

The Pornography Trap

How not to write about rape

IN THE SPRING OF 2009, A REPORTER FOR THE ASSOCIATED PRESS PUBLISHED A news feature about rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Much of the piece focused on the taboo that silences rape survivors there. But it began like this: “Zamuda Sikujuwa shuffles to a bench in the sunshine, pushes apart her thighs with a grimace of pain and pumps her fist up and down in a lewd-looking gesture to show how the militiamen shoved an automatic rifle inside her.”

If you ignore the content for a moment, this is a textbook-perfect feature lead. It’s full of “color.” It gives us a “character” to follow for nearly 200 words. It’s loaded with “action verbs”—*shuffles, pushes, pumps*. It creates a miniature “scene,” set outdoors, somewhere, on a well-lit bench.

But if you bring the content back, the first sentence horrifies—and not just because what happened to Zamuda Sikujuwa is horrifying. It horrifies because we, as readers, have no idea what’s going on: In a country where rape and sex are taboo, why did a woman, sitting outside, “push apart her thighs” and mimic the violation she experienced? Did the reporter ask her to? Are there other women around? Men? And why, after putting Sikujuwa the woman through all of this, does Sikujuwa the character disappear after fewer than 200 words?

As a general piece of journalism, this lead does everything right. But the unanswered questions raised by these narrative choices make me doubt the writer. Her article fails to adequately address the most important question facing a journalist covering rape and other violent traumas: How do we make readers ethically comfortable with our storytelling choices and morally *uncomfortable* with what the story depicts?

Trauma stories require the writer to consider the reader, listener, or viewer as a partner in the creation of ethical journalism. Our choices as craftsmen—about identity and attribution, about detail, about writer’s voice, about structure and style, and even about medium—do more than simply tell the story. They tell readers about our values.

Most journalism seeks to convey information objectively, but trauma stories have an agenda: they call to the reader to witness, to agree with the writer that “This should not have been.” If there is no agreement between reader and writer, or if the writer fails, the story is an exercise in voyeurism. In rape stories, we are publicly exposing the personal suffering of survivors. If we do this with any other intention than that rape should not happen—or if we do this without any clear intention at all—we are indulging in a kind of storytelling that critics do not hesitate to call pornography.

What separates good trauma journalism from voyeurism are two elements of the job: the way we report and the way we write. The best practices for reporting trauma have been getting more attention. There are tools, like Roger Simpson and William Cote’s textbook, *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting about Victims & Trauma*, and guidelines from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism’s Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, that help us think about whether and how to identify our subjects; what effects post-traumatic stress disorder may have on the memories and storytelling capacities of our subjects; how to interview with sensitivity to avoid re-traumatizing survivors. All of these choices shape the ethics of our reporting.

But our audience perceives and evaluates our ethics through our writing. A growing body of research, nicely summarized recently by Quinnipiac University’s Nancy Worthington in her scholarly article, “Encoding and Decoding Rape News,” in the journal *Women’s Studies in Communication*, suggests that readers interpret meaning from the structure and style of a story, as well as its content. In fact, journalists have long intuited this. News reporting earns reader trust, or tries to, by conveying the value of impartiality through craft choices. In news pages, we seek out multiple sides of a story and we write in a



Survivors Reporters face ethical issues when interviewing rape victims, like these women in Congo in 2007.

neutral tone. In this traditional model, impartial narrators—journalists—serve indifferent readers. Our imagined audience is distracted, and our job is to bait them with a headline or hook them with a lead, and reel them in as far as they’re willing to go, all the while illustrating that we take no side in the matters we are reporting.

Trauma changes how our audience perceives our tools—and whether, in their judgment, we use them ethically. “Color” can clang against impartial news voice; attribution can imply doubt; details can seem exploitative. If we falter in tone; if we misuse dark details; if we overexpose survivors, we may lose our readers—and our mission. Whether they realize it, or we acknowledge it, the choices we make in our writing beg a

moral question of readers: Do they feel called to witness or do they feel implicated?

If readers feel implicated, they will blame us. After all, it is in their name that we impose the discomfort of our nosy questions on trauma survivors. When Nicholas Kristof, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, named a nine-year-old Congolese rape victim in his *New York Times* column in January 2010 and broadcast her face in an online video, reader outcry was so strong that Kristof wrote a detailed follow-up on his blog, explaining what his column had not: that he’d secured the girl’s and her aunt’s permission to use the name, and that he’d weighed public exposure in an American newspaper against the likelihood that exposure would reach

her village in Congo. When Mac McClelland, *Mother Jones’s* human-rights reporter, began tweeting, without introduction or explanation, from inside the examining room where a Haitian rape survivor was seeking follow-up treatment, the moral confusion some readers felt was so great that they demanded the magazine cease the Twitter feed. (Full disclosure: I was among those calling, in real time, for that cessation.)

