumers to concerned, energized citizens.

When news organizations work in partnership with advocates of women who are facing domestic violence, they send a message to current and potential victims, current and potential batterers, and every potential interventionist in the public as well as within that news organization that domestic violence is not tolerated.

Their partiality conveys that as members of the

community they report on, they very much care about sustaining the health and safety of people. As noted by Judy Yupcavage (2007), PCADV's Director of Communications, "Media is the most powerful force in the country to shift and re-shift attitudes. They do great investigative pieces on corporate corruption. They can clearly make or break someone's political power. So why can't they do the same with domestic violence?"

² Newspaper that serves small city of 30,000 people.

Where the Chips Fall

Many battered women's organizations lack the infrastructure that media has to reach the public, for instance, on campaigns against domestic violence and Domestic Violence Awareness Month events. Certain domestic violence cases also need press publicity to raise public outcry on behalf of victims and survivors. With media as ally, intervention and prevention work can go further.

On the other hand, media is not an easy or natural ally for those who have experienced domestic violence or their advocates. Many forms of media and some news organizations, including some who feature stories on domestic violence, profit from condoning the subjugation of women. And in small cities, news organizations tend to be influenced by the views that local authorities have on domestic violence, which may reinforce negative stereotypes about battered women and myths about domestic violence. Unfortunately, even alternative media outlets such as progressive journals and news magazines, independent television and radio stations are often silent on violence against women (unless it happens in other countries). Many of these media have played an intermediary role between the public and policymakers, sometimes influencing policy on issues such as global warming and garment-making sweatshops, but adopt a different attitude when it involves violence against women. A quick glance at progressive publications will also show how infrequently and marginally the issue is covered. One reason is that alternative media is reflective of its primarily liberal and progressive constituency, which has frequently taken the position that violence against women is a divisive issue in progressive left politics. I recall the July 2004 Boston Social Forum³ where the two male coordinators refused to include violence against women on the agenda. Consequently, there were no keynote speakers, panelists or mention of this issue even by women speakers. A circle of women "elders" who were convened by local activists to witness a tribunal of survivor testimonies had to fight to get on stage to present a statement on the very last day at the very end of the closing plenary when most attendees had left. In response to a complaint by tribunal organizers, one of the Forum coordinators said that the issue was divisive.

Another compelling reason for media anxiety is the pressure to capitalize on the "media moment." Television, in particular (from talk shows to special reports), relies on advocates to supply the "right" survivor, as defined by the production values of a show or editor. While the promise of public attention to domestic violence can be attractive, these "media moments" come at a price, often subverting a survivor's needs, as well as an advocate's intent. This approach tends to deprive survivors of their authority and the opportunity to participate in a process where they can feel empowered to claim their voice as subjects in their own stories and not what gets packaged as media-worthy. This is especially true for victims and survivors from traditionally silenced communities. When the subject of domestic violence is also circumscribed by race, culture, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc., media often frame the content as if the individual represents whole aspects of a particular culture. While a survivor's intent may be to give voice to personal experience, there is an expectation that she will act as spokesperson for her community. This

³ The Boston Social Forum is part of a movement of progressive and radical community-based groups and individual activists who come together around the world at local, national (for instance, U.S. Social Forum), regional and international (World Social Forum) levels to confront the injustices of poverty, war, environmental exploitation, colonialism, racism, etc. Violence against women and the rights of gay and transgender communities was part of the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India. Each Forum agenda is shaped by the geopolitics of the region and the activism of the host country.

expectation is an unfair burden that exposes survivors to criticism from their home communities, and forces a choice between foregoing the media moment and doing what media expects of its subjects.

Often media's drive to generate stories clashes with what advocates of domestic violence victims/survivors see as their imperative (protect the women). Both sides agree that domestic violence must be addressed but they often do not agree on how to put a public face on the issue. The following two comments capture this tension:

Advocates need to understand media's goals and how media works. Media can't parrot the rhetoric of domestic violence advocates. We need to talk to victims. The public wants to hear from victims. But advocates are afraid that victims will be identified. If advocates don't find victims for us then the story won't be told. We can't just generate stories from press releases. The reading audience needs personal stories. Unless advocates want to write their own stories, and print their own stories and distribute their own stories, they need to understand that if they want more awareness about issues, they need to cooperate with media.

