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Rape, storytelling and social media: how Twitter interrupted the news media's ability to construct collective memory

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ABSTRACT

This study, using the Mary Kay LeTourneau interview on ABC's *20/20* television program, investigates how social media coupled with citizens' voices interact with mainstream media in the telling of a story and the construction of collective memory. Grounded in discourse analysis, this research examines the *20/20* story and accompanying Twitter conversations to understand how dominant and feminist ideologies about gender, rape, sexual violence, sexuality, and love are presented and (re)articulated in these texts. In doing so, this study considers how a newly opened public sphere via social media may have the capabilities to influence our collective memories and remove some of this long-held power away from traditional mainstream media.

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Mainstream news media has occupied a prominent position in our cultural discourse, with research illustrating that newspapers and broadcast news programs can tell us not only what to think about but how to think about the world around us (Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg 2011). In fact, research has shown that news media has played a role in building collective memory—a shared memory within a group—about such monumental events as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (Barbie Zelizer 1992). However, in recent decades, participation in public discourse has broadened because of technological advances and the introduction of social media. Whereas in the past mainstream news media occupied a privileged position in the public sphere, now citizens' voices rather than just news producers (i.e., journalists) are given a public space where they can offer their ideas and opinions and, in turn, influence our understanding of the world (Susan Jacobson 2013). This research investigates this concept, asking how social media and citizen voices might interact with mainstream news media in the telling of a story and construction of our collective memory. We ask how social media might allow citizens to interrupt or disrupt journalists' ability to shape collective memory. Specifically, this research focuses on a story told by long-time journalist and prominent TV personality Barbara Walters on the news magazine *20/20* and on Twitter, a popular social media site. In 2015, Walters presented an update to a story about Mary Kay Letourneau, a teacher jailed for raping her 12-year-old student but who ultimately married

the victim and in 2015 celebrated their 10th wedding anniversary. Using discourse analysis, this research examines the *20/20* story and related Twitter conversation, to understand how dominant and feminist ideologies about gender, rape, sexual violence, sexuality, and love are presented and (re)articulated in these texts.

This research first offers an overview of the Letourneau story and early media coverage before explaining the theoretical framework from which we approach this study. Next we offer a context for situating this study among other mass communication research before offering analysis of the recent *20/20* story with Barbara Walters and the Twitter conversation that accompanied and followed the news magazine airing. While approaching this study with a feminist and critical theoretical foundation and the theory of collective memory within the context of mass communication research, this study considers how a newly opened public sphere via social media might influence our collective memories and take some power away from traditional mainstream media.

The rape of a student

In March 1997, police arrested 34-year-old Mary Kay Letourneau after discovering she had engaged in a sexual relationship with her 12-year-old student, who was a sixth grader. The elementary school teacher, who was married with four children at the time of her arrest, pled guilty, and the courts convicted her on two counts of second-degree child rape. However, before the conviction, in May 1997, she gave birth to her victim's child, a daughter. Letourneau agreed to cease all contact with her victim (Vili Fualaau) and the court sentenced her to six months in jail (of which the court suspended three months). After serving this short sentence for the rape of this 12-year-old, and a mere two weeks after her release from prison, police caught Letourneau having sex with Fualaau in a car. Then pregnant with Fualaau's second child, the courts sentenced Letourneau to 7½ years in a state prison for violating the terms of her probation. Letourneau gave birth to another daughter while in prison in October 1998. In May 2005, after her release from prison in 2004, Letourneau married her ex-student and the victim of her child rape conviction. Vili Fualaau was 21 years old at that time.

The story of Letourneau garnered immediate and intense media attention at the time of her arrest. This level of media attention continued with each turn in the story and culminated in a televised wedding on the TV show *Entertainment Tonight*. While both news media and entertainment journalists covered the story, the coverage often took a disturbing turn that pronounced the crime of rape (rape of a child, no less) as a love affair (Josh Grimm and Dustin Harp 2011). Rather than a victim, journalists described the young boy as Letourneau's "lover" and their relationship was termed an "emotional attachment" (Grimm and Harp 2011). A *People* magazine article described the two as "lovers bound together in a perplexing romance" (Bruce Frankel, Catherine Nolan, and Alex Hardy 1998, 67) while another article in *People* magazine noted the relationship "seemed natural," but "what didn't seem natural was that there was a law forbidding such a thing" (Karen Alexander and Johnny Dodd 1997, 52). *Time* magazine noted that the teacher-student relationship had "a certain screwball Romeo-and-Juliet poignancy" with "something almost sweet about it" (Lance Morrow 1998, 64).

While statistics on inappropriate sexual relationships between teachers and students are difficult to come by, the Counter Pedophilia Investigative Unit notes that about 15% of students will be sexually abused by a school staff during their time in school while between

1 and 5% of teachers sexually abuse or harass students, though most of these incidents will go unreported (John Wondra 2010). When cases are reported and become stories in the news, the cultural discourse often varies dependent on the gender of the perpetrator. Feminist scholars argue this occurs because of long-held cultural beliefs about gender and sex that give men agency and situate women as sexually passive. Hegemonic masculinity constructs men as “strong, stoic, in control of the situation, active, aggressive and powerful” (Gilles Tremblay and Pierre Turcott 2005, 133), therefore becoming a victim of sexual assault can be seen as emasculating. Rather than see boys as victims of a female teacher’s sexual assault, through a cultural discourse steeped in hegemonic masculinity these boys are turned into aggressors who have achieved a sort of sexual prowess. One only need Google “Teacher sex offender” and see results like “10 Hottest Female Sex Offender Teachers” to see the pervasiveness of this ideology. The socially constructed gender roles that ascribe this particular masculinity to men also assign women a specified gender role. In terms of (hetero)sexuality women are defined in relation to men, “creating dichotomous constructions of gender characteristics in which women are passive and submissive while men are aggressive; women are followers while men take control; women are weak while men are powerful” (Grimm and Harp 2011, 5). These hegemonic gender sex roles allow journalists to reconstruct the story of a 12-year-old boy raped by his 34-year-old teacher into a romance, and move him from a victim to a lover. Feminist media scholars argue that this (re)articulation of the story—from the rape of a child by an adult to a love story—was only able to occur because of the genders of the rapist and victim (Grimm and Harp 2011).