These are dramatic examples of choices that writers and their editors failed to expect readers to notice, but which readers rightly questioned. To prove to our readers that we are responsible journalists, we cannot simply report ethically and well, and then explain all that later. When ethics is a collabora-

tion between journalist and audience, as it is in trauma stories, we have to let the readers in on our work.

How do we do that? Take this NPR story by Ofeibea Quist-Arcton about the sexual abuse of women in Guinea last year, when soldiers killed 157 pro-democracy protestors. Before she even says the word “rape,” Quist-Arcton contextualizes the graphic details we are about to hear: “It was the soldiers’ brutal assaults on women that have so shaken Guineans. They keep repeating: *C’est du jamais vu*—never before have we witnessed such acts.” This lessens the likelihood that the details we’ll soon hear will feel merely lurid; the Guineans, too, felt shocked, as we surely will.

Before Quist-Arcton quotes a survivor, she discloses her reporting practice, even acknowledging that her questions violate a boundary: “Through an intermediary, I met with some women in a small room in an opposition safe house

with these women makes us witnesses to, rather than voyeurs of, their suffering.

Finally, she lets the survivors’ stories set the structure. Instead of plugging survivors’ quotes to support news points, Quist-Arcton arranges her sound bites so that her explanatory narration—of which there is remarkably little—builds on what the women have already said, allowing them to introduce the news, rather than the other way around.

But this can be even simpler. In a 2004 article, Marc Lacey, of *The New York Times*, makes partners of his readers in a single sentence. In a report he filed from Congo, he tells the stories of two pseudonymous underage girls. “Helen and Solange said in recent interviews that they had not told their stories even to their parents, never mind to United Nations officials. Rape carries a heavy stigma here, both girls made clear. They told their stories when approached by a reporter.”

In a series of reports, also from Congo, that won the Dart Award for Excellence in the Coverage of Trauma, radio reporter Jeb Sharp, of PRI’s *The World*, gives listeners an ethical clue in just two sentences. “It doesn’t feel right to interview young girls about rape. But the hospital staff want me to understand what’s been happening here. I speak with a tiny ten year old in blue jeans named Marie,” Sharp says. She lets us behind the scenes, which resolves one level of listeners’ ethical squeamishness—“How could she go talk to those ten year olds!”—so that listeners and reporter can share another ethical objection, precisely that objection which our reporting should raise—“How can this be?”

Many of the examples I’ve cited have focused on rape and have come from Africa, reflecting the focus of my own work, and critics have long argued, rightly or not, that American journalists apply looser standards when reporting on Africans than on Americans. But the risks these stories illustrate are inherent in all rape reporting. As the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*’s Joanna Connors observed in her first-person narrative of surviving rape, “We Americans have such an awkward, complicated response to sex. We’re obsessed with it, ashamed of it, thrilled by it and deeply frightened by it.” She thinks this means that “we don’t want to talk about it.” But it can also mean we are tempted toward the salacious. In rape, as in other trauma stories, details can seem lurid. A clumsily placed attribution can suggest doubt about a survivor’s believability. A sound bite from a survivor who disappears from the story as soon as she’s been quoted can seem exploitative. This all depends on how the reader experiences what we write. We cannot control that experience, but we can, powerfully, guide it. We can enhance our professional credibility and improve our craft if we let this question, once posed by Serbian newspaper editor Milorad Ivanovic, guide our writing: “When”—and, I add, how—“do you put blood in the face of the reader?” **CJR**

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to talk about their ordeals.” She goes on to admit that her journalism put her subjects at risk: “The woman who arranged the meetings for me... was herself terrified that she’d be found out and punished.” Now the audience knows these risks, too. We feel like we—and the vulnerable people we are listening to—are in safer hands when such risks are acknowledged.

Then, for nearly five minutes, Quist-Arcton, and her audience, sit with the same women. This generous amount of time has value; it gives these women presence. That, in turn, transforms the graphic details of their suffering, from “color” dropped in to bait the listener into telling detail. The time we spend

Of course, if readers stopped to think about it, they would probably assume that all such stories are told to an approaching reporter. But that single line acknowledges to the reader, “I recognize my role in this story.” Signaling that level of awareness helps ease reader concerns about consent, anonymity, and other ethical questions. But it also does something else ethical journalism must do. In an e-mail message, Lacey explained, “This piece was carefully written to not identify these girls but I also felt as though I owed it to readers to give a sense of why these girls’ allegations should or should not be believed. So I included as many details to help readers come to their own view.”