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Crime Reporting In The Age of Victim's Rights: An Interview with Carrie Rentschler

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In *Second Wounds*, media scholar Carrie Rentschler traces the emergence of victim advocacy in the U.S. from the sixties until the present. Rentschler also explores the relationship the victim's rights movement and the media, describing how U.S. reporting on crime has been influenced by the movement's idea of the "secondary victim" as well as theories of post-traumatic stress. In the first of a series of interviews with scholars about journalism research, *Researching Journalism* page editor Lisa Lynch spoke to Rentschler about her research process and her findings.

LL: *Second Wounds* is more about the processes and actors that shape the representation of victims in the media, and less about how we should 'read' those representations when they finally appear. I found this to be a refreshing approach to journalism analysis, since so much work on representation focuses on critical readings of existing content in the media rather than on a systematic look at how such content is produced. There's plenty of scholarship about the shaping effect of the structural conditions of the industry — the 24 hour news cycle, the economic crisis in the newsroom — but it's rare that a specific kind of news coverage is singled out and examined in terms of how it is shaped by forces outside of the industry itself.

CR: I knew going in to this project that I didn't want to do a survey of media representations of victim's rights. Instead, I was trying to understand where victims' rights comes from as a media and political discourse. To do that, I had to get behind the scenes of media and political institutions, to see how places like journalism education, which was one of my key sites of analysis, encourage media workers in training to take up different ways of speaking and thinking about what they do. In my own work, I've tended to think about questions of representation in terms of what makes them possible. Social activism and media training have been two key sites in which victims' rights discourse has taken shape, first as a political discourse and then as a set of conventions for reporting on crime, disaster and terrorism.

In the book, I follow where media training in victims' rights orientations to crime and violence, and the related language of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, lead in terms of the kinds of news representation of victims we see more and more around acts of mass victimization. Instead of asking "what is it that I see in these representations?" I ask "How do these sets of representations of victims become possible? What are the institutional sources for the language and interpretative frameworks in which they are presented? And who is invested in shaping representations of victims in these ways?" When we understand where things come from we can begin to understand them differently, particularly in terms of the ways they change over time.

LL: Over the past few years, scholars have been thinking about the role humanitarian groups have begun to play in media accounts of international crisis, arguing some media accounts have effectively become co-productions between journalists and humanitarian groups. In *Second Wounds*, reporters and victim's rights groups have a somewhat different kind of relationship, but we can still see how victim representations are co-produced. The movement shapes how victims are represented, but also draws from media representations to create its own discourse. Did you begin with a focus on this reciprocal relationship, or did it emerge for you over time?

CR: Originally, I thought I was doing was a social movement study, looking at organizations that are working behind the scenes to create the discourse of victim's rights. But as I began to research these groups, it became clear that focusing only on them would not enable me to determine where the discourse came from -- because the movement wasn't the only player in the production of victims rights discourse. Rather, victim's rights groups inherited and reworked an existing discourse that came from crime policy and law-and-order and other movement activism (such as the feminist anti-rape movement). These discourses also circulated in the media at the time--the late 1960s in particular--so in order to answer my research questions, I needed to look at both policy institutions and media institutions to trace the particular emergence of victims' rights at that time.

LL: By media institutions you mean journalism training.

CR: Yes. To get at news media practices of representation around victims' rights orientations to issues of victimization, I focused on the education works behind the scenes to train journalists how to cover victims of crime and violence. Journalism education is a form of movement intervention into changing how the news media cover and interact with crime victims and their families. Journalism training at the University of Toronto is a good example of how journalists are learning how to think about crime from a victim-centered perspective. Journalism students are being trained to understand crime, disasters and violence from a victim-centered perspective. The Canadian Journalism Foundation and the Canadian Journalism Foundation are also good examples of how journalism education is being transformed. Journalism education is being transformed to acknowledge and take account of in order to tell a story about the effects of crime and violence on victims. That is, rather than treat victims as just another source, victim-centered training ideally teaches student journalists to take account of the effects of crime and violence on victims. While victims bear so much of the burden of crime and violence, they do so, in most cases, non-voluntarily. Victim centered journalism training focuses on transforming the news/victim interface into one that is a more conscious and conscientious exchange. While news outlets need good



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visuals and are still invested in covering the effects of crime through crime scenes, weapons and wounded bodies, victims and their families have a radically different set of investments in news coverage as a site in which their loss can be socially recognized and addressed. So much of the journalism training on covering victims attempts to reformulate parts of the news making process, specifically the news interview, as a space of more equal encounter between victims and reporters/photojournalists, where victims might be able to achieve representation without becoming just another crime commodity.

