Responsible Writing and Editing About Sexual Violence

By Anna Walsh (@annamccachren)
Introduction
Some statistics

- Nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 71 men have had someone rape them at some time in their lives
- Approximately 1 in 20 women and men experienced types of sexual violence other than rape in the last 12 months
- The vast majority of rapists know their victims
- Only 34.8% of rape cases each year are reported to the police
- Only 5.6% of rape cases in a year (16.1% of cases reported to police) result in arrest

Some statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Lifetime prevalence of attempted or completed rape for adult women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>26.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple races</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual women</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual men</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual women</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual men</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimateviolence/prevalence.html), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011
Sexual assault in the news

Experimental research has shown that newspaper coverage of sexual assault has a direct influence on readers’ attitudes on rape and their proclivity to accept cultural “rape myths”

- Husbands can’t rape their wives
- Women enjoy rape
- Women are somehow “asking for it”
- Women lie about being raped
The good news...

"We are in a golden age of reporting on sexual assault."

- Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma
Jackie was just starting her freshman year at the University of Virginia when she was brutally assaulted by seven men at a frat party. When she tried to hold them accountable, a whole new kind of abuse began.
Language Problems Copy Editors Should Watch Out For
Passive voice: erasing the perpetrator

- A 1995 study found that after reading sexual assault stories written in the passive voice, “readers showed increased acceptance of rape and battering of women” compared to stories written in the active voice.
- Same study found a 2:1 ratio of passive:active voice in published sexual assault stories in the Boston Globe.
- A 2009 study found journalists used the passive voice less in domestic violence cases where the woman was the perpetrator against a man.
16-year-old girl reports that she was raped at Hopkins fraternity house

By Justin Fenton and Joe Burris
The Baltimore Sun

A 16-year-old girl reported that she was raped at a Johns Hopkins University fraternity over the weekend, according to law enforcement sources. University officials ordered the fraternity to cease activities as Baltimore police investigate.

The university notified students at 4 a.m. Sunday of the alleged sexual assault, which occurred about 1:30 that morning at the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house in the 2900 block of St. Paul St. A female told police she was assaulted by two men; neither is believed to be affiliated with the school.

- "16-year-old girl" is the subject
- First sentence says "she was raped," doesn't have an actor
- Don't find out anything about the perpetrators until the second paragraph
- Suggested revision: “Police are investigating reports that two men raped a teenager in a Hopkins frat house, law enforcement officials say.”
Johns Hopkins student sexually assaulted in Charles Village

By Peter Hermann, The Baltimore Sun

OCTOBER 3, 2011, 7:41 PM

A man who said he was armed with a gun sexually assaulted and tried to rape a Johns Hopkins University student early Saturday, an attack that city police said occurred in an alley two blocks from the North Baltimore campus.
Don’t apply “alleged” too liberally

- An overreliance on “alleged” creates too much hedging in the article
- Try to attribute information to a source in lieu of using alleged
- Don’t use “alleges” or “claims”; in most cases, “says” will work just fine
- **Blacklist the phrase “alleged victim”**
  - Alternatives: “the victim,” “the complainant,” “the 16-year-old girl,” “the woman/man”
Abingdon boy accused in alleged rape of girl, 14

By BRYNA ZUMER AND KIRSTEN DIZE, bzumer@theaegis.com; kdize@theaegis.com

SEPTEMBER 27, 2011, 3:30 PM

A 16-year-old Patterson Mill High School football star has been charged as an adult in connection with the alleged rape of a 14-year-old girl in her home in Harford County last weekend.

Kyle Burnett Reddish, of the 200 block of Kensington Parkway in Abingdon, was charged last Wednesday with second-degree rape, second-degree and third-degree sex offense, second-degree assault and sodomy.

The victim said she then remembered Reddish entering her room and allegedly raping her.

“In connection with the alleged rape”-- why not just make it: “has been charged as an adult with raping a 14-year-old girl”
Call it what it is.

Rape isn’t a “sex scandal,” or “womanizing,” or a “misunderstanding.” It’s rape, and it needs to be labeled as such.
Call it what it is.

Bill Cosby detailed his womanizing, secrecy efforts a decade ago

Associated Press

WJZ | CBS Baltimore  @cbsbaltimore

#BREAKING: A Baltimore City School teacher has been charged with having sex with a 15-year-old girl in his Parkville home.

Baltimore Fishbowl
YOUR WORLD. BENEATH THE SURFACE

Shattuckfreude: Rumor Mill in Overdrive on Molly Shattuck Sex Scandal Story

Posted by Susan Dunn

via mollyshattuck.com
Married couple commits murder-suicide in Baldwin Borough

Baldwin Borough couple dead in murder-suicide
Post-Gazette.com - The bodies of a wo...
post-gazette.com

10/5/15, 11:05 PM

Pittsburgh PG @PittsburghPG 11m
Police: Baldwin Borough couple dead in murder-suicide bit.ly/1LfaxZQ (headline corrected)

Baldwin Borough couple dead i...
Post-Gazette.com - The bodies...
post-gazette.com

To our followers: This tweet corrects an earlier tweet that has since been deleted that had an erroneous headline.
Things That Should Set Off Red Flags
(Or at Least be Cause for Discussion)
Graphic details

Questions to ask:

- Do graphic descriptions of an assault actually further the purpose of the story?
- Do they do more harm than good?
(Warning, graphic descriptions of child sexual abuse ahead...)
CP Photographer Accused of Raping His Daughter

Jones' statement of charges detail the daughter's accusations, based on an interview with BCAC. She "went to Mr. Stevenson's house" to "visit him for Christmas," the document states, and "was in Mr. Stevenson's room located in the basement of the house laying on the bed" and "watching television when she fell asleep." She then "felt him touching her around her waist," after which he "took her pants off and put his penis inside of her." She "felt him put it in her private part and her private part was hurting," and "she didn't say anything to him because she just felt confused and wondering why he was raping her," the document states.

When Stevenson "was done," the document continues, "he got up and walked across the room," then "walked upstairs to the first floor." After he "walked back down to the basement," he told her "to get off the bed and go upstairs to sleep on the couch," which she did. "They never talked about what happened," the document states, and "were the only two in the house because [Stevenson's] girlfriend had left the house to go to the store."
“He said, she said”

It’s important to give the alleged perpetrator a chance to respond to accusations

...But that doesn’t mean you let factually inaccurate or harmful statements go unchallenged just because they’re a quote from a source
Studies of false allegations of child sexual abuse show that such allegations are relatively rare...the rate of false allegations is low (below 10% of all allegations), and that a false allegation arising solely from a child is even less common.

"Studies of false allegations of child sexual abuse show that such allegations are relatively rare...the rate of false allegations is low (below 10% of all allegations), and that a false allegation arising solely from a child is even less common."

- True and False Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse, edited by Tara Ney, Ph.D.
Pay attention to the framing

- Who is getting more sympathy in the story, the victim, the accused rapist, or uninvolved third parties (“the community,” a sports team, etc.)?
- There’s an important distinction between writing a piece that says “This man is going to jail and his life is ruined because he was accused of rape” and one that says “This man is going to jail because he raped someone”
- “When you write a piece about an athlete who is convicted of violence, and you center their athletic ability, you erase the victim.” -sports journalist Jessica Luther
Sources and Further Reading
Questions?