– Terry McCon (2007), *Wala Wala Bulletin*

We've made it clear that no victims would be named. We have a strong policy on this. But there's a culture of fear around domestic violence and people working in it are steeped in that fear. I wanted to spend a night in a shelter and I could not. I wanted to show how frightening it must be for a person to go to the shelter. The police and judges were very cooperative but the battered women's program was not. [Battered women's] advocates are not used to being questioned, they're afraid. Everything they say is weighted and measured and according to policy. If they want to empower women they should give battered women the choice of whether they want to talk to us, instead of making them afraid.

– Sheila Hagar (2007), *Wala Wala Bulletin*

These concerns raise the question about advocate ability and preparedness to deal with media. Cheryl O' Donnell (2007) suggests that many battered women's advocates have not tended to engage with the media as anti-violence advocates. "They take robotic steps, fax a press release, make a phone call and that's it. What's needed is a conversation with the reporter, sit down with them, ask them what they need rather than saying, 'Here's what we do. What story are you going to write?'"

The counter argument raised is, "What if there are no reporters to cultivate, editors worth befriending, or news organization willing to respond to requests for better coverage of domestic violence?" In this case, advocates could do their own coverage, i.e., write the news story, provide the headline, and find survivor quotes. When advocates take a more hands-on approach, they shape how the media frame stories on domestic violence and they influence how the public interprets the story. The key is writing stories that media can use, observing different deadlines for different media, and doing the critical follow-up with the right person so that the stories get the right kind of attention.

Another way to “be your own media” is by using some of the technological innovations of the late 20th century that media lawyer and author Scott Gant (2007) says has “dramatically changed the shape of journalism.” He advocates that “blogs have given people a voice to communicate their ideas to the world, and the Internet has given people more to talk about, more to know, more opportunities to question and be more critical ... of traditional media.” While Gant’s comments refer to the need for a different kind of journalism in the post September 11 climate of information surveillance and free speech repression, they are relevant to battered women’s advocates. Now there are opportunities to use new methods of communication in radical ways for movement work, such as digital storytelling, blogging, podcasting, streaming video and audio, MySpace, YouTube, even using telephone text messaging for campaigns. These new media technologies are said to be democratizing the process of information sharing and providing ways to hold media more accountable.

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No doubt, many battered women’s programs are under-resourced and advocate access to new media technologies is limited. This can change with greater access for all advocates. But to push for access, advocates must want the new media technologies. To draw an analogy, in the 1980’s most battered women’s programs in small towns and cities, including small programs in large cities, had no VCRs or a budget to purchase videotapes on domestic violence. If there were operating budgets for shelters, they prioritized beds; videos were considered a luxury item. Now most of them have VCRs while larger and better-resourced programs have switched to DVD players. If new media technologies are to become a vehicle for grassroots community-based organizations to do better outreach about domestic violence prevention, then advocates need to budget for them, funders need persuading to recognize the value of using these technologies, and staff need training. I can envision a scenario where advocates using the new media technologies exemplify for traditional and mainstream media how to do thoughtful, nuanced, sensitive, and in-depth coverage that has a positive impact on those most affected by domestic violence.

Looking to new media technologies, however, does not suggest ignoring the need for working with traditional media, since they reach the mass base of people that many advocates consider their constituency.

Suggestions for Improvements

The Berkeley Media Studies Group (2001) released a handbook, *Reporting On Violence: New Ideas for Television, Print and Web*, which suggests five approaches for good coverage on domestic violence:

1. Violence against women needs “thematic,” not “episodic” treatment, where thematic reporting looks at issues or patterns of events rather than focusing on a particular episode or incident of violence. Thematic reporting is “substantially more helpful to readers as a resource to making sense of events.”
2. Media should avoid focusing overly on the “unusual,” i.e., the domestic violence related homicides, murder-suicides and multiple family killings, as this kind of coverage presents a false picture. Domestic violence related killings occur less often than other types of violent crime. What the media should be informing the public about is the “magnitude of domestic violence in many American cities [where] police make more arrests and answer more 911 calls about domestic violence than any other kind of violent offense.”
3. News organizations should avoid their preference for reporting on crime in a way that scares readers and viewers, “leaving them feeling helpless about reducing violence in their communities.” Instead of regularly and prominently featuring the comments of law enforcement and prosecutors, media need to also present the views of public health experts and domestic violence experts, including battered women’s advocates, who can provide violence prevention data, examples of successful interventions and findings from domestic violence prevention research that readers and viewers can use to expand their understanding and inform responses to the violence.
4. Media should broaden their view on domestic violence reporting by helping viewers and readers see how this violence intersects with other equally vital community issues such as health costs of domestic violence, guns and domestic violence, and how domestic violence impacts a community emotionally and economically.
5. Although fewer news organizations say that domestic violence will stop if only women will leave, many still allude to the idea that victims share in the responsibility for what their abusive partners do.

Additionally, media coordinators at domestic violence organizations suggest industry-wide media training in domestic violence coverage, which they consider an urgent need for new reporters. Some battered women’s advocates are already conducting domestic violence sensitivity training for students in journalism schools. Another suggestion is better assigning of domestic violence stories. As Judy Yupcavage (2007) observes, “Often the editors assign cub or new reporters to crime reporting. They would never do this for a health and science or the business news sections. But new reporters with no experience do police beats and they are simply not aware of domestic violence issues.”

Two more suggestions are:

1. More, better, and consistent training for advocates at state and local levels on how to improve their media advocacy and media outreach. "When HIV/AIDS advocates saw how much stigma is attached to HIV/AIDS, they wanted to change the dialogue. They did outreach to the media so that media could report accurately about the crisis. What about the crisis of domestic violence and sexual violence? Advocates in the domestic violence movement have not done the same kind of outreach," says O'Donnell (2007). She also notes, "Media is changing and advocates need to understand how the changes affect their work. For instance, beats have disappeared. Before, you could contact the reporter who covered certain issues. Now we have general reporters covering everything. So continuity is affected. Relationships are different. One phone call without follow up or a press release without follow up won't bring reporters to your event."
2. Capacity-strengthening for programs that lack staff time for media work, particularly in smaller programs that juggle crisis work with media work. There is no time to craft news stories when there are other priorities, and no time to email a reporter when the computer is a cheap, slow machine. NNEDV helps draft media messages about local domestic violence incidents and provides programs with local media contacts. Not only does this ease the burden on under-staffed and over-worked advocates but, as O'Donnell (2007) explains, "We try to help advocates think strategically about how best to use the media for their work even when they distrust media and have had negative media experiences."

Other ideas from advocates who have worked with media successfully include:

- identifying non-visual media such as community radio stations, where survivor stories can be presented differently;
- in communities where telenovelas are popular, working with a writer or offering to be the producer's story consultant for a story on domestic violence that compellingly challenges stereotypes and reflects different truths from those usually depicted;
- viral marketing which involves using free web-based email to send out information that keeps multiplying as readers pass it on, a useful option for galvanizing fast community responses to a situation, such as gathering people for a demonstration at the courthouse or flooding local and state authorities with telephone calls and faxes about a domestic violence case.

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Conclusion

The need to be cautious of media and the practicality of being available to media do not cancel each other out. As with most other institutions, the relationship with media requires

As with most other institutions, the relationship with media requires constructive engagement. Advocates know how to do this; they already navigate relationships with other institutions, striving to change how these institutions interact with and treat victims and survivors of domestic violence, e.g., law enforcement, courts, state legislatures, medical establishment, the Church, even the Army.

constructive engagement. Advocates know how to do this; they already navigate relationships with other institutions, striving to change how these institutions interact with and treat victims and survivors of domestic violence, e.g., law enforcement, courts, state legislatures, medical establishment, the Church, even the Army. But most advocates do not relate to media as an institution. Consequently, they negate the chance to influence media.

Even as we ask news organizations to find a balance between objectivity and advocacy and demand greater accountability to survivors and advocates, advocates who have avoided the challenge of dealing with media must reassess and reframe their relationship with media, using what this institution offers while working to change their institutional practices. Perhaps, in the process, bad media coverage is countered with more good media coverage. And, perhaps, bystanders can learn how to change outcomes.

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