In March 2015, ABC television network’s news magazine *20/20* aired a highly promoted story about the 10th anniversary of Mary Kay and Vili Fualaau’s wedding. Barbara Walters, the first US female network news co-anchor and a long-time journalist, conducted the interviews with the couple and their two teenage daughters. From the promotional interviews prior to the airing of the nearly 40-minute story to the actual packaged and produced *20/20* program, Walters and the program’s producers presented the story of Letourneau and Fualaau’s relationship as a love story, one that had sustained tumultuous years and a judgmental public. However, while Walters provided this narrative of love, a vast number of Twitter users produced a counter-narrative. In other words, using social media, the show’s audience participated in the mediated public sphere. This mode of participation allowed citizens to offer an alternative narrative and interrupt the framing of mainstream media’s story and, in turn, disrupt the collective memory that may have been constructed had Walters and the crew at *20/20* been able to interpret and frame the story without interruption.

Feminist theory and collective memory

Feminist media theorists note that to have access to mass media messages is to have influence within a culture. Within this theoretical framework the media provides ideological support for hegemonic power structures (Liesbet Van Zoonen 1994). Nancy Fraser (1986) offers that dominant groups (by race, gender, etc.) have control over how groups communicate through such things as official vocabularies, rhetorical devices, and the paradigms of argumentation accepted as authoritative. Patriarchal understandings of gender have shaped traditional narratives of rape though feminist re-articulations have countered these narratives. For example, traditional (patriarchal) concepts of gender and sex roles have contributed to media coverage that tends to construct rape narratives as crimes of opportunity with a

male perpetrator (stranger) and female victim, in which the male is motivated by lust and/or sickness and provoked by certain dress or demeanor (Helen Benedict 1992; Marian Meyers 1997; Ken Plummer 1995). Ultimately, too according to the traditional narrative, these are crimes typically avoidable with proper behavior on the female's part. A feminist re-articulation of this narrative argues for a revised understanding of rape to include both stranger *and* acquaintance rape, both male *and* female victims, and a strong declaration that no one ever asks for or deserves rape, regardless of attire or actions (Benedict 1992; Meyers 1997). Scholars' work on sex roles and hegemonic masculinity coupled with feminist media theories offer a framework for explaining how and why the rape of Fualaau and his subsequent marriage to Letourneau became a story about love and romance.

Media scholarship on collective memory presents an additional means from which to think about how media producers and journalists tell stories and help to shape our world. Collective memory is shaped by "an ongoing process involving political, cultural, and sociological confrontations as different interpretations compete for their place in history" (Eyal Zandberg 2015, 111), a process that has especially influenced journalists (Jill Edy 1999; Janice Hume 2014; Barbie Zelizer 1992, 1995). Brigittine French (2012) found that, overall, these collective memories serve to focus on representations instead of truths, emphasize "unequal social orders," and link "authoritative truth claims" with historical facts (340). In other words, through the hegemonic reinforcement of historicizing, how we remember an event can be the reflection of legitimized social relationships (Sarah Florini 2014). Particularly in the United States, media are essential to helping us understand the past (Florini 2014; George Lipsitz 1990; Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg 2011; Carol Schwalbe 2006; Zelizer 1995), allowing us to construct and retain how events transpired (Florini 2014). The process can literally shape the memory itself, impacting how we recall important moments in our shared histories (Jose Van Dijck 2007). As a result, public memory becomes an act rather than a moment, something that "can be used to legitimate or condemn behavior, to challenge or sustain the power of given individuals or groups" (Charles Griffin 2003, 197). Challenging these memories becomes an important, resistive strategy. Because of systemic inequality in terms of access and representation, marginalized communities do not have as loud of a voice in mainstream media, resulting in a collective memory that Christina R. Foust and Jenni Marie Simon (2015) argue is "inherently selective and always partial, making it an overtly political act" (Foust and Simon 2015, 3). Further, as producers of content, mainstream news occupies a privileged position in the shaping of our cultural memory. At the same time, social media and citizen-produced content holds a broader space and louder voice than ever before.

The Internet has been shown to be an interesting venue for observing the process of forming collective memory, but relatively few researchers have studied this particular medium (Florini 2014; Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg 2011), and no one has examined this connection to social media, despite French's (2012) call for examining to what extent experts' narratives resonate with the collective memory of audiences. While the Internet is ideal for creating websites that offer an alternative history challenging historicized events (Florini 2014), social media offer a real-time critique of messages, providing a unique opportunity to counter in real time the established, hegemonic narratives. Social media users have the opportunity to act as an active voice of protest, a running contradiction of events to shape how people are actually experiencing something unfold in front of them. This unique

phenomenon allows us to move beyond merely looking at a message specifically designed by professionals to examining reactions to these messages.

Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2013), a feminist media scholar, has looked at the relationship between mainstream media and online citizen responses. Her work examined *The New York Times'* coverage of the gang rape of a schoolgirl in a small Texas town. Durham found that after *The Times* published a story reinforcing traditional victim-blaming, online bloggers and commentators swiftly inserted a feminist rape perspective into the public consciousness. This counter citizen discursive construction of the story prompted a petition and an apology by *The Times* (Durham 2013). Dustin Harp, Jaime Loke, and Ingrid Bachmann (2012) also examined the construction of a story about sexual violence by mainstream news media and citizen bloggers (and alternative media sites). The authors' found that mainstream media reinforced traditional rape narratives while alternative mediated spaces, and citizen voices, allowed for the diffusion of a feminist ideology into the public conversation. While these studies do not address collective memory, they do offer a glimpse into how citizen voices shape public stories.

While the Mary Kay Letourneau case thrust into our public consciousness a gender role reversal in the teacher/student sexual relationship, since then there have been hundreds of these cases that have received varying degrees of publicity (*World Net Daily* 2015). Moreover, the public has had time to weather the storm of "Where were these teachers when I was in school" jokes and begin to acknowledge the double-standard (Grimm and Harp 2011) and the traumatic role these encounters have on victims (Petula Dvorak 2014). Within this current context, and keeping in mind the traditional role of mainstream news media in building collective memory, this research examines the updated mainstream media telling of the Letourneau story along with audience reactions to better understand how social media might interrupt (or disrupt) news media's building of our collective memory and the hegemonic constructions of gender roles and rape narratives. Employing discourse analysis, the research answers the following broad research questions: How did *20/20* construct a narrative about Letourneau and Fualaau? To what extent did this narrative re-enforce hegemonic gender roles? How did audiences react to the program's narrative in real time using social media?

Method

A majority of Americans use a second screen (a smartphone, laptop, or tablet) while watching TV (Jeff Bercovici 2014), and a large part of this experience is using social media while viewing a program (Chris Godley 2012). One in three people using Twitter sent messages about television programs (David Bauder 2012), and of the 53.1 million active Twitter users in the United States, 85% of those active during primetime television shows tweet about TV (Anjali Midha 2014). This active engagement allows for a unique experience both for the social media content producer and consumer. As one media executive explained, "Social TV is transforming TV from something we watch to something we do" (Nielsen 2013).

On April 10 2015, ABC's *20/20* aired a heavily-promoted interview with Mary Kay Letourneau Fualaau, Vili Fualaau, and their two daughters (Jennifer Joseph, Brooke Stangeland, Lauren Putrino, & Lauren Efron 2015). Barbara Walters conducted the interview and it garnered a 62% increase in viewership, with nearly six million viewers watching the Fualaaus (Patten Dominic 2015). The show was the highest rated program for the night in the crucial 18–49

demographic (Hal Boedeker 2015). Of particular relevance to this research, the interview was the top trending hashtag on Twitter for the evening as well (@tweetstream 2015).

This study relied on Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) to uncover the blatant and latent meanings attached not only to the questions/answers from the interviewer/interviewees, but also the bricolage of content comprising the 20/20 interview. Emphasizing the constructs of knowledge about a particular topic, discourse analysis examines how language and representation fuse together to produce meaning, with particular attention paid to how the intersections of representation, meaning, power, identities, and subjectivities all create relationships with each other (Stuart Hall 1997). Additionally, Teun Adrianus Van Dijk (1991) explained that in news studies, discourse analysis investigates the topics expressed throughout a piece of content, which relies on a community's "knowledge and beliefs about society" (178). For Twitter, we used the search term "Letourneau" and the hashtag "#abc2020" to find tweets reacting to the interview.¹ This resulted in 30,897 tweets discussing the interview. Given the number of tweets, we limited our analysis to the "top tweets," which resulted in 1757 tweets that we analyzed. Twitter defines as popular tweets "that many other Twitter users have engaged with and thought were useful" (Twitter 2015). More specifically, these tweets are aggregated by Twitter using an algorithm that "lots of people are interacting with and sharing via Retweets, replies, and more," described by Twitter as an important part of "the widespread conversation" (Twitter 2015). By using these top tweets, we were able to focus our analysis while finding texts that appear prominently on Twitter.

As this study analyzed both the verbal content and images of the broadcast, relying on FDA allowed the content to be analyzed through intertextuality—a method which relied on more than a singular form (verbal broadcast and image broadcast). Intertextuality is essential in understanding a particular discourse in its entirety, as a single image or text is defined by meanings attached by other images and text (Gillian Rose 2012).

The authors began the analysis by performing a "preliminary soak"² to gain a cursory introduction to the overall content of the broadcast coverage and corresponding tweets (Stuart Hall 1985). Next the authors employed a closer discourse analysis to critically analyze the information embedded in the coverage. The interview was then viewed again to determine specifically what themes, concepts, and patterns were articulated, while recording extensive notes. While conducting the discourse analysis, the authors not only noted what was being broadcasted but also recording what was *not* covered in the news. Discourse analysis involves analysts taking into consideration the invisible—acknowledging that the invisible can be just as powerful as the visible (Rose 2012).

When examining the Twitter content to study how individuals reacted in real time to the interview, we used Barbie Zelizer's (2011) approach to analyzing content involving competing interpretations of a single event. Zelizer (2011) argued that four stages occur ("either separately or simultaneously") to move this process forward: minimalization, substitution, displacement, and transportation (30). In minimizing the narrative, the preferred storyline is pushed to the forefront at the expense of other interpretations (particularly those falling outside of hegemonic norms). Substitution is used to describe the replacement of key words and definitions that results in the elimination of the uniqueness of a situation. The third stage is displacement, in which a single theme is elevated above others, often at the expense of nuance. In the final stage, transportation, the previously constructed (often faulty) memories of what occurred are repeated, thereby cementing how that event is remembered. Using Zelizer's (2011) approach of the cannibalization of memory allowed us to explore and

understand the narratives that ultimately determine how an event or issue appears in the collective memory.

