

MEDIA COVERAGE OF “GRASSROOTS” VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

A comparative analysis for Romania
and Canada

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VALENTINA MARINESCU

*University of Bucharest-Faculty of Sociology and Social Work,
Romania*

ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a comparative project about the re-construction of acts of violence against women and children in Canadian and Romanian newspapers. The data showed both the similarities and the differences between Eastern European and Western American images of women. The data stressed that although violence against women and children is a world-wide social phenomena, its media “coverage” was strongly dependent on the peculiarities of the society in which it has occurred, and has a national character. A common trend of the journalistic texts was recorded at a trans-national level: to (implicitly) disseminate stereotypes related to the women’s first degree and socially-accepted positions of helpless victims of violent acts.

Key-Words: Discourse analysis; violence; mass media; stereotype; women.

INTRODUCTION

The present article started from the preeminence and widespread of the social issue of violence against women and children in the entire world and focused on two countries: Romania and Canada.

We take as granted the fact that “violence” is a common social fact which has the same shapes irrespectively of the place where it occurs. We assume that in the case of the same violent act-for example, a murder of a child, the Canadian and Romanian media will present two different stories. Because any news is shaped (and less discovered) by the journalists, the stake of our project was to deconstruct the ways in which news about violence against women and children were made, make clear what were the similarities and differences in the images of the violent acts and in the portrayal of the individuals (women and children) involved in them.

The main research hypothesis of the present article is:

The typology of covering violent acts against women and children in the case of Romanian newspapers will be very different from the typology of the same phenomena in the case of the Canadian press.

The present article will attempt to show how the mediatisation of violent acts against women is embedded in some more complex mechanisms of interplaying factors including the use of journalistic devices in presenting crime news, the employment of legitimate sources in defining violent situation and the social stereotypes reproduced through media's discourse.

Theoretical framework

As the general framework of the present article we consider the social constructivist theories of violence and the media, more exactly, the social constructivists' perspective according to which human knowledge is constructed from language and words that give meaning to human experience and objective reality in concert with their social, political, and cultural environments (Greene, 1994; Payne, 1997). The individual constructs his/her own meaning of the real world based on shared norms, values and experience. Green (1984; 115–116) suggests that:

Culture thus is not recognized as a monolithic stereotype of groups of people. Attempts to draw broad cultural pictures of people's do injustice to any particular individual who does not match this stereotyped version of a culture.

Different interpretative repertoires can construct different versions of the same event. Referring to that Willing (2001:95) gives the following examples:

A newspaper article may refer to young offenders as 'young tear-aways', while a defending lawyer may describe his or her client as 'no-hope-kids'. The former construction emphasises the uncontrollability of young offenders and implies the need for strict parenting and policing, whereas the latter draws attention to the unmet psychological and educational needs of young offenders and importance of social and economic deprivation.

In the case of media and violence the focus of social constructivists' research was understanding and explaining the media's role in “primary defining” a social event as “violent” in a given society. In this case it was argued that the news-making process is not random, and many variables influence the type of information the public receives. As Surette (1998: 62) showed, news reports about crime are:

...neither a pure picture of society nor a fully controlled propaganda message, but is instead an organizational product controlled by a few key individuals.

The crime news (violent acts) is, as such, a “social construct” made from (Surette, 1998:61):

...the coupling of two information processing systems-one being news agencies, the other the government.

What determines how crime news are constructed has been the subject of intense investigation. Despite the varying perspectives or emphasis, it is the agreement that the construction of crime news serves purposes other than the factual (or statistical) portrayal of crime that is most relevant. In a series of studies in the late 1980s Ericson et al. (1987, 1989, 1991) argued that media representations of crime serve the purpose of constructing and reinforcing a sense of “order” which serves a range of institutional and cultural interests. In presenting a violent story, the journalists act less like a “simple” sender of a social fact and more as a gatekeeper: on the basis of “newsworthiness” core-value he/she has to select information from various sources, to re-construct and to deliver it as news to the audience. Generally speaking, the professional routines lead the journalists to search the information first at the sources which have, in their opinion, the power to “define” the situation and to “frame” it-the socially-recognized sources. Traditionally, journalists have reported crime and violence from a law enforcement or criminal justice point of view (Stevens, 1998). In particular, the research on media-violence relation (Barak, 1988, 1994; Chermak, 1994, 1997; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, 1989, 1991; Fishman, 1978; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Humphries, 1981; Kidd-Hewitt & Osborne, 1995; Surette, 1992) show that mediated information about crime is commonly traced to government sources; namely, political leaders, law enforcement officials, and other state managers. By occupying elevated positions within the hierarchy of credibility, politicians and government officials enjoy the privilege of offering to the media primary-and self-serving-definitions of crime (Becker, 1967, 1973). As a result of this social arrangement, the media afford political and government leaders valuable opportunities for advancing a criminal justice agenda that serves the state’s political, ideological, and economic interests by generating public support, legitimizing power, and garnering funds for resources and manpower (Fishman, 1978; Hall et al., 1978; Kasinsky, 1994).

