TECHNOLOGY & EMERGING MEDIA

TECHNOLOGIE & MÉDIAS ÉMERGENTS

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In A. Buckland & C. Caron (Ed.), *TEM 2014 : Proceedings of the Technology & Emerging Media Track*

**Citation**

Cardin, M. (2014). Social Media in Steubenville: Understanding the Power Dynamic of Rape Culture. In A. Buckland & C. Caron (Ed.), *TEM 2014 : Proceedings of the Technology & Emerging Media Track – Annual Conference of the Canadian Communication Association (Saint Catharines, May 28 – 30, 2014)*, URL : http://www.tem.fl.ulaval.ca/fr/saint-catharines-2014/

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# Social Media in Steubenville:
# Understanding the Power Dynamic of Rape Culture

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**Abstract** This paper explores the case of "Jane Doe", a sixteen-year old girl who was raped at a party in Steubenville, Ohio, in 2012. This case and the resulting social media frenzy invite us to ask fundamental questions about rape culture and the subjectivities of rapists. I analyze this event and feminist online activism against rape culture through the lens of Foucault's writings on power and language. His methodology for understanding power and resistance against it helps to demonstrate how discursive shifts in defining rape and rape culture have been a useful starting place for resistance. Ultimately, the aim of this discussion is to emphasize how the term "rape culture", which was catapulted into the popular lexicon in part as a result of the 2012 Steubenville rape, has become a crucial tool in discursive resistance to rape and therefore is a worthy topic for further academic inquiry.

**Keywords** Steubenville ; rape culture ; Foucault ; feminism ; social media ; mobile technologies.

**Acknowledgments** I would like to express my thanks to Brian A. Brown and Daniela Mastrocola for their suggestions and advice. This research has been funded in part by an Ontario Graduate Scholarship.

## 1. Introduction

This paper will explore the case of "Jane Doe", a sixteen-year old girl who was raped[1] at a party in Steubenville, Ohio, in 2012. This case and the resulting social media frenzy invite us to ask fundamental questions about rape culture and the subjectivities of rapists. I analyze this event and feminist online activism against rape culture through the lens of Foucault's writings on power and language. His method for understanding power and resistance against it helps to demonstrate the importance of defining and identifying rape culture.

I begin with a summary of the case in Steubenville, drawing from the media coverage of the event.[2] I consider the apparent tensions that arise in defining power as it relates to violence, and to rape, as a gendered crime. I provide a preliminary overview of some of Foucault's thinking on violence and power, and some of the tensions that arise when it is compared to some prominent feminist scholarship (see for example, Buchwald et al., 1993). Foucault's arguments have merit because they may help both individuals and collectives to desexualize rape, and potentially contribute to a reduction in victim blaming. However, ultimately I believe his views do not sufficiently take into account systemic gender inequalities and the resulting vulnerability of women. I also consider Foucault's understanding of the panoptic dimensions of power, and how this might apply to rape culture. Finally, I explore this idea in the context of understanding rapist subjectivities. Ultimately, the aim of this discussion is to emphasize how the term "rape culture", which was catapulted into the popular lexicon in part as a result of the 2012 Steubenville rape, has become a crucial tool in discursive resistance to rape. This individual incident of rape is a critical one to consider because it represents a watershed moment, where the ubiquity of social media and mobile technologies gave testimony to the commonplaceness of sexual violence.

## 2. The Case of "Jane Doe"

In August 2012, members of the Steubenville High School football team sexually assaulted a 16-year-old girl at a party. This type of story is unfortunately not uncommon, but it caused international headlines because of the unique role played by emerging media technologies. Over the course of that night, partygoers sent texts about the assault, and

[1] The terms "rape" and "sexual assault" each carry legal definitions that vary depending on jurisdictional areas. The term "sexual assault" was introduced to recognize that many sexual assaults do not manifest as male-and-female sexual intercourse. For the purposes of this article, however, both terms should be taken to mean any act of sexual violence.