After parsing out the top tweets, we designated them into three classifications: positive, negative, and neutral. Each of the authors looked at the same 10% of the top tweets and divided them into the three categories. We regrouped and compared our results to ensure that we had inter-coder reliability which was established in the first round. The tweets were straightforward with each statement clearly falling within the positive or negative categories. Few tweets capable of analysis fell into a “neutral” category, which makes sense considering people were tweeting in order to voice an opinion on a controversial topic. Those neutral tweets were simply news organizations tweeting that the interview was taking place or Twitter users asking who was planning on watching the interview.

Once we had the tweets separated into the positive and negative categories, we first looked at the smaller group of tweets which belonged to the positive group. We identified the main topic of each positive tweet—determining if the tweet focused on the daughters, Letourneau’s looks, or that Letourneau has served her time and deserves to be off the sex offenders watchlist. Our analysis showed that the majority of positive tweets tended to coalesce around how their daughters seem well-adjusted. For example, @Certifiedmel tweeted, “The girls are cute though. Looks like they handled it well.” Even then, those notes of support about the daughters were often laced with disapproval for the situation overall. For instance, @ak630 tweeted, “Their girls are going to be fine. That’s the only good part of this story. They are smart, beautiful, well-adjusted #whew.” The (very few) neutral tweets were simply inertly discussing the existence of the interview itself. For instance, Nightline tweeted, “2nite on @Nightline the @BarbaraJWalters exclusive with #MaryKayLetourneau Fualaau & her husband” with a link to the interview, and @K_Darshea tweeted, “Who’s gonna watch 20/20 with Mary Kay Letourneau?”

We spent most of our time in the group of negative tweets which dominated the conversation on twitterverse. The authors took copious notes on the negative tweets and we came together to share the similarities of what was the main topic of the negativity—in other words, what were the tweets’ main gripe?

The negative tweets fell mainly into four dominant categories—Villi as a prisoner, Mary Kay’s mental health, the clarification of rape, and attacks on Barbara Walters and 20/20. All of these categories are discussed in depth below in the analysis.

Analysis

20/20 and ten years of marriage

Veteran journalist Barbara Walters interviewed Mary Kay and Vili Fualaau about their current lives after 10 years of marriage. The program began with opening credits and a voiceover describing that this story is about a “34-year-old teacher and the 13-year-old student *in love with each other*” while pictures of the smiling couple fill the screen. The story is initially set up as a romantic love story and nothing else. Next, journalist and 20/20 newsmagazine anchor Elizabeth Vargas says “Good evening. It was a name that stood for scandal. Mary Kay Letourneau, that teacher, pregnant and in prison. Starting at the age of 13, Vili Fualaau, her former student, pining away for her”. Walters’ voice is next and as she speaks video of the family (Mary Kay, Vili, and their two teenage daughters) in New York fills the screen. Walters

explains that the family is visiting New York for an interview with her and explains they are no ordinary family but instead are “a couple infamous for having one of the most reviled relationships in recent memory”. She goes on to explain,

This was not your ordinary boy meets girl story for in this tale the boy, Vili Fualaau really was a boy, a sixth grader to be exact, and the girl was his 34-year-old teacher, married mother of four Mary Kay Letourneau.

Today, student and teacher are now husband and wife living in the quiet suburbs of Seattle.

The collective symbols here in one sentence—husband, wife, and suburbs—evoke stability and a healthy home life. These symbols arguably assist in removing any taboo related to the relationship and help establish normalcy. These introductory statements also set the tone of the interview and serve to situate the relationship as one of enduring love, with a then boy “pining” away for his lover, who is a 34-year-old *girl*. Further, Walters’ simplification of this relationship as a boy-meets-girl scenario works to erase the fact that the two did not meet by chance but rather in what child molestation experts might call a predatory or opportunistic setting. That the relationship began in an elementary classroom and that an adult committed felony rape of a child is hardly alluded to. While Walters does acknowledge the relationship to be “reviled,” her interview and demeanor toward Mary Kay does not signify any such sentiment.

Before delving into the new interview, Walters explains, “First, we want to reacquaint you with a story that captured the country nearly two decades ago. An illicit *love affair* that became the scandal heard around the world”. By describing it as a love affair Walters negates the fact that a child rape occurred. While it is true that Fualaau is now a man with agency in his relationship with Mary Kay, the erasure of the initial rape convictions dangerously ignores the negative consequences of this crime on victims. Instead the original act is ignored and the relationship is normalized. Next on the program, audiences see and hear news clips from when the story originally made headlines, with one featuring a journalist saying, “...after being found meeting with a former teenage *lover*.” Walters and the journalist heard in the clip both use language to situate the relationship between the two as a love affair rather than a criminal act. Walters continues to narrate the story while we see images from the past. Included in her narration, Walters’ explains, “Her life seemed picture perfect. Mary, the beautiful blonde...” Later in the story, Walters again uses that descriptor when she asks Vili if he had thought of leaving Mary, saying, “there are *other* beautiful blondes.” Attention to Mary’s looks again diverts attention from a criminal act and insinuates that Vili is somehow fortunate to have married this idealized woman. Walters continues with the background story, explaining Mary was “harboring an unthinkable secret. The once-doting mother and elementary school teacher was *having an affair* with a 13-year-old former student.” Next we see famed news anchor Peter Jennings explaining in a past news cast that “a 35-year-old teacher *had sex* with a 13-year-old sixth grader.” After nearly four minutes, the word rape has still not been mentioned (and it never will be during the entire story, even though Letourneau pled guilty to two counts of felony second degree rape of a child). Instead, both past and current journalists repeatedly use the words love, sex, and affair to describe the relationship, essentially erasing the criminal aspect.