Research examining gender and crime has consistently indicated

that most crimes involve male offenders and victims. Cases involving females are rare; thus, when they occur, they are perceived to be more newsworthy and are more likely to receive media coverage (Chermak, 1995; Katz, 1987; Madriz, 1997; Naylor, 1995). In a particular study examining the reporting patterns of female offenders, Naylor (1995: 80) concluded that although female offenders constitute about 10% of the crimes reported to the police, they made up about one third of the violent cases reported in newspapers. Likewise, the gender of the victim plays an important role in the newsworthiness of the case for much of the same reason. Chermak (1995: 130) argues,

Society thinks females, like children, are more vulnerable and feels crimes committed against them are more newsworthy.

The cultural constructions of women and children’s images in the crime news emphasised the same set of values: as victims both categories are vulnerable and requiring the protection of “others” - adults’ protection, for the child, and men’s protection for the women (Archard 1993, Faith 1993, Meyers 1997). On television, women and children are depicted as being vulnerable to criminals, who are usually men. In television news, crime is the number one category of coverage, and crime news mirrors the television drama’s portraits of women (Surette 1998). Women, especially young white women, are overrepresented as victims in crime news (Chermak 1995; Surette 1998). The ways in which media present the violent acts and the social actors involved in them can, as such, convey the dominant stereotypes related to social identities for those two social groups: women and children (Lorber and Farrell 1991; West and Zimmerman 1987).

The research assumptions, the data set and methodology

We have used a qualitative methodology, starting from the thesis that any “discourse” is (A. Laramée, B. Valee, 1991: 264):

any statement which suppose a sender and a receiver, and in which case the first has the intent to influence in a certain degree the second.

Under such circumstances we understand discourse analysis as (D. Deacon, P. Golding, 1999: 147) an:

attempt to understand the systematic relations between texts, discursive practices and socio-cultural practices.

The purpose of the discourse analysis is to discover and makes clear the ways in which (D. Deacon, P. Golding, 1999: 310):

the power relations and structures are build into the daily language and, in that way, the way in which the language contributes at the legitimation of the social relations that exists and of the hierarchies of authority and control.

The methods of discourse analysis we had used in the present research project was that developed during the 1990's at the Loughborough University by D. Deacon and P. Golding. The clarity of the results and teir usefulness in a comparative research project were the main characteristics of the method that lead us to select it.

The sample of articles was made of six articles on violence against women theme published in the Canadian and Romanian newspapers. We decided to analyze two articles per month for the period of time 1 October -31 December 2006. The articles comprising this sub-sample are:

Cassette 1 – Headlines of the articles used as examples for the discourse analysis

Mother, daughters slain (*The Gazette*-15 October 2006)
Esclave a 6 ans (*La Presse*-4 November 2006)
Myriam Bedard arrete-« Elle est ou maman ? » (*Le Soleil*-24 December 2006)
Drama-The disappeared 2 years old boy was found in a fountain-Child killed by a beast (*Jurnalul National/The National Journal*-21 October 2006)
Parents who transform themselves into monsters-[She was] Raped with her mother's agreement (*Libertatea/The Freedom*-9 November)
Tragedy in Iasi: Another child had committed suicide for his parents' grief (*Adevarul/The Truth*-27 December 2006)

The newspapers from Romania were all central (that is, edited in the country's capital –Bucharest) and distributed nationwide: *Ziua (Free Romania)*, *Free Romania*, *Romania libera (Free Romania)*, *Adevarul (The Truth)*, *Jurnalul National (The National Journal)*, *Libertatea (The Freedom)* and *Gandul (The Thought)*. In the case of Canadian's newspapers only two were national-the National Post and the Globe and Mail- one was a provincial (from Quebec region)-*Le Soleil*- and three were local (city-based-from Montreal) titles-*La Presse*, *LeDevoir* and *The Gazette*. There

was not used any sampling procedure and the total number of daily copy for each title was considered.

