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Framing of Sex Trafficking Articles in Two Newspapers in 2015

Introduction

The media, like newspapers, influences public discussion and action in all matters – specifically, human sex trafficking. Human sex trafficking, a form of modern sex slavery, is closer to home and a larger problem than many realize. Movies like “Taken” where a girl is abducted by sex traffickers while on vacation overseas, news stories and books like “Whistleblower” that cover the UN’s involvement in sex trafficking in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the idea of the epidemic of sex trafficking around major events like the Super Bowl, shed the light on part of the problem in particular.

Sex trafficking is described as the sexual exploitation of women and girls, even though it happens to boys and men as well. Through the lens of human trafficking, sex trafficking is described as “the recruitment, transportation, or harboring of persons through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of sexual exploitation” (unodc.org). Globally, it’s estimated that 4.5 million people are imprisoned in forced sexual exploitation (ilo.org). Commercial sexual exploitation includes prostitution (either women choosing it or controlled by a pimp), sex tourism, mail-order brides (woman joins a service to set her up with a man from a more wealthy country), child sex trafficking, etc.

Human trafficking happens everywhere – despite popular belief. It’s not just a foreign concept; sex trafficking occurs in the United States. With so many victims of sex trafficking (accounted for and unaccounted for), accurate and fair representation is

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

needed for the lives lost, the lives suffering, and the lives that could be prevented from such a struggle.

Research Question

I've previously studied what area of coverage – human sex trafficking, other types of trafficking, and human trafficking stated broadly – is covered the most in *The New York Times* in 2015. It was a quantitative study (2016) to discover which types of trafficking were covered the most in an international news source. Of all the articles published in 2015, only 126 articles related to human trafficking – with human trafficking stated broadly published most (75), then sex trafficking (38), and other types (13) (Finn p.3). After this conclusion, I wanted to further my research on human trafficking but take a different spin on what to research.

My research question is: How does online coverage of framing issues on sex trafficking compare from a conservative news source, *The Arizona Republic*, to a liberal news source, *The Denver Post*, in 2015? I reduced my research topic to just sex trafficking, as sex trafficking is covered more than other types of human trafficking. This time around I looked at two local newspapers – papers that mostly cover local and national news – and with local papers, I was likely to have more material on sex trafficking to study.

Literature Review

Framing in terms of sex trafficking can lead readers to see those trafficked, those who buy sex, and those who traffic differently, reinforce harmful stereotypes, and spread myths.

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

Robert Entman, a professor of media and public affairs, examined the idea of framing and how it relates to studying media content. Entman (1993) found that frames define problems, suggest causes, make moral judgments, and offer remedies. When defining and showcasing these four aspects, one selects a specific perspective, or “perceived reality,” in a piece of work (p. 52). The “communicator” either decides consciously or unconsciously to frame a text in a certain way by including key words or phrases, images, or sources of information. All in all, framing selects certain aspects of an idea or story, uses those aspects to “construct an argument about problems and their causation, evaluation, and/or solution” (p. 53).

The most commonly mentioned cause was criminal activity (Berman 2003; Friedman, Johnson, Schafer 2014; Gulati 2011). According to Berman (2003), stories on Eastern European women described the trafficked women themselves as criminal figures, creating the criminalization of the women as being “passive victims of their crimes” (p. 41). With the mass media focusing on criminalization of the trafficked persons, not only does this framing hurt the potential understanding of the issue of trafficking, but also hurts and misrepresents the victims themselves. Articles that should discuss immigration and border control, instead, are reframed as criminal cases (Berman).

In many news outlets, careless and incorrect reporting perpetuates myths of the trafficking enterprise. Feingold (2005) examined news headlines about human trafficking and debunked the issues. Weitzer (2007) surveyed anti-trafficking groups and their ability to exaggerate statistics and cases to attract public attention and outrage to create solutions. When these organizations do so, they end up with “exaggerated, unverifiable,

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

or demonstrably false” declarations that could possibly lead to imprudent policy decisions (p. 458). With mindless reporting, victims could be misrepresented, issues could be taken out of proportion and wrong framing could lead to miscommunication and misrepresented facts and preventions.