The opening scenes accompanying Walters’ introduction showed the couple exchanging a quick kiss on the lips as they sat on the couch where the interview took place. During the entire segment, Walters continues to normalize the relationship even while explaining it was the “first teacher-student sex scandal (that) became national water cooler conversation”.

Walters began the interview by asking the couple why they chose to talk with her on their 10-year anniversary. Mary implied that because the media would be twisting their story again, this time she wanted to stake a claim in how the story unfolded once more as she now had a responsibility to her children. She said it was the “most responsible [decision] to protect our girls.” Walters and *20/20* allowed Mary to do just that—retell a love story rather than dwell on a criminal act. It is hard to believe this same courtesy would be afforded to a 50-year-old male teacher who had pled guilty to felony rape of his 12-year-old student, impregnated her when she was 14 and again at 15, and then married her after serving seven years in prison. The recent *20/20* broadcast focused on the present with Walters asking Mary and Vili about the state of their current marriage. Both implied it had not been an easy road. Vili answered curtly, stating, “Marriage is marriage,” while Mary said, “Marriage is work.”

Walters mentioned that there had been a spate of other incidents where a female teacher was caught having sex with her minor male students, but Walters explained, “Out of all the cases, hers [Mary Kay Fualaau] is the most memorable perhaps because of the *unfaltering love* they have always professed to each other.” The tone of these types of statements (and the entire framing of the story) could certainly be seen as dangerous in that it normalizes a student-teacher relationship. The program continued the story with an explanation of how the couple first met. Soft piano music played in the background as the network flashed pictures of Vili as a child and pictures of Mary as his adult teacher. Pictures of the smiling couple filling the screen offer a confusing story: on the one hand, viewers are told of a couple in love, while on the other hand pictures of a child and adult are seen. The narrative simply focuses on love, essentially ignoring the criminal act.

Walters’ reinforces traditional notions of sex roles, including that males are in control when she notes that, “Vili seems mature to me” and at another point during the interview describing his good fortune to him—“you have a loving wife, a 10-year marriage, that’s more than a lot of people have. Two beautiful daughters...”. These are efforts, conscious or not, that serve to normalize this relationship within the context of traditional gender roles. What Walters’ never does during the interview is critically examine the criminal act that marks the start to this relationship and how victims of rape (particularly young victims) might react and cope with these crimes. In fact, as an illustration of how completely Walters’ erases the crime: at one point Walters says to Mary “You are a registered sex offender. Even as I say that I’m shocked myself”. Instead of attending to the sex crime, Walters’ says the couple had a “scandalous start to their romance.”

The interview concluded with Mary Kay and Vili’s daughters on camera. As the feature showed the two girls singing, Walters narrated, “And when they serenaded me with their sweet voices, I thought their choice of this Ed Sheeran song was most appropriate.” The scene cuts to the girls singing, “People fall in love in mysterious ways...”. Finally Walters’ concluded by saying: “Mysterious ways indeed. An ode to their parents’ romance, which all these years later is still for so many considered a crime.”

Tweeting another reality

Overall, the Twitter response to the interview was overwhelmingly negative. Generally speaking, there was roughly one positive comment about the Letourneau interview for every 30 negative comments, and even then, most of the positive comments were talking about how at least the daughters seem well-adjusted. Out of the tweets we analyzed, there was not a single tweet in support of Walters’ narrative of this case as a love story.

Fualaau as prisoner

One of the dominant themes of the Twitter reaction to the 20/20 broadcast was the idea that Vili was trapped in the marriage. Some posited that he was merely unhappy in the marriage, posting, "Hope Vili watches this interview & realizes that he looks so unhappy & needs 2 talk 2 some1 other than MaryKay who he feels safe with"³ (@neenerg413 2015). However, most were concerned that he was unable to leave, asking, "Did anyone see the hostage situation on 2020? Somebody help that poor guy!" (@KatKmassaglia 2015). Suggesting he had fallen for his captor, a few people wondered, "Could this have been statutory rape, and he had Stockholm syndrome. Relating with his victimizer" (@JsQueen625 2015) and "What is the rapist/rape victim equivalent of Stockholm syndrome? I feel like that's what's going on here" (@SoKattastic 2015).

This theme was especially persistent because Twitter users were actively trying to read his body language and other visual cues to see if the prisoner theory was accurate. "Anyone notice how Vili has already rolled his eyes several times, described Mary negatively = unhappy man" (@StyleByTami 2015). Tweets pointed out that, "Vili looked confused and disgusted the entire time. He knows what he did was wrong, just couldn't say it" (@MeganLynn314 2015), and "He's looking like this b*tch really is crazy!!! He's crying out for help to the world with his eyes!! Somebody save me!!!!" (@Smoothie_king10 2015). This led to individuals speculating on his motivation. One user noted, "He looks like a kid who sees no other future and has resigned himself to his fate or is accepting his punishment" (@Hofftastic 2015), while another suggested, "He was trapped and prob felt guilty she was jailed. Part of me feels he felt he 'owed' her in his young mind" (@TvCritic333 2015). This also led to speculation as to Letourneau's motivation.