Findings

The first similarity regarding the articles' relevance inside the “general structure” of that day was related to the fact that in all six cases the texts had known authors, identified by their name. Comparing the relations those articles have with other news that surrounded them we noticed a second similarity between the Canadian and Romanian “editorial logic”: in all cases the first page had an eclectic internal composition, and the same was true about the second page's structure for the only Romanian article placed in that situation. On the contrary, when the article on violence against women was placed inside the newspaper, the page on which it was edited had a homogenous character, the rest of the texts being related to it through their subject-matter that covered the general issue of violence-with a special emphasis on violence against women. For example, in the article analyzed from “*Le Soleil*” (Myriam Bedard arrete-« Elle est ou maman ? ») is thematically related with other texts placed in the second and third pages, due to the fact that all refer at the so-called “Myriam Bedard Case”. The second article important from the same page (Page 2) presents the position of Myriam Bedard's friend, Nima Mazhari, related to her's arrest (Nima Mazhari se defend-“Le FBI savait ou nous etions”), while on the third page there were edited also an article about the judiciary status of Myriam Bedard (Myriam Bedard arrete-Aucune ehappatoire-L'ex-championne olympique devra faire face a la justice, disent deux criminalistes) and another one covered her first days in prison (Un Noel en prison). In the case of Romanian article from “*Libertatea/The Freedom*” (Parents who transform themselves into monsters-[She was] Raped with her mother's agreement) it was accompanied on the same page by an article presenting the case of a boy which was beaten by his father (Boy brutally beaten by his father) and another one which covers the case of a baby born in a railway station ([She] Gave birth between the rails). All of them were, as such, related to the general theme of violence against women.

While the “editorial logic” of the newsroom seems to operate in the same manner irrespectively of the newspaper's geographical location (Canada vs. Romania) the question that could be addressed was: Why those information related to violence against women were choose to be covered in that “split” way-that is, by placing the beginning of the article on the first page? The structure of the “linguistic indices” showed another

similitude between the two types of newspapers: the appeal at feelings and emotions related to helpless individuals such were the children and women. The titles of articles used stylistically omission to transmit only information related to non-protected persons (Mother, daughters slain – “*The Gazette*”; Esclave a 6 ans – “*La Presse*”; [She was] Raped with her mother’s agreement – “*Libertatea/The Freedom*”). Also, both Canadian and Romanian headlines were in fact made of statements built on oppositions between simple words with “psychological” connotation – for example in the headline from “*Jurnalul National/The National Journal*” “child” was opposed to the noun “beast” and in the case of the title from “*Le Soleil*” the verb “arreter” (to stop) send the opposite information than the adverb of place “ou” (where). Finally, the introductory paragraphs of the Canadian and Romanian articles were written in the same alarming and personalized tone:

Table 1. – Examples of introductory paragraphs

<i>Le Soleil</i>	<i>Adevarul</i> (<i>The Truth</i>)
“Elle est ou maman?” La voix casse par l’emotion, la petite Maude s’interrogeait hier sur le sort de sa mere, la medaillee olympique Myriam Bedard, arretee la veille pour enlevement A l’autre bout du fil, sa grad-mere, tentait tant bine que mal de reconforter sa petite-fille qu’elle n’avait pas vue depuis six mois.	An 11 years child, who was under maternal assistance at a family from Mosna, the Iasi village, committed suicide last week. The maternal assistants of the child are still under shock and they have no explanation for the reasons that lead him to that act.

In that way both Canadian and Romanian articles from the beginning stressed the involvements of children and his/hers parents in the violent act presented by news (despite the fact that, for example, in the case of “*Le Soleil*”, the narration will stress other’s opinions).

