

Human Trafficking and Journalism

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Human trafficking is the largest method of modern day slavery, and occurs through both labor and sex trafficking (ACF, 2013). For an act to be considered human trafficking, the Department of Homeland Security states it must involve the “use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act,” (DHS). Human trafficking is a global issue, and one the media has more recently given attention to. Media outlets have portrayed trafficking as a public concern through movies such as “The Sound of Freedom”, and reporting on Epstein’s Island and, more recently, the Polk County “Operation March Sadness 2024”. The news coverage of human trafficking issues is a new phenomenon, and has “received growing prominence in newspapers, increasingly appearing in news headlines,” (Sanford et al., 2016, p. 140). While the media has the ability to shine a light on a previously hidden issue, the media can also harm victims and the public through an incorrect portrayal of human trafficking issues. Media coverage of human trafficking vastly shapes the public’s assumptions of what human trafficking is and who it affects, and there is a risk of reporting on trafficking through a sensational lens that alters the accuracy of the depiction (DoCarmo, 2020). This incorrect portrayal is not only harmful to survivors of trafficking, but also makes the public more susceptible to being trafficked because it creates an ‘ideal victim’ for who is at risk (Rodríguez-López, 2018).

After evaluating the motivations behind the increase in media coverage of human trafficking, as well as assessing the impacts of sensationalized and prejudice reporting on survivors and the public, the ethics of journalist reporting on human trafficking will be assessed by evaluating The New York Times Magazine article “The Girls Next Door” through the TARES test.

Media Coverage of Human Trafficking and its Effect on Public Opinion

The US Department of State estimates that there are 27.6 million people who are victims of human trafficking internationally; however, they recognize that finding an exact estimate is difficult because of “the hidden nature of the crime, challenges in identifying individual victims, gaps in data accuracy and completeness, and significant barriers regarding the sharing of victim information among various stakeholders,” (USDS). With 8.1 billion people alive worldwide, many individuals are not personally exposed to the reality of human trafficking. Because of this lack of personal exposure, the media is largely responsible for the perceptions the public has regarding human trafficking, and “the interferences between media representations, social perceptions, and the law are perfectly visible in relation to human trafficking,” (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p. 62). Because media portrayal is so crucial to the public opinion on the issue, it is important that journalists are sourcing their information correctly as opposed to following an echo chamber approach. This is possible because journalists often use government officials as sources; however, “there has been a reciprocal relationship between media representation, social construction, and law against human trafficking in recent history,” (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p. 69)

Journalists’ portrayal of human trafficking can, oftentimes, “align closely with assumptions made by politicians and government officials,” (Sanford et al., 2016, p. 142). As a result of this, media coverage shifts as government officials’ opinion shifts. Media being shaped by government officials and external political groups has the potential to portray the issue in an incorrect light if government officials’ motivation and accuracy is not questioned. Research suggests that “newspapers generally do not define human trafficking for their readers and almost never question official claims,” (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p. 153), which fails to regard victim’s

personal experience or sources outside the government, and as a result produces a narrow view of the issue. When the social issue of human trafficking is portrayed through the lens of the government, it can be used as a tool for official's interests, and oftentimes trafficking is used as a stepping stone to push other political agendas, such as "prostitution, illegal migration, or an organized crime problem," (Jahic & Finckenauer, 2005, p. 37). This causes the public to view human trafficking as a piece of a puzzle, as opposed to its own issue to be addressed and understood.

When the public begins to categorize human trafficking into a part of a larger issue, they begin to eliminate themselves from the at risk group of victims and survivors. The common victim in media coverage of human trafficking depicts a woman or child, often helpless or poor, being sold into enslaved sex organizations. This makes the public less likely to associate themselves with the at-risk population because "victims who are not women, and neither sexually exploited nor smuggled, are often being overlooked in programming about human trafficking. It is perhaps not surprising then that there is public misunderstanding of what human trafficking looks like today," (Bonilla & Mo, 2019, pp. 202–203). Because of this, the public becomes numb to the reality that human trafficking occurs in every country, and can affect people of any age, race, gender or socioeconomic status (DHS). This misrepresentation of human trafficking victims and narrow perspective through sourcing not only puts people in danger, but has the potential to harm victims and survivors as well.

Media Coverage Effects on Victims and Survivors

The Media's portrayal of human trafficking victims ultimately shapes public opinion, and can oftentimes result in law and policy change. When reported correctly, journalists can shed

light on the hidden issues of human trafficking; however, unethical reporting has the potential to cause temporary and lasting suffering for survivors and victims of human trafficking.

Journalism is an industry and, as a result, seeks to bring in a profit through each story produced. With human trafficking, this can result in a focus on ‘sensational’ stories as opposed to stories centered on the unbiased fact of the case (DoCarmo, 2020). These sensational stories sell, in part, because of their content. While both sex trafficking and labor trafficking exist, “Sex trafficking is newsworthy for several reasons. Firstly, it has been argued that sex trafficking is frequently covered because it allows for the broadcasting of highly sexualized female bodies,” (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p. 62). This leads to further objectification of women who survived trafficking, and also limits coverage of individuals being trafficked for labor purposes.

The media coverage of human trafficking has also evolved over time. Originally, it was framed as a human rights issue; however, over time it became a focal point as a crime issue. This impacts victims because “once human trafficking became publicly defined as a crime problem, activists and policymakers sought criminal justice system solutions,” (Farrell & Fahy, 2009, p. 622). When the focus of reporting shifts, the impact it has on individuals involves shifts as well. “Positions as such do not hurt, but when policies are developed in order to satisfy the position rather than to determine what is best for the victims, the latter can tend to get hurt,” (Jahic & Finckenaer, 2005, pp. 36–37), therefore the framing of reporting on human trafficking becomes an ethical consideration when it results in policy change.

Emily Mills, the CEO of Lovely Village, a Waco non-profit focused on helping women overcome histories of sexual abuse and trafficking, said journalists inclination to go to government officials as sources not only impacts public opinion, but also directly impacts survivors. Mills said “anytime you’re doing journalism that has the utmost integrity, you have to

pull from multiple different sources and the number one source to pull from is to look toward those who've been abused. Life experience is essential to quality truth telling and not just storytelling." She continued to say that when journalists allow external factors such as politics and legal agendas to influence their framing of human trafficking, survivors suffer because their true experience gets pushed away from the light.

Human Trafficking Focused Content Availability and Ethics

Human trafficking has appeared in the media in many different ways. Movies like "The Sound of Freedom" and "