LL: When you say 'victim' here, you are not just talking about crime victims.

CR: About three-quarters of the way into my book project, some of my readers helped me realize that the key victim-subject I was writing about was not the primary victim of crime but the people around them, the secondary victims. They are also the main activists in the victims' rights movement. The movement's focus on the secondary victims of crime and the secondary wounds they bear as representatives of other victims helped bring about a key shift in public discourses of crime: from a focus on the criminal event to one on criminal justice reforms in the name of victims' rights to representation there. As I argue, the victim's rights movement appropriated the concept of secondary victimization from feminist anti-rape activism, which used the idea of the second rape to critique how police and prosecution neglected and re-wounded rape victims. As other scholars have noted (Susan Jeffords comes to mind), it is a problem to metaphorize rape in this way, but what feminist activists were trying to do is name institutional neglect and blame placed on rape victims for the violence they suffered, in a way that could powerfully depict the experience of this neglect as itself a form of violence. They gave name to a form of institutional victimization that didn't have one before. In the victim's rights movement, then, the idea of the 'second rape' is rearticulated into the idea of the second wound, the forms of harm suffered by families of crime victims in their institutional encounters as representatives of victims, and in the experiences primary victims of violence have secondary to the violent event.

LL: What does journalism education have to say about how reporters ought to interact with primary and secondary victims?

CR: Programs that do reporter training around victims usually operate within a trauma framework. They draw from scholarly and practitioner literatures and research on post-traumatic stress disorder to train reporters how to think about how the violent event that created the 'victim' they cover produces not just physical wounds but psychological wounds. These wounds may be less visible, but they are no less devastating in their effects. In journalism, the concept of trauma and trauma victims has become quite powerful — in part, because there is already an existing discourse of trauma within journalism, connected to the experience of war correspondents and how they have been talking about the effects of that experience.

LL: You mean the idea that journalists themselves are traumatized by reporting on violent events.

CR: Yes. The idea that journalists can experience their work lives as traumatic creates the possibility of co-identification between journalism and victim: both can occupy the position of traumatized subject, and they do in journalistic trauma training.

LL: How do journalists themselves describe their experiences of trauma?

CR: One of the cases I talk about in the book is the Columbine shooting. I examined numerous trade journal reports, interviews and videos where journalists talked about covering the shootings. One of the things I found in their descriptions of their experiences was a double articulation of trauma. They talked about what its like to work in the current news industry, the stresses they experience from their working conditions and the monopoly control of the media that pushes them into situations where they often feel as if they must exploit others to get the story. That is precisely how many described their assignments around the Columbine High School shootings. Being sent to repeatedly cover the families of Columbine students, exactly in the midst of their intense grief, many reporters found to be not only exploitative, but also overwhelming for them as workers required to translate that grief into news. They describe how the increasing commercial imperatives of the news media forced them to be more and more intrusive in people's lives. So they were describing themselves as doubly traumatized - by commercial imperatives and by the encounter with the distraught, grieving community of which they were themselves a part.

LL: You look at two different kinds of training materials in *Second Wounds* — the manuals circulated within the victims' rights movement that are used to train victim advocates how to handle the media, and the materials circulated in journalism schools and in professional settings that train journalists how handle victims. What is fascinating about these materials is that each side constructs a different definition of 'victim' and 'the media.' For victim's rights groups, the media is often a harmful force, but still one that needs to be harnessed for potential good. The media training materials focus in part on this idea of public good as well, but they see their interactions with victims through a different frame...

CR: From a movement perspective, the victim-subject needs to be emboldened with rights politically: this in turn requires a form of social recognition which they assert comes through representation in the media. The media thus becomes another venue, like the courtroom, that provides victims with a form of social recognition and redress.