Similar to the cause most mentioned, official sources, such as law enforcement and policymakers, were sourced the most and victims were rarely sourced (Friedman, Johnson, Schafer 2014; Gulati 2011; Cwikel and Hoban 2010). The victim may not want to speak out because of fear of harm to them or their loved ones, fear of being ostracized, shame of their experience, etc. However, not sharing that view of the victim allows others “to fill the gap in the news coverage” (Friedman et al., p. 431). A victim’s perspective is pertinent in maintaining a certain frame, or specifically a non-negative frame. This way, the victim can give agency to his or her own experience (Friedman et al.).

Raymond (2001) conducted a study of trafficked women in five countries – Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Venezuela, and the U.S. – and found nine causes for the increased problem of trafficking worldwide. Some of these nine causes include the switch from state-owned services to private causing women to supply the services themselves and move for family survival; the sex industry has become more globalized by sex tourism; society’s constant reminder of men’s “need” for sex and the media coverage of women’s sexual exploitation increasing the demand; “the exotic is the erotic” mindset for foreign women; etc. In Friedman’s et al. (2014) study, causes that were found like crime-focused articles or policy/legislation articles were also read through to identify a deeper cause of sex trafficking (i.e. Raymond’s study). If one or many of the nine

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

factors are found in an article, it puts the author's, or communicator's "unconscious or conscious framing judgments" in the piece (Entman 1993, p. 52).

All the research that came before my study helped to shape what I am either coding for or expecting in the results. Throughout many of the studies, I found inaccurate reporting of trafficking through media, crime as the number one topic, or frames that allowed the readers to perpetuate the myths or information that they had previously known about trafficking. In my study, I based my research off of one study in particular – which is listed in the next section – but kept in mind all the research and findings from previous studies.

Methodology

This study, a qualitative analysis study, analyzes the coverage and framing of sex trafficking in two local newspapers, *The Arizona Republic* and *The Denver Post*, from January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2015. The articles were gathered from the archives of both newspapers. The articles included were from the printed newspaper found on the online database for *The Arizona Republic* and were from LexisNexis Academic database for *The Denver Post*.

I examined every article published in the year of 2015 with the key words, "sex trafficking," from the two newspaper organizations. *The Arizona Republic* had 29 articles between January 2015 and December 2015 while *The Denver Post* had 34 articles. The types of stories examined include a news story, a feature, or an opinion piece (including opinion commentary).

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

My research is based off of Friedman's et al. (2012) where they analyzed coverage of sex trafficking in U.S. newspapers and broadcast stations in 2009. For time purposes, I only looked at two newspapers. My coding sheet is based off of their coding sheet. I noted if the article described the trafficked persons as adults (women, men), minors (girls, boys), both, or no age mentioned. As there are four top issues mentioned in regards to trafficking, if the article presented issues such as crime, policy/legislation, human rights (a.k.a. cultural, economic, and political rights), public health, and other, it was noted. If there are any comments in the article that minimize or attempt to counter concerns about sex trafficking, I checked off any themes that were present in the article that do so, including: sex trafficking is not a large scale issue, the government and others overestimate the human trafficking figures, it's a mistake to allocate law enforcement to prevent sex trafficking, some women choose to be prostitutes and are not sex slaves, we can't really combat sex trafficking anyway, other, and no theme present.

One code, which must be explicitly mentioned, defines what the story is focused on. This code includes if it's covering an event or an occurrence (i.e. an arrest, trial); profiles or experiences of an individual; ties sex trafficking to a larger society; health, law enforcement, legislative or government agency problem; includes background information on the issue of sex trafficking; offers multiple perspectives (i.e. counter, neutral, and similar perspectives); or other. The sources that were cited throughout the article, whether through paraphrasing, a direct quote, or just any information attributed by a source were listed. Sources include law enforcement, government officials, social

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

workers, advocate/advocacy groups, victims/trafficked persons, traffickers (or through their spokesperson), witness/non-experts, experts, other, or none present.