The comparative analysis made on the “thematical structure of the article” pointed out the widespread use by the journalists of the so-called inverse “pyramid” of the news’ narration (D. Deacon, P. Golding, 1999: 170). In all six cases the “schemata” of the narration was sequential and it had implied a displacement from an initial “nucleus” toward a set of “contiguous” elements. The “nucleus” was made from a unique textual entity that is based on the sequential set: “Who, What, When, Where and Why”:

Table 2– The “schemata” of the narrations

	Who	What	When	Where	Why
<i>The Gazette</i>	Dragulob Tzokovitch – a psychologist	[He] Killed his wife and two daughters and committed suicide	A day before the publishing of the article	Beaconsfield (Montreal) Beaconsfield (Montreal)	Unknown reasons
<i>La Presse</i>	Mark Kwadwo – an under-aged boy	[He] Was sold as slave and obliged to work for his master	Three or four years ago	Kete Krachi-Ghana	The poverty of the families from the region
<i>Le Soleil</i>	Myriam Bedard – former Olympic champion	[She] Took her girl with her without the ex-husband consent	Three months ago	United States –Maryland	[She] Had infringed the right at double custody over her daughter due to the “birocratic terrorism” she denounced in the case of the Canadian authorities
<i>Libertatea/ The Freedom</i>	Marcel Ifteme	[He] Had raped a 13 years old girl, Liliana, with her’s mother consent	Four months ago	Ciocani village (Vaslui district)	The poverty of the girl’s family
<i>Jurnalul National/ The National Journal</i>	Ioan Lazar – the step-father of the victim	[He] Had kidnapped ad killed a 2 year boy	A week ago	Hanesti village (Botosani district)	Revenge against boy’s mother
<i>Adevarul/ The Truth</i>	Marian C – a 11 years boy	[He] Had committed suicide	Two days ago	Mosna village (Iasi district)	The grief for his parents that went abroad to work.

The contiguous elements were photos (present in five of six cases of articles analyzed) and the use of leads immediately after the headlines on the front pages of the newspapers analyzed.

The comparative analysis of the “discursive schemata” for each article allowed us to identify the set of adjacent elements of the texts that structured the “nucleus-news” in various shapes. The questions we addressed in that case were: Did the shapes of mixing the sources and “voices” presented in the articles differ from one country to another or not? And how can we explain the reasons of those differences or similarities?

The comparison among various ways of structuring the quotation of sources had revealed the main differences between the two types of newspapers. The Canadian articles had quoted a large amount of “normative” sources – the attorney, the advocate, the policemen, the jury, and the legal documents – while the Romanian ones minimize the appeal at this kind of “primary definers of the situation”, either as individuals or as institutions. To take as a comparative example the article from “*La Presse*” and that one from “*Libertatea/The Freedom*” we had noticed that in the case of the Romanian article the quotation of persons non-related to the normative/legal field (the Mayor of the Ciocani Village, the former teacher of the raped child, the mother of the girl and the aggressor) had priority in comparison with the position of the last type of sources (in the article was quoted only the policemen from Ciocani village). The situation was quite the opposite for the Canadian text, where the quotation of the persons who had advocated the position of legal institutions (either state’s institutions or NGOs) was preminent: The Representative for the children’s protection at UNICEF, the Director of the Surveillance and Fight against traffic of persons Department from the US State Department, the Ghana Representative of the International Organization of Migration, The Reports of the IOM, ILO etc.. It was clear that in the Canadian texts the journalists had applied the criteria of the “source preeminence” in assessing the newsworthiness of a social fact. Also, in the Canadian case, the stress put on the legal-official sources in the building of the article had stressed the hierarchical relevance of the news, the placement at the middle of the article of quotations from ILO, IOM reports suggesting their relevance as “key-indices” of the whole story.

The differences between two types of editing the articles on violence against women – and, as such, of rebuilding the women and children’s images in the media – had appeared also in the case of the quality of sources. Thus, even if the Canadian article had quoted in a less degree the

victims (three quotations of them) the simple fact that they were named while in the Romanian case the victim was only invoked, her words were re-phrased and she was always referred as “the child” or “the girl”.