Mental instability of Mary Kay Letourneau

Another key theme that emerged during the Twitter discussion of the 20/20 interview was questioning the mental state of Letourneau. One user insisted, "MaryKay has a myriad of psychological diagnoses I could make in just the hour #ImATherapist" (@Auntie_Allison 2015). Others did the same (albeit without the therapist hashtag), wondering, "Is it me or is this woman coming across as mentally unstable?" (@rachthesinger 2015) and, "No apologies because Mary Kay L is still a #nutjob She has harmed a lot of people with her craziness & media seeking attention" (@MaureenWFost 2015), while suggesting, "This woman is disturbingly delusional. Almost childlike" (@Leela3018 2015), and "Mary Kay's maturity level seems like a child's. Wonder if her brain would look normal under a microscope" (@Samantha_Ronnie 2015). Several users compared Letourneau to the manipulative character in the popular book/film *Gone Girl*, while other users posited motives for her that call into question her motivations, such as "Mary didn't want Vili to grow mentally, she wants him to remain dependent on her" (@MzYummyDread 2015), "Somebody in that relationship needs to be the adult. He can't. She doesn't know how. Emotionally I think she's childlike herself" (@JanePorter2008 2015), and "Mary Letourneau has the voice of a teenager at 53 years old. Maybe it's part of some immaturity complex that explains the scandal" (@MegaMuggins 2015).

Clarifying rape

Another recurring theme on Twitter was that, despite the news media narrative that this was a story of love conquering obstacles, Twitter users wanted to be certain people understood that Letourneau raped Fualaau. Occasionally it was a subtle reminder: “47 minutes in. Guess what words have STILL not been said?” (@missbanshee 2015). However, most of the users were much more straightforward, reminding the audience, “Can we all just remember that #MaryKayLetourneau is a convicted child rapist and sex offender? The kid-gloves approach isn’t okay” (@EKlynstra 2015). These tweets were spread throughout the broadcast, with some tying what was said back to the fact that this was a crime. “Mary Kay Letourneau didn’t think sex with a child was illegal. Let me help you out. It is. Period.” (@CoachCharlotte 2015), while the rest simply popped up as impromptu reminders that a crime was committed. For example, “No matter how you portray it ... rape is rape not a love affair” (@niecytaylor 2015), and “It wasn’t love it was rape” (@JoelleAmiee 2015). By using tweets such as, “It doesn’t matter if it’s a consensual relationship. If a minor is involved, it’s illegal. Letourneau got a slap on the wrist” (@sincerely_steff 2015), these users place the mediated memory of Letourneau and Fualaau in the context of a legal discussion. In the process, users became frustrated with *20/20*, Barbara Walters, and ABC for orchestrating this media event.

Attacking Walters and 20/20

As Walters continually pushed the established narrative of love and forgiveness, Twitter users reacted strongly. Some comments were directed at Walters, stating “Barbara totally botched that interview. Any validation to this relationship is irresponsible journalism” (@JenniferAbrell 2015). “The fact that Barb is being so sweet to Mary, the Child Molester, is disturbing. She would never treat a Male Molester like this” (@brijh 2015), and, “Barbara was just laughing and joking with them. Promoting stories like this make child predators think it’s OK” (@KellyStricklan9 2015). Others attacked both her and the program, asking, “Who at #abc2020 encouraged/allowed @BarbaraJWalters to try and put a ‘heartwarming’ spin on the #MaryKayLetourneau story???” (@NurseOnTheRun90 2015). That said, *20/20* received the brunt of complaints, with users suggesting, “Maybe we shouldn’t be softballing questions to a convicted child molester” (@thewayoftheid 2015), and pointing out that, “@ABC2020 This is presented as if this child was not molested by his teacher! Presented as though it’s some new age fairy tale!” (@myshelby 2015). Other users elaborated on these points, stating, “This 2020 was sick disturbing and y’all are glorifying this pedophile and y’all should be ashamed of yourselves sick yuck” (@Silverorchid25 2015). And some users focused on the news narrative in general: “The media didn’t do enough to hold you accountable, Mary Kay. They are calling your sexual abuse and predatory behavior an affair” (@lilnerdette 2015).

Live-tweeting journalists

Throughout the program, Twitter users were frequently reacting directly to the show’s content. General reactions to the overall situation were common, but throughout the episode, users were tweeting responses to what they saw happening on the program. When telling the story on-air of how the two ended up together, Letourneau said Vili came right out and asked her, “Would you ever have an affair?” Immediately, skeptical tweets appeared, stating

"a 12 year old does not talk like that . . . Like no" (@ellabella 2015), "a 12 yr old boy asks about an affair????? Send her back to prison for lying" (@bugsact 2015), and "No 12 yr old is gonna ask teacher if she'd have 'affair'! Much less be sexually aggressive! She's delusional" (@Samantha_Ronnie 2015). More critical tweets followed, asking, "Sooo you are blaming him for your inappropriate behavior?" (@JoyfullyReviewd 2015), "Is this grown woman seriously blaming a 12 y/o for her being a child molester!?" (@eSn82 2015), and "She sexualized a child. She's trying to paint him as the aggressor, he was 12 Mary, you were married!" (@_SoloDovePR 2015).