The motivation behind journalism training is to assuage and manage potential traumas by learning to embody different modes of comportment with victims and families – in less combative and intrusive ways. The model of news/victim interaction, then, is less the combative interview model so central to the journalistic enterprise and its professional sensibility, and one that is more 'cooperative' and empathic. Of course, the news interview is still about getting information from a source, so in the end, the model of interaction between reporter and victim source is still an instrumental one, only it is also supposed to serve the instrumental interests of victims too. There is strategy, in other words, on both sides of this model.

LL: In your book, you describe the relationship as 'instrumental.'

CR: It is quite instrumental. I don't think there's any way around that — unless you stop the interview with the victim. It's instrumental because there's a news commodity that comes out this. But victim's-rights training is instrumental as well: the movement wants victims to be in the news and some victim families seek representation in the news. In light of this, what the movement is trying to do is reduce the potential harms of the encounter. They are also trying to create more opportunities for victims to talk to the press in ways that the press is more prepared to engage.

LL: In the US, how common is the kind of journalism trauma training you describe in *Second Wounds*?

CR: With trauma training, there is some consensus at the institutional level that it should be adopted. I think the whole idea of co-identification has made journalism trauma training more easily adapted to forms of journalism education than other forms of movement-based training oriented towards journalists. For example, I have a colleague in Australia who works with organizations who create multicultural anti-racist training aimed at journalists. In her experience though, journalism education has been slow to adopt this training if not outright hostile to it. One explanation may be that news institutions there just don't see their own interests being linked to the interests of anti-racist activists.

LL: So do you think this victim-centered, trauma-focused approach to crime reporting will remain the norm in journalism training, at least in the U.S.?

Most of the schools in which trauma training have been adopted are close to sites of high profile acts of mass violence and victimization. The University of Central Oklahoma in Tulsa developed training in the wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City federal building bombing. Journalism researchers at the University of Colorado-Boulder made a documentary about covering the Columbine High School shootings and began to adopt victim-centered training thereafter. These are just a few examples of schools doing this training. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has expanded from Michigan State University and the University of Washington-Seattle to New York, Jakarta, Melbourne, London, and Cologne, Germany. I think we are going to see more and more of the kind of training I examined in *Second Wounds*, and I think we're going to see it develop in particular around coverage of political violence and catastrophe.

I am not sure how things in Canada will evolve. I should add, too, that I focused on training in the U.S. because I wanted to understand the particular emergence of victims' rights as an extension of the war on crime in the U.S. When I looked at Canadian journalism schools, I didn't see the kind of trauma training I describe in the U.S. It has started recently, but without the same kinds of funding.

What might it mean to cover crime from a different perspective, such as an antiviolence perspective?

This is a significant question and it is one I have considered a lot. Most of the resources for thinking about how to cover crime from an anti-violence perspective come from movements that typically eschew a crime orientation to issues of violence in favor of ones that address the social sources of violence and the social resources for its prevention. These include movements like the feminist movement to end domestic abuse, whose media strategies have focused for years on ways to socially intervene into the relational conditions that reproduce violence in people's intimate lives. Among other things, their publicity efforts aim at teaching men how to talk to the men in their lives who exhibit abusive behaviors toward their partners and/or children. Public health advocates create media training material aimed at news workers that offers them resources and interpretive frameworks for reporting on the links between drug and alcohol abuse and family and partner violence. The Berkeley Media Studies Group and the Media Research Action Project in Boston offer training to community groups on how to become news sources that can address the social conditions that create violence, and challenge news outlets that misrepresent youth and racial violence, among other issues. In the U.S., most victims' rights activism does not do this work in particular. Some anti-death penalty advocates, however, are mobilizing the discourse of victims' rights to their own ends, claiming their rights to speak as victims against the death penalty in courts and in the press. These groups draw from a human rights orientation to victims' rights, something that is more common in other countries' victims' rights movements. What a human rights framework provides is an orientation to violence that asserts all people's rights to lead violence-free lives. Without this orientation, victims' rights remains a primarily law-and-order movement, invested in crime control rather than anti-violence visions of a non-violent world.

Carrie Rentschler's book *Second Wounds: Victim's Rights and the Media in the U.S.* was published in 2011 by Duke University Press.

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