Casette 2 – Differences in using the sources of various quality in Canadian and Romanian press

“ « Je n’aime pas ça ici », murmure-t-il suffisamment bas pour que sa remarque ne vienne pas jusqu’aux oreilles de Takyi. Mark Kwadwo a 6 ans. Faisant a peine un peu plus de 13 kg, l’enfant porte des sous-vêtements bleus et rouges et un t-shirt de la Petite Sirène. “ (*La Presse*)

“A terrible case took place in a Vaslui village. A girl aged only 13 years from Ciocani village was repeatedly raped by an ingeneer with her’s mother agreement. The women receive money and food in exchange of «selling» the girl”. (*Libertatea/The Freedom*)

The comparison between the “framing devices” used in both articles deepened the differences in journalistic styles. Thus, the Romanian article starts with three statements that resumed the whole story of the victim: “The nightmare of the child had begun in August this year. That time the girl was raped for the first time by Marcel Iftemie, an ex-engineer from the village. The repeated rapes had been made with her other’s agreement, the women receiving in exchange money and food from Iftemie”. Those statements precede and establish in fact the thematical structure of the article. The first quotation is that of the mayor from the village who stated an ambiguous position of non-involvement of the authorities. Next, the case is clarified through the introduction of a more specific statement of the Policemen from the village. In the case of the “*La Presse*” article the beginning is in fact an extensive description of the working day of the victim (here was introduced only one quotation of the boy) and the narrative structure of the article was in fact articulated starting from its middle, here being the point where a “bulk” of various official sources expressed their credible and expert opinions about the act of violence against children.

Table 3. - The sequences of stand-points presented in the Canadian and Romanian articles

Canada		Romania	
1	Specific description of the case	1	General presentation of the case
2	Mark Kwadwo-the victim	2	Ionel Munteanu-Mayor of the Ciocani village
3	International/general description of the case		Marinel Galca-Policemen from Ciocani village
	Report of the International Labour Organisation	3	Detailed presentation of the case
	Report of the International Labor Organization	4	Jana Spataru-mother of the victim
	Report of the UNICEF		Jenica Gherghescu-former teacher of the victim
	Pamela Shifman- Representative for the children's protection at UNICEF	5	Presentation of the aggressor's arresting
	John R Miller- Director of the Surveillance and Fight against traffic of persons Department from the US State Department	6	Marcel Iftemie-aggressor
4	General presentation of the Africa case		
5	Eric Peasah- Representative of the International Organization of Migration in Ghana		
	Amponsah Annan-Representative of the Ghana Government		
6	Specific presentation of the Ghana case		
7	Kwasi Twranim-the victim		
	Kwadwo Seako-the victim		
8	Specific presentation of the case		

The differences between Canadian and Romanian articles in the coverage of the violent acts against women had been, as such, based mainly on the use of peculiar journalistic devices and in the employment of very specific and national-oriented discourse strategies.

A similitude between the Canadian and Romanian articles laid in the

general vocabularies used that had enclosed families of words related to “thematical structures” already identified in relation to violence against women coverage in media:

1. Words that refer explicitly to the violent act (to kill, to rape, to commit suicide, to abandon);
2. Words that denote the actors involved in violent acts (girl, child, killer, aggressor, mother, father);
3. Words that constitute the normative vocabulary” (the court, the policemen, the advocate).

We noticed a difference between the semantics of the two types of articles that is the ways in which journalists employed the strategic devices of “objectivity” in news reporting. For example in the above-mentioned two articles (the article from “*La Presse*” and that from “*Libertatea/The Freedom*”), we could notice the procedure of direct quoting the victim in the Canadian article that was replaced in the Romanian case by the paraphrase of the victim’s words. Also, in the Canadian case the journalist had tried to offer the appearance of an objective general depiction of the case through the appeal at the scientific evidences, such were the quotations from ILO and IMO reports – a device that the Romanian article did not use.

Casette 3 – The use of scientific evidence in the Canadian case

“L’Organisation Internationale du Travail (OIT), un organisme de l’ ONU, estime que 1,2 million d’enfants sont vendus en esclavage chaque année dans le cadre d’un commerce illicite qui rapporte jusqu’a 10 milliards \$ US annuellement. Des études démontent que les enfants, les plus vulnérables se trouvent en Asie en Amérique latine et en Afrique” (*La Presse*)

Instead of those differences the similarities in the use of the linguistic devices in both types of articles were: the employment of related the narrative ordering and of analogous ways of framing the quoted sources (even if the accent was put each time on other element of the story: the victim or the normative elements).