[2] I have used salient examples from media coverage because this paper reflects not only on the events that occurred, but also on the textual discourse surrounding the rape and what that means for our understanding of rape culture. The Tweets selected in this paper were reproduced in the media and hold a significant place in the ensuing dialogue.

uploaded a plethora of jokes and photos to the Internet. While some of them seemed not to fully understand that a crime was being committed,[3] others used words like "rape" almost casually. Scores of comments, videos and photos were uploaded and sent. This documentation of the crime later became irrefutable evidence used in the trial of the two young men who were accused, and ultimately convicted. Images and videos from the assault went viral. The public reaction was intense: How could these young men be so divorced from understanding the severity of their crime that they had allowed and been complicit to its taping? How was it that no one intervened?

One of the young men present, Cody Saltsman, posted a photo to social media of the victim[4] being dragged around by her hands and feet, her head flopping to one side. His Tweet "I have no sympathy for whores" (Baker, 2013) was among many that emerged from that night. This and other viral Tweets demonstrate how smartphones have changed the landscape:

> *Fifteen years ago, Richmond and Mays [the two men convicted] would have escaped suspicion: before smartphones and Twitter, rumors floated around high schools and then dissipated, often before adults knew what was real and what was adolescent imagination (Levy, 2013).*

Social media was not only important for its role as a new type of watchdog for a crime, it also made the concept of "rape culture" difficult to ignore. Feminist activists and academics have been arguing for years that rape is not an isolated problem, committed by a few sociopaths at the fringe of civilized society. In the words of influential feminist bell hooks, "We live in a culture that condones and celebrates rape. (…) Rape and sexual harassment are therefore not accidental to the structure of gender relations within a sexist order" (hooks, 1993, p.353). The very recognition of hooks' point – the systemic, gendered nature of this crime – challenges common rape myths and allows the concept of "rape culture" to make headway. At the forefront of this is a critical discussion of power dynamics.

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[3] Because the victim was unconscious, the crime lacked the "violence" many youth associate with rape (Levy, 2013).

[4] First, out of respect for the victim, I have made the personal and considered decision not to reproduce the photo in this paper. Second, a discussion of the terms "victim" and "survivor": Neither term can possibly take into account the individual preference of a person who has been raped, the psychological effect the crime has had on her, or her individual process of healing. However, I do not hesitate to use the word "victim" because in general we do not hesitate to describe victims of non-sexual assaults as such. To me, this directly ties in to perceiving victims of sexual assault, like any other crime, as free of any responsibility for what has happened to them. However I also acknowledge that the word "survivor" may be preferable because it implies agency on the part of the victim. Therefore, both terms are used.

## 3. Violence or Power?

Foucault's discussion of rape and power has the potential to provide meaningful insights for resistance to rape culture. He states quite boldly that rape is a crime of violence, not power. For him, power can only be exercised on "free people, and only insofar as they are free" (1982, p. 790). Violence, therefore, is not a relationship of power. This rests in part on the way he perceives freedom:

> *By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole, there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains (1982, p. 790).*

By this logic, the violence and physical overpowering of the victim in the crime of rape would not be an exercise of power. A person being raped is not making a choice; she is having force exercised against her, in one form or another – Jane Doe's state of unconsciousness was used as a weapon to overpower her. Certainly, from this standpoint rape does not fit into a Foucauldian definition of power (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 745). Foucault, like some feminist activists, also argued for the desexualizing of the way we view the crime of rape – to see it as we might see any other physical assault. In fact, he likened rape to a punch in the face, arguing that it differed only in its severity (Henderson, 2007, p. 225). This statement may have some merit in that it may help victims to come to terms with what has happened to them. It may also contribute to cultural understandings of victimhood as blame-free.