To identify causes of the problem, like how Entman describes in his framing theory (1993), I first examined to see if there was any cause of sex trafficking mentioned. If so, I checked off all that applied: economic policies of globalization (i.e. poverty), internet making sex trafficking more easy and accessible (i.e. sex industry more globalized), women's inequality and economic dependence on the man of the household, commodification of women's bodies as sexual objects and prizes, child sexual abuse, stereotype that the "exotic is the erotic" (i.e. demand for foreign women to enter prostitution), war or military conflict demanding troops access to women sexual services, restrictive immigration policies not offering job opportunities, or other. The last question I observed was if there were remedies mentioned for the problem. If solutions and remedies were mentioned, I checked off all that applied: increased punishments for traffickers; increased punishments for sex workers; increased punishments for the johns (the ones that pay for the sex); better coordination of efforts among policy, law and advocates; legislation or policy changes; promotion of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that work on prevention efforts; training healthcare workers to recognize trafficking victims and/or to provide special care; training and/or resource allocation for law enforcement to combat and prevent the problem; and other.

With the two newspapers, I analyzed the difference of coverage and framing between a (slightly) liberal news source, *The Denver Post*, and a conservative news source, *The Arizona Republic*. It's determined which is liberal and which is conservative

based on the most dominant political views of each state and the cities the papers are located in.

Findings

From January to December 2015, sex trafficking was present in 29 of *The Arizona Republic's* articles and 34 of *The Denver Post's* articles. There is no comparative statistic of how many articles were published in total in *The Arizona Republic* or *The Denver Post*, as it was too impossible of a task to calculate the total. However, just imagining that both newspapers are pretty sizable for their collective states and cities, one can imagine that thousands of articles are published in a year.

The Arizona Republic had most of its sex trafficking articles published in January at nine articles, with February coming in second at five articles, shown in Figure 1. A