This type of active critique was prevalent during the entire interview. When Letourneau said she didn't know that getting into a relationship with a minor was a felony or a crime, users responded with tweets that were filled with suspicion and disbelief, such as, "She didn't know that getting into a sexual relationship, as a 34-year-old, with a pre-teen was wrong? GTFO. She's spewing such BS" (@LucasLascivious 2015), "How did you not know getting into a 'relationship' with a CHILD was illegal? This is such BS" (@f_uitlist 2015), and "SHE DIDN'T THINK IT WAS UNLAWFUL. Think about that. A teacher not knowing that statutory rape is against the law #MaryKayLetourneau." (@missbanshee 2015). When Letourneau followed that by saying this type of relationship would be allowed in some countries, to which users tweeted, "WHAT COUNTRY?! WHERE IS A 34 YEAR OLD WITH A 12 YEAR OLD OKAY?!" (@brownsugarbbyy 2015), "Ummm public hangings and marital rape are praised in other countries? Shall we go on? Psycho" (@AutumnNALston 2015), and "But yall do not live in another country. You live in America! And this shit was illegal. It's why you went to prison" (@viriyakarunaa 2015).

The target was not only Letourneau, as often Walters came under fire for her role in the interview. When Walters stated that she was shocked Letourneau was on the sex offender registry, viewers tweeted, "Really, Barbara, shocked?! She had sex with a 12 y/o—of course she is a sex offender! She gives all of us teachers a bad name!" (@jessanne83 2015), "@BarbaraJWalters how is it shocking that she is a sex offender?? She was 35 messing with a prepubescent child!" (@_theAquarian 2015), and "Why is Barbara shocked that she was a registered sex offender?! Did she momentarily forget who she was interviewing or something?" (@stephanienix 2015). When the show played Ed Sheeran's "Thinking Out Loud," viewers wondered, "What was #abc2020 trying to do using a love song at the end of #maryKayLetourneau interview? Convince us it wasn't child rape? Disgusting" (@tolulopeab 2015) and "Anyone else upset that #abc2020 ruined @edsheeran's 'thinking out loud'? Thanks, Walters. Thanks a lot" (@EmilyF1984 2015).

In actively challenging 20/20's content, these users are filling the traditional news media's role as the watchdog, interjecting questions that should be asked or observations that should be made. Whether it was the examples listed above, or commenting about Fualau's double-standard regarding him not wanting his daughters to date teachers, or Letourneau insisting that she knew he would be a good father when he was 14 years old, those tweets represent the counter-narrative to public memory. Rather than letting the news media reinforce its existing narrative of soulmates (Grimm and Harp 2011), users offered active, real-time alternatives to the scripted performance being broadcast by ABC.

Discussion and conclusions

This study illustrates how a mainstream broadcast news program maintained a long-held narrative by describing the child rape of Vili Fualaau as a romance. When the story of Mary Kay Letourneau and Vili Fualaau first became part of the mediated discourse in 1997, news and entertainment media outlets constructed a story about love, relying on outdated and hegemonic understandings about rape and sex roles (Grimm and Harp 2011). Barbara Walters continued this narrative in an update to the story via a nearly 40-minute *20/20* package, complete with love songs and a declaration of the couple's "unfaltering love." In essence, as news media have done with many stories from our past, this *20/20* story serves to cement our collective memory about the pair. Audiences in the public sphere via social media, however, interrupted that narrative to insert their reactions to the framing of the story, and, in turn, disrupted the narrative. While the *20/20* story was a major trending story on Twitter during its airing, the majority of audience members rejected the framing of the story by mainstream news, essentially offering a (re)articulated story.

This research is important for two main reasons. First, it illustrates how audiences via social media react and interrupt the telling of a story and, in turn, disrupt mainstream news media's strength in forming our collective memory. News media serve a powerful role in the telling of stories and construction of collective memory. However, now a mass audience (citizen voices) has the ability to amplify and participate in a mediated conversation. While collective memory literature illustrates the ability of online resources to challenge perceptions of an event or movement after it has taken place (Florini 2014), this study suggests individuals are identifying and challenging narratives through the use of social media specifically. Zelizer (1992) explained that Kennedy's assassination was as much a story of how the memories of news media became memories of the US population, and "if not the authority of journalists, then certainly the authority of other communities, individuals and institutions will make their own claims to the tale" (214). In this case, not only does Walters possess authority to construct our collective memory about Mary Kay Letourneau and Vili Fualaau but individual citizens via social media enjoy some authority in the construction of our collective memory. Further, in participating, these individual citizens are countering dominant ideologies about rape, sexual violence, and gender roles and thereby carving out a claim to how the story will be remembered. This citizen action reinforces the particularly important role of social media as an alternative to mainstream mass communication systems in a society and affects cultural hegemony.

Memory, or perception thereof, permeates every aspect of rape and sexual assault. How individuals remember what happened is largely based on how trustworthy a victim is perceived to be (Benedict 1992). Individual memory is subsumed by collective memory, with the rape changing from the victim's account (what did happen) to the justice system's account (what could have happened) to the narrative (what should have happened). Each step places distance between the victim's memory to the public's memory, and for so many publicized cases, the memory of the assailant is privileged over that of the victim. In other words, the public remembers the attacker's narrative of events, thereby subsuming the victim and reinforcing the assailant's power for the next publicized case. For these reasons it is especially important that the diffusion of feminist ideologies about rape be inserted into the public consciousness and offer a (re)articulation of news stories that reinforce traditional gender and sexual violence narratives.