The difficulty with considering rape as a sexual crime is the baggage that so often accompanies sexuality. By considering rape as violence only, and not sex, we may be able to more fully comprehend and communicate that the victim did not ask for, or in any way encourage, what was done to her. Of course, the idea of desexualizing rape remains highly contentious, and stands in stark opposition to arguments of many feminist scholars, such as McKinnon:

> *Violence is sex when it is practiced as sex. If violation of the powerless is part of what is sexy about sex, as well as central in the meaning of male and female, the place of sexuality in gender and the place of gender in sexuality need to be looked at together (1987, p. 6).*

For McKinnon, the derivation of pleasure from exercising power cannot be removed from the crime. Foucault's declaration that violence is not an exercise of power is also deeply undermined by the overwhelming cultural prevalence of rape, which is evidence of the power that continues to be exercised by men over women. This truth cannot be ignored since, for Foucault, a key to understanding power is the examination of the resistance against it. The first point of his methodology for understanding power is the study of the "opposition to

the power of men over women" (1982, p. 780). Foucault requires the acknowledgement and examination of disciplinary mechanisms of power. When we begin to look at rape as a systemic, cultural issue, as has been asserted continually by feminists, it is impossible to ignore that it reinforces and feeds into the oppression faced by women. Foucault provides us with a powerful analogy for coming to terms with it.

## 4. The Panopticon: Rape Culture as a Mechanism of Power

Foucault uses the metaphor of the Panopticon, a circular prison with a central watchtower, to describe surveillance as a mechanism of power. By the effect of backlighting, all of the prisoners are visible to the center, but cannot see into the watchtower. Foucault sees this as a metaphor for disciplinary power within society:

> *The perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary (…) this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).*

Rape culture creates a panoptic situation for women who fear not surveillance but violence. The prevalence of rape, the victim blaming, the warnings about stranger rape, acquaintance rape, and date rape – all create a situation in which the threat of violence is very real, and the fear of it is justified. Of course, women are not the only victims of sexual assault. Men do experience sexual assault, often perpetrated by other men, as do children, and women are sometimes perpetrators. This is not a minor point.[5] Nonetheless, the prevalence of sexual assault as a gendered crime, committed by men against women, places women in a particular position of vulnerability:

> *(…) the systematic violation of women and children, in particular but not exclusively by the men (in particular but not exclusively) who have gained power over them, has been, can be and will be continued without disturbing the social order (Benton, 2013, p. 227).*

Although men can be victimized, most men are not raised to fear rape. Women, for the most part, are (Miller & Biele, 1993, p. 53). While individual rapes may be understood to be crimes of violence and the motives and circumstances may vary, rape culture creates a panoptic relationship of power: "(…) the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is a diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its

[5] There is much validity to feminist arguments insisting on the importance of valuing the knowledge of victims, and this must apply to all victims. The experience of men and children as victims of sexual violence as certainly worthy of further academic inquiry, however it is tangential to the present study which seeks to further understand the experience of women residing within a cultural epidemic of sexual violence.

ideal form" (Foucault, 1977, p. 205). Fear of sexual assault can thus be understood as a mechanism of power exercised against women:

> *"Rape culture" is the term for a whole set of attitudes that further a society in which rape is inevitable, consent is invisible, and victims are blamed instead of supported. Obscuring the reality of the crime of rape — ultimately de-emphasizing rapists' actions in favor of blaming alcohol, short skirts, "hook up culture," or the rise of social media — is one of those problematic attitudes (Culp-Ressler, 2013).*

For women, this panopticism is often subtle and impossible to escape. Some groups of women are especially vulnerable, such as women of colour, queer women, and women with disabilities. Recognizing the power imbalance does not change it. The understandable result is education campaigns that instruct women on how to avoid rape, and these can feed back into rape culture; there is a fine line between instructing women on how to avoid rape and blaming them if it occurs.[6] Fear plays a part in the formation of women's identities and lives; at the same time, entitlement to women's bodies and objectification of them is normalized for men.