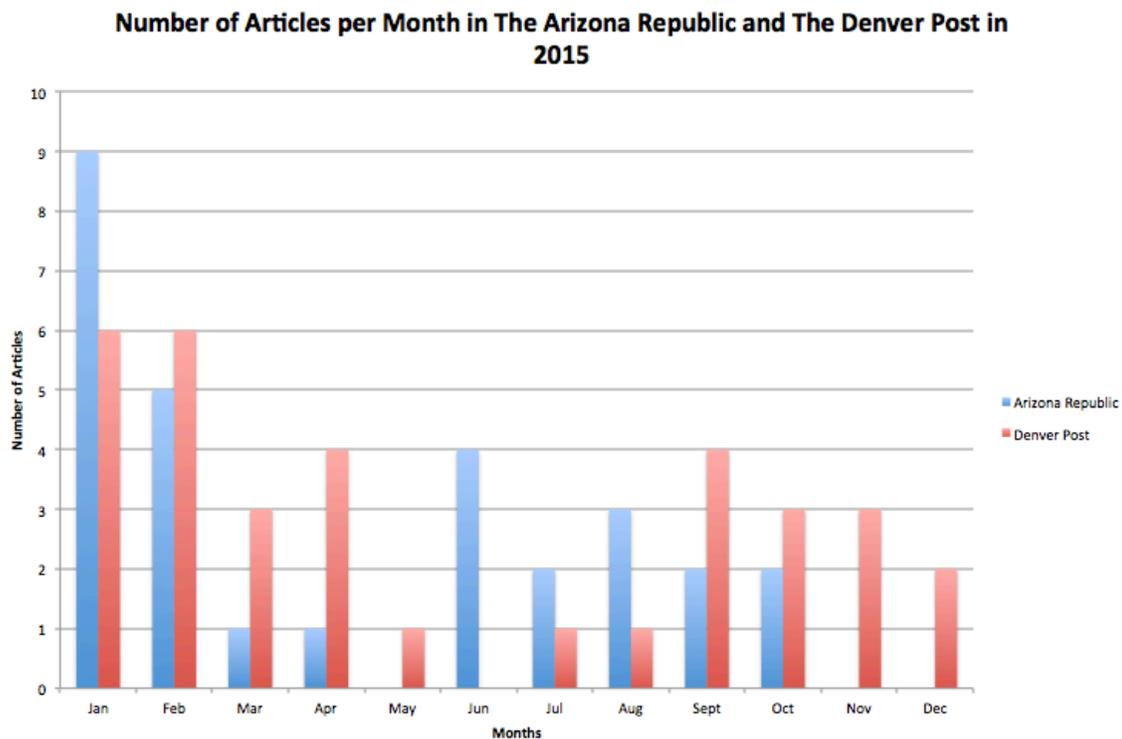


Figure 1: Chart above shows number of articles per month in *The Arizona Republic* and *The Denver Post* in 2015.

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

reason for this could be that the Super Bowl in 2015 was held at the Arizona Cardinal's football stadium. With the stigma around the Super Bowl and sex trafficking, many of the articles were on that idea and issue. For *The Denver Post*, the articles were more leveled out, however, there were still the most sex trafficking articles in January and February at six articles each, shown in Figure 1. There didn't seem to be any link between the articles published in January and February in *The Denver Post*.

Some of the articles I came across in both *The Arizona Republic* and *The Denver Post*, under the code word, "sex trafficking," included sex trafficking very briefly – only in passing. There were only five articles that mentioned sex trafficking briefly in *The Arizona Republic* and three articles in *The Denver Post*. Meaning, sex trafficking was just mentioned briefly as one of someone's crimes that they had committed (i.e. John Doe has been previously charged with child pornography, sex trafficking, and robbery), as a problem in reference to another problem (i.e. immigration and sex trafficking linked), a focus on an event that touches on sex trafficking, etc. I did include these in my study only because even the slightest mention of sex trafficking could have the readers thinking about such an act.

Most of the 29 *Arizona Republic* articles were news stories – either long or briefs (65.5%), opinions – either commentaries or long-form (24.1%), and features (6.9%). *The Denver Post* also mostly consisted of news stories (91.2%), opinion pieces (8.8%), and no features. The victims of sex trafficking in the *Arizona Republic* were identified as adults in 20.7% of the articles, minors in 13.8% of the articles, as both minors and adults in 27.6% of the articles and did not mention any particular age in the articles at 37.9%.

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

For *The Denver Post*, minors were identified in the articles at 44.1% - including boys and girls, adults in 5.9% of articles, both adults and minors in 11.8% of articles, and no age mentioned in 23.5% of articles. In five of the articles at *The Denver Post*, boys were mentioned. No boys were mentioned in *The Arizona Republic*. Four of the five articles that mentioned boys as sex trafficking victims in *The Denver Post* were all the same extension of stories – same arrest, just the follow-up when new information was let out.

Scholars have criticized the media on its coverage of evolving issues as containing no background information on the topic at hand and failing to report sufficiently by the lack of adequate resources (Iyengar 1194; McChesney & Nichols 2010). Friedman et. al. (2012) states that “a possible consequence of this type of coverage is that the reporting focuses on only the current aspects of the issue, on the individuals responsible for the problem, on the most immediate remedies, and relies on the most easily accessible sources” (p. 426). With my study, I’ve found that most of the articles were event-driven and were focusing only on the “current aspects of the issue,” i.e. the most prominent and easily accessible story.

In *The Arizona Republic*, a little more than half of the articles (51.7%) were covering an event, like an arrest, rescue, art exhibit, law, etc. In *The Denver Post*, a majority (67.6%) of the articles were covering an event or occurrence.