This research is also important in that it not only illustrates how audiences can disrupt the framing of a story, but it illustrates how alternative, feminist re-articulations of the collective rape narrative are prevalent in public discourse. Audience members who participated in the Twitter discourse almost unanimously showed disgust and contempt that the news program in general and Walters in particular would frame the rape of a 12-year-old by his 34-year-old teacher as anything other than rape. The overwhelmingly negative comments toward Walters and the producers for their romance narrative demonstrate how fully the non-traditional (feminist) understanding of rape has taken hold in our culture. The notion that boys cannot be raped by their teachers because they are always ready and willing to have sex is solidly dismantled by the audience's tweets. In this case, the audience members even used the promotional tools of the news program (i.e., the hashtag) to speak out against the reification of these rape myths, which suggests that the *20/20* news team was stunningly unprepared for the ensuing backlash.

At the same time, mainstream news outlets like *20/20* and journalists, particularly at the level of Barbara Walters, hold a privileged space in the public sphere and construction of collective memory. Unfortunately, research on contemporary occurrences cannot measure collective memory. Instead this research relies on scholars whose work has marked the importance of journalists on constructing collective memory and research that shows the impact of online and social media in affecting social discourse. Research like Durham's 2013 study of *The New York Times'* story of the rape of a schoolgirl in a small Texas town offers solid evidence of the ways citizen media disrupts mainstream media's telling of stories. The fleeting nature of Twitter discourse versus the ease of retrieval of stories from an institution like ABC, however, draws pause in considering how strong the interruption to the mainstream narrative might be in terms of collective memory. This is certainly something to consider in more depth as scholars continue to study the effects of social media on collective memory. With that caveat, it is essential to note that the entire nearly 40-minute *20/20* segment of Walters' interview with Mary Kay and Vili Fualaau is absent from the ABC website—the only episode missing for the year 2015. While it is speculation, perhaps the overwhelmingly negative Twitter audience response impacted the network's decision to take this story offline. As for collective memory, our thought is that the Twitter conversation does not usurp the *20/20* narrative, but disrupts it and in the process helps to draw a new narrative for our collective memories.

This study also offers important reflection for journalists. The audience's tweets gathered for this research illustrate how careful journalists must be in the contemporary media environment. The audience's reaction to the story was not simply about the content but directed at the journalists and news producers, who were called out for what the audience viewed as irresponsible practices. This research shows that the traditional watchdogs (the news media) are now being watched in a very public way like never before. Ratings have always been an important issue in these programming formats, and these types of extended news features have relied on spectacle. However, with the advent of social media, what has changed is that journalists have lost the complete control of story narratives they once had as social media users interject and interrupt the telling. No longer do journalists have the same power to form our collective memory and, in this case, to reinforce tired hegemonic notions of gender roles and rape.

While normally it would be the journalists' role to engage in the fact-checking and information clarification that the users were engaged in during the show, in this case, the journalists seemed to simply book the guests, organize photo shoots, and promote the event, all while

ignoring (or at the very least, not acknowledging) the highly problematic scenario of touting the unity of a sexual predator and victim. Journalism routines and norms would demand that interviewees ask the questions and points raised by Twitter users. In their eyes, Barbara Walters should have been asking about Fualaau's reluctance to answer questions or clarifying important issues of the case, such as the definition of rape and the issue of consent when someone in the position of authority is involved. However, the show was clearly a promotional piece meant to garner a large audience—a spectacle if you will. It achieved that much, as the ratings indicate. And likely, Walters agreed to a fluff piece in order to secure her subjects, who most likely would not be interested in a hard-hitting interview. Regardless of these business decisions, outspoken audience members were not satisfied with the spectacle.

We also acknowledge the journalistic choices could have been a pre-meditated maneuver by *20/20*, a strategic approach to generate controversy through manufactured outrage in the hopes of driving up ratings. However, ABC's *20/20* Twitter account did not engage the other Twitter users who were criticizing the show—@ABC2020 posted 18 tweets during the broadcast, but each was only a direct quote from the interview, with no description or opinion accompanying the quote. Furthermore, the news division of ABC did not report on controversy surrounding the interview, which would seem a logical step if wanting to capitalize on the outrage online.

Our findings suggest that while *20/20* tried to perpetuate an existing, problematic narrative, individuals responded immediately to counteract that storyline with their own understandings of what happened. What makes our study unique is that, while other research has studied online challenges to how an event or issue is understood (Florini 2014; Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg 2011), this is the first to analyze how social media, which provides instant feedback to construct a counter-argument in real time, might disrupt journalists' construction of collective memory. This opportunity to challenge interpretations creates intriguing possibilities for individuals looking to battle embedded hegemonic narratives, as evidenced in the whitewashed, romanticized re-telling of the Mary Kay Letourneau story, and it demands further study.

As an addendum, in June of 2017 various media outlets announced that Mary Kay and Vili Fualaau have formally separated. The story made headlines including from CNN "Husband files for separation from former teacher Mary Kay Letourneau," from Yahoo News "Man plans to divorce wife who illegally started relationship when he was 13," and from Fox News "Husband of Mary Kay Letourneau files for separation." Dozens (or more likely, hundreds) of headlines across the country read similarly. For those who argue for the accuracy of these headlines and do not consider them problematic, considering the unusual headline from BBC News that subverts traditional hegemonic notions of rape, sexual violence, and gender: "US husband splits from wife who raped him as a boy."

Notes

1. Using the search terms "Vili" and "Fualaau" did not significantly alter the number of results, most likely because Twitter users had trouble agreeing on the spelling of Fualaau's first and last name.
2. "Preliminary soak" as coined by Stuart Hall in *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935–1985* is defined as an introduction to the content to form familiarity before proceeding to conduct deeper analysis.
3. Every tweet analyzed contained the hashtag #abc2020 to facilitate online discussion. To avoid repetition, the hashtag was not included when re-writing tweets unless essential to understanding them.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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