The comparison between the “key-statements” (the macro-discursive procedures) generally employed in the two types of articles had revealed to us another dissimilarity, which is worth to illustrate on the basis of the same two articles (from “*La Presse*” and “*Libertatea/The Freedom*”). Thus, while in the Canadian case the journalist had successfully equilibrate the narrative-formula of a traditional story (the presentation of the case, expert opinions about it and the return at the initial case) in the Romanian article the final part of the article did not represent a return

to the initial presentation of the case, but an open-end (where there was no presentation of the case but the aggressor's quotation). From the point of view of the reports between the "macro" and "micro" indices the Canadian articles seemed to be more attentive to the fact that many people did not read the entire article, but mainly the essential parts (the beginning, something from the middle and the end) and tried to articulate their discourse in a "common-sense" way. On the contrary, the Romanian ways of "telling the story" about violent acts against women was more similar with television series, due to their open-ends.

Conclusions

The results of our analysis showed a series of similarities in the newspapers' articles and they are in line with some Carrll's observations (Carrll, 2003):

...there appears to be a commonly-held impression that...violence against women is less significant than other forms of violence.

Our general findings lead at the empirical invalidation of the research hypothesis. The similarities recorded between the two national articles indicated a common "typology" of reporting about violence against women and children in the case of Canadian and Romanian newspapers, and not substantial differences among them. In presenting the acts of violence against women, the Canadian and Romanian newspapers tend to follow the same "editorial logic": the stress put on the dramatic and personalized characteristics of a violent event involving women and children, the mediatisation of the individual (and not collective) actors in such acts. In both countries analyzed the event which displays in a higher degree those characteristics could have more chances to attract media's attention, to be considered as "newsworthy" and, consequently, it was very possible that this event (and not other) to be rebuilt by the journalists as news or article regarding violent issue.

Our analysis also pointed out the fact journalists employed had embedded in their texts a set of socially- constructed myths and stereotypes about women and children. Those myths referred at the second-order rank attributed to news whose subjects were women and children and to the status of passive victims in which women and children were in general portrayed both in the Canadian and Romanian press.

At a very general level the comparative qualitative results seem to indicate the fact that the media coverage in Romania had used in a greater degree the myth of "blaming" of victim than was the case with

the Canadian texts. The main “linguistic” device employed in this case was the minimal quotation of the victims and of the legal elements involved in the violent acts. A possible and tentative decoding of the victims’ portrayal send in those articles was that of the individuals who only suffered the consequences of a violent act made by others and had no means to retort in a normal way. On the other hand, the “balanced” approach employed in the Canadian texts on violence against women was thwarted by the “impersonal” character of media coverage. If in the Romanian case women seemed to be helpless individuals exposed to particular acts of violence, in the Canadian case the victim were also portrayed in a subordinate position in relation to some abstract entities such as the state’s institutions or the social and legal norms.

The general significance of our results result at the comparative level could be expressed, in our opinion, in that general way: Despite the differences among various types of journalisms (Canadian vs. Romanian) the media re-build social reality in a rather homogenous, trans-national way. Regarding the issue of violence against women this had lead to a “retreat” from the “advocacy”-type journalism to a more comfortable of non-involvement position. In fact, media that way only reproduce and perpetuate (as we had tried to show in our analysis) the general myths and stereotypes associated with women and children as victims of the violent acts. The much-invoked “media objectivity”, that exists at the first glance, had proved to disguise journalistic discourse procedures that reinforced the existing social divisions between the powerful and helpless individuals (women and children being part of the last group).

In spite of the fact that in each case there were generally presented social facts (the rape, the killing, the abuse of a person, the bad treatment of the children, the traffic of the human beings) each national press re-build the reality in its own way, stressing either the spectacular, dramatic, personalized elements involved in the violent acts against women (this was the case with the Romanian newspapers) or the normative and legal constituents of those social facts (the Canadian articles case).

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Valentina Marinescu is a professor at University of Bucharest-Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, Romania. E-mail: valentina.marinescu@yahoo.com