One article in *The Arizona Republic* covered background information on sex trafficking. Another article tied sex trafficking to the larger society. Two articles included a health, law enforcement, government agency, or legislative problem. Thirty-four percent of the articles focused on some other focus not already listed out. For *The Denver*

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

Post, 11.8% of articles had another focus not already listed and another 11.8% of the articles tied sex trafficking to a larger society. One article was focused on each – profiles and experiences of an individual, offered multiple perspectives, and included background information on sex trafficking.

I also coded for the minimization or countering concerns of sex trafficking. A majority of *The Arizona Republic* articles (75.9%) and *The Denver Post* articles (88.2%) did not include any theme that minimized concerns about trafficking. Four articles, from *The Arizona Republic*, presented the counter concern that some women choose to be prostitutes and are not really sex slaves. Three articles from the Arizona newspaper said for each that the government and others overestimate the human trafficking figures, it's a mistake to distribute law enforcement to prevent sex trafficking, and other – in which they said that you can't just arrest people to get rid of the demand. Three articles from the Denver newspaper for each said that sex trafficking is not a large-scale issue, the government and others overestimate the human trafficking statistics, and other – in which they said there is no need for federal funding for abortions from sex trafficking.

There are four dominant issues when regarding sex trafficking articles – public health, human rights, crime, and policy and legislation. A fifth category is other, where if an article doesn't fall into one of the four categories, it fits into this one. Crime seemed to be the “winner” in both newspapers, however, *The Arizona Republic* “won” in crime by only one article over from another category (Figure 2). For *The Arizona Republic*, 31% of the articles were crime-focused. Twenty-seven percent of the articles were human rights-focused, with other following in third at 24.1%, followed by public health at 17.2%, and

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

policy and legislation at 3.4% (or really just one article). For *The Denver Post*, crime was leading by a landslide at 73.5%. Following that, human rights got second at 8.8% (three articles), other at 8.8% (three articles), policy and legislation at 5.9% (two articles), and public health at one article (Figure 2).