## 5. Understanding Power: Asking the Hard Questions about Rapist Subjectivities

By demonstrating that rape is prevalent, that women are not "asking for it", and by challenging the myth of the strangers in dark alleys, the resistance against rape culture asks us to come to terms with an uncomfortable truth: Rapists are among us. They can be our friends and our brothers and our fathers. Sexual assault is an uncomfortable lens through which to come to terms with our subjectivities.

Hanna provides a useful summary of the way in which Foucault applies the term "subjectivity": a way of describing the subtle and cumulative effects of structures of power on the construction of the self (2013, p. 658). This definition has extraordinary potential for helping us understand the power dynamic that creates and maintains rape culture. It is critical for helping us understand the prevalence and seeming normalization of violent and sexual crimes against women. Gendered violence, while certainly never justifiable, is not a surprising consequence of being surrounded by a culture that constantly demeans, objectifies and dehumanizes women. That men begin to feel entitled to our bodies, and do not take violence against women seriously, is perhaps to be expected under these circumstances.

This attitude of entitlement is clear in footage from Steubenville, such as a cell phone video uploaded to Youtube the night of the rape, but

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[6] Many feminist activists have responded to this issue by creating campaigns targeted at men (See for example, "Don't Be That Guy," 2011).

later removed, in which football player Michael Nodianos describes the rape, laughing (Harkinson, 2013):

> *"You don't need any foreplay with a dead girl", he says. He is laughing uncontrollably, as are several other boys in the room. "She's deader than O.J.'s wife. She's deader than Caylee Anthony", he continues. "They raped her harder than that cop raped Marcellus Wallace in 'Pulp Fiction'. She is so raped right now". Nodianos keeps on riffing, and his audience keeps on laughing, for more than twelve minute (Levy, 2013).*

It is also not surprising that the media coverage was widely indicative of rape culture. Many reports were criticized in social media for the ways in which they blamed the victim and sympathized with the rapists (Goodale, 2013). Both the media coverage, and the ubiquity of footage of the crime, aided and abetted by its perpetrators, speak to a culture in which victims are routinely ridiculed and blamed, and in which women are taught to live in fear.

## 6. Conclusion

The Steubenville case was an important catalyst for discourse in social media about the very existence of rape culture. Charges have also been laid in connection with another, earlier rape at a football party that received far less coverage (Macur, 2013). The revelation of this prior incident only reinforces the feminist message: These incidents are not isolated, but arise from a systematic cultural acceptance of rape.

Foucault's methodology may have great value for survivors and communities as we grapple with endemic violence against women. His attempts to conceptually desexualize violence may have great merit for victims in allowing them to separate the violence they have experienced from their sexuality, let go of undeserved feelings of guilt, and form their subjectivities separately from violence. However, his ideas about the connection between power and violence may prove too simplistic. There seems to be an inherent contradiction therein. If one insists that violence is not power, how does one acknowledge the pervasiveness of rape culture, and its role in disciplinary mechanisms of power exercised over women? To understand rape, we must take into account the voices of women living in fear. Understanding power means we can no longer consider individual rapes in isolation, but must instead recognize the deeper cultural disciplinary mechanisms that allow them to occur systemically.

In considering the gendered Panopticon of fear created by violence against women, the ubiquity of social media has become a key element, which with women must now also contend. It seems clear that Jane Doe's perpetrators would never have been brought to justice (such as it was) without social media. It seems equally clear that social media, by extending the types of space in which power relations operate, has the potential to become a sort of electronic Panopticon (Albrechtslund,

2008), in which women feel we must tread with caution. This space may carry its own set of implications for women, especially survivors of sexual violence, as a space in which we must potentially deal further with perpetrators and victim blaming. These technologies cannot be considered as neutral because they operate within a context of broader systemic violence and power over women. They may, however, as was evidenced by the backlash against the Steubenville media coverage, also carry extraordinary potential for resistance.

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