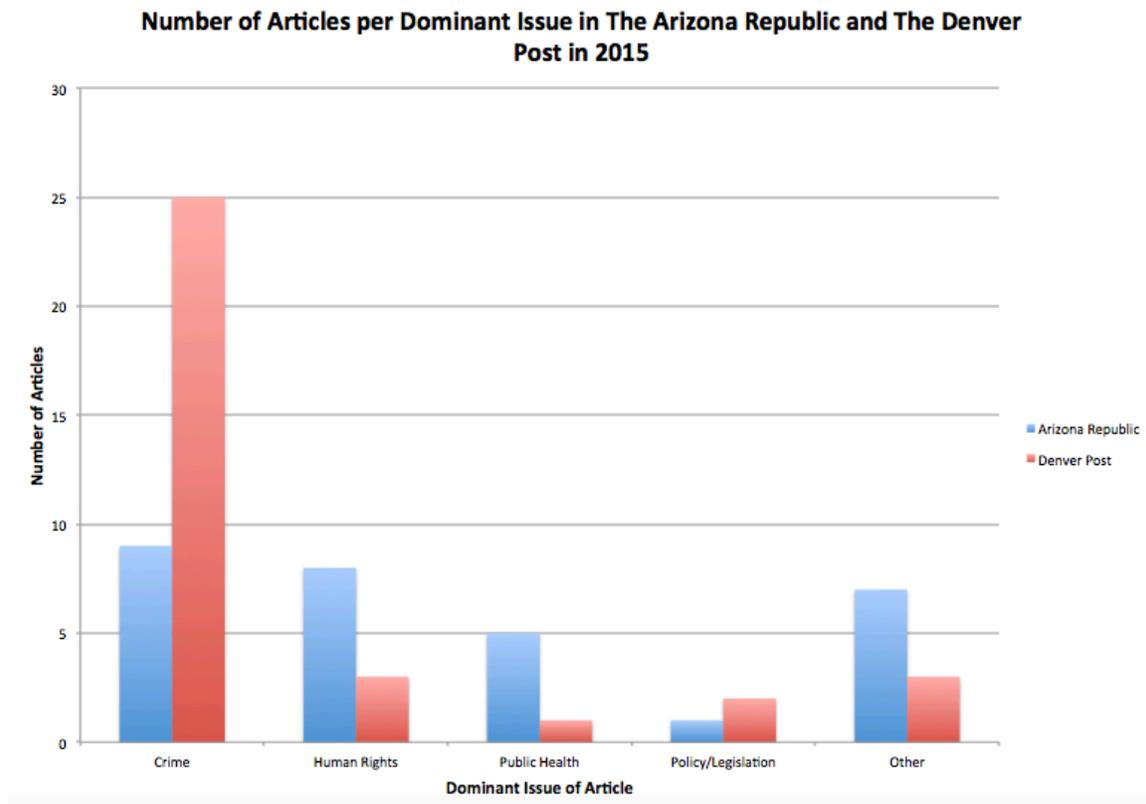


Figure 2: Chart of the number of articles per dominant issue in *The Arizona Republic* and *The Denver Post* in 2015

Who is sourced in an article helps to shape what the article’s focus is. Depending on the sources of a story depends on how the “communicator” will frame the story – consciously or unconsciously referencing certain sources. The majority of sources cited in public health articles in *The Arizona Republic* were advocates. *The Arizona Republic*’s human rights articles sourced advocates and others most. The human rights articles for

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

The Denver Post sourced mostly advocates and government officials, with no other leading sources in its public health, policy/legislation or other articles. For *The Denver Post*, only two articles were policy/legislation focused and *The Arizona Republic* had only one policy/legislation article – so no accurate representation of those sourced in those articles could be articulated. For both newspapers, crime articles contained mostly government official and law enforcement sources.

Friedman et al. (2012) identified causes under a specific dominant issue, however, for my study, it feels almost pointless to do so as the majority of the articles I surveyed had no cause present (62.1% for *The Arizona Republic* and 88.2% for *The Denver Post*). For *The Arizona Republic*, six articles identified the cause as the internet making sex trafficking more easy and accessible, two articles said it was child sexual abuse, two said commodification of women's bodies as sexual objects and prizes, one said "exotic is the erotic" and one said an event that draws money and men. For *The Denver Post*, two articles said the cause is that the Internet is making sex trafficking more easy and accessible and two articles said that an event draws money and men. Most of the articles for both papers just talked about the event or whatever the story was focused on without providing a cause to why it was happening.

As Entman (1993) described that the discussion of remedies is important in framing and Friedman et al. included this in their study, I decided to analyze the remedies listed in the articles of both newspapers. Similar to the causes section, both the newspapers had no remedies present (48.3% of *The Arizona Republic* and 64.7% of *The Denver Post*). *The Arizona Republic's* remedies that it did list included: increased

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

punishments for johns (seven articles); promotion of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) that work on prevention efforts (five articles); better coordination of efforts among policy, law, and advocates (four articles); increased punishments for traffickers (two articles); training and resource allocation for law enforcement (one article); preventing demand from the johns (one article); and eradicating all adult service ads from sites like backpage.com (one article). *The Denver Post* had remedies that included: increased punishments for johns (five articles); increased punishments for traffickers (three articles); training healthcare workers to recognize trafficking victims and/or to provide special care (two articles); promotion of NGOs that work on prevention efforts (one article); legislation and policy changes (one article); better coordination of efforts among policy, law, and advocates (one article); john shaming (one article); and to keep the current policy and legislation (one article). Friedman et al. (2012) also identified remedies under a dominant issue and yet again, most of my information didn't provide any clear data and analysis on which remedy mostly aligned under a certain top issue.

Discussion

Framing allows the author to choose how an issue is talked about and discussed by readers by how the words, the sources, and the images are displayed and represented. In looking at news coverage in 2015 between *The Arizona Republic* and *The Denver Post*, I found that victims were sourced more than I thought they would be sourced. Although, victims were still not sourced as much as law enforcement, government officials, and advocates. In *The Arizona Republic*, johns were sourced the same amount as victims. In *The Denver Post*, johns and traffickers were sourced once, while victims

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

were sourced more. It's pertinent that victims are sourced so that their voices are heard, as they are usually the ones being misrepresented as studies show (Friedman, Johnson, Shafer 2012; Gulati 2011; Cwikel and Hoban 2010). Although victims were sourced more, the victim wasn't sharing his/her experience; it was more of a side quote from the victim without much substance. Some of the quotes in *The Denver Post* were from the same victim saying the same thing in different articles. To me, I wasn't receiving as much information and understanding of the victim when I was an audience member reading through the piece. In terms of victims getting more say (even though it wasn't that meaningful) - does that mean that johns and traffickers should be equally sourced for their voices to be heard as well? If victims are sourced more, allowing safety for them and their families and allowing their voices to fill their own gap of the news coverage (Friedman, Johnson & Shafer 2012), should johns and traffickers also get that choice to be heard? I don't in any way condone what they do to trafficked persons. However, in terms of nonbiased journalism and the idea of staying neutral when representing an issue, wouldn't having all parties of the trafficking problem sourced be best for the article?

I do also know that sourcing a victim is hard in terms of the victim wanting to speak out or not, concern for the victim and their families safety, etc. After such a traumatic experience, victims may want to stay quiet in fear or in shame. What needs to happen at this point is for advocacy groups to help with the media in easing a victim into speaking about their experience. Many advocacy groups are actually the ones that help trafficked victims cope and get back into everyday life. With media and advocacy groups working together, a victim may be more open to speaking out. Getting a john or a

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

trafficker to be sourced may be hard as well, as johns and traffickers may not want their names to be out in public as they would be shamed. In a lot of articles, johns and traffickers names aren't published. In one of *The Denver Post* articles, it explained that the Denver law enforcement and law enforcement across the country started to release names and mug shots of the johns to media to distribute to the public. In that case, johns and traffickers could be afraid of speaking to the media for fear that their name and what they did could be published as some media are already doing.

With my preconceived ideas about the media and its representation of sex trafficking, I assumed that the newspapers were going to have more themes in the articles about minimizing and countering concerns of sex trafficking. However, I was met with data that proved otherwise – most of the articles did not minimize the gravity of the issue. When the articles from both papers did include a comment, it was mostly to provide information on how some people think, and for me, just mentioning that sort of information perpetuates the idea of that sex trafficking isn't a big problem. The articles that minimized sex trafficking had only subtle comments that I think if a reader was looking for it, it might be easier to find. I think it depends on what outlook the reader has on sex trafficking going into reading the article, that if he/she reads a subtle comment that counters concerns then they might perpetuate the idea they already have or just ignore it. I definitely thought going into my research that I was going to see many articles supporting the idea that sex trafficking isn't really an issue – at least for the conservative paper – but was met with better results.

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

Identifying causes, as listed as one of the functions that helps to frame stories according to Entman (1993), is important in allowing the reader to know why this issue is significant and why it needs public attention. An article that identifies the cause of sex trafficking is the “so what” factor of an article – it’s why the audience should care about the issue. In most of the articles – for both newspapers – there was no cause identified. Most of the articles just listed the event or whatever the story was focused on and did not provide that background information as to why sex trafficking was happening. Sometimes, the causes that are identified are not the sole causes, leading the readers to blame a certain issue that might not be the sole issue as to why it’s happening. However, not providing any cause at all allows the reader to dismiss the issue and not think about it further. In *The Arizona Republic*, a cause that was identified in six of the articles was that the Internet is making sex trafficking more easily accessible. With this cause, one of the articles furthered discussion of the issue by providing a potential solution – to eradicate all adult service ads from sites like backpage.com. What this article did was not only provide a “so what,” but a “what’s next.”

When framing remedies, whichever solution is presented is what is deemed as legitimate and displays who should help in endorsing said solution. In my study, I found most of the coverage for both newspapers focused on crime and most of the articles did not present any solutions. With not covering any solutions, it allows the readers to think that the event that is being covered (as events were covered most) is the end result and the problem has been solved by law enforcement or government officials. No solutions in an article shows the end of the sex trafficking issue in that story, rather than a continuous

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

issue that goes beyond that one article. Also, with not covering remedies, the “why” this is an issue is not necessarily answered. The readers just read about the “what” factor and the event, without the “why it matters” factor. With the few solutions that were listed – promotion of NGOs, better coordination of efforts among policy, law and advocates, increased punishments of johns and traffickers – readers get more of a sense of why it’s important and what needs to be fixed – which helps gravitate the problem of sex trafficking.

Crime was, overall, the most dominant issue in the articles for both newspapers. Something that surprised me was that *The Denver Post* had a majority of crime articles, while for *The Arizona Republic*, the crime articles only made up a little more than half. What I associate with crime stories is just coverage of an arrest or event. Those are good stories to cover, but it only scratches the surface on the issue – it doesn’t clearly show the victim’s trauma or experience, doesn’t work to educate those on the background information of sex trafficking, etc. For *The Denver Post* being a more liberal newspaper, I thought that it would have more varying articles on sex trafficking and what occurs in not just the rescues and sting operations of law enforcement.

In terms of looking at the liberal *Denver Post* newspaper versus the conservative *Arizona Republic* paper, what I discovered was that there were less articles published on this issue in the Arizona paper than the Denver paper. I wasn’t surprised by the lesser amount of articles in the Arizona paper – and there were even less if you don’t count the articles that briefly mentioned sex trafficking. It was said that John McCain’s, the senator of Arizona, wife is an advocate for sex trafficking of children in Arizona, so I was a bit

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

surprised that if she really is serious about this issue and wants to put it on the forefront, why isn't it covered more? I feel as though she should help the media push for more attention and awareness to this issue if it's really important to her. However, with the idea that *The Arizona Republic* is a more conservative paper, it wasn't a surprise that there were less articles than the more liberal paper. *The Denver Post* did mention boys as sex trafficking victims in a few of their articles, while *The Arizona Republic* didn't touch on that. Personally, that makes sense to me as sex trafficking is really thought of as the sexual exploitation of women and girls. I felt that a liberal paper would more likely discuss the lesser known types of trafficking – whether that be a certain type or of a certain gender. Although, I believe that if a story that was about a sting operation was to come about where law enforcement rescued boys and girls from sex trafficking, *The Arizona Republic* wouldn't omit the mention of boys.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to see if there was a difference between the news coverage and framing of a conservative news source and a liberal news source. What I found was that there wasn't as big of a difference as I first believed. In terms of the total amount of articles, sure, there was a difference – more sex trafficking articles in the liberal paper. However, in terms of minimization of the issue, causes, what the story was focused on, sources, top issues, and remedies – both papers seemed to align quite similarly. News media needs to increase its coverage, for one, on sex trafficking. Second, news outlets need to vary the dominant topic of stories, identify the “what” and the “why” factor, and offer remedies, even just to initiate discussion for the audience. In

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

order to bring justice to those involved with sex trafficking, news media needs to have an unbiased frame and source those unheard to “fill the gaps of the news coverage”

(Friedman, Johnson, & Shafer 2012, p. 431).

Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

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Shannon Finn
Prof. Brian J. Bowe
JOUR 480: Final Draft of Final Paper
December 2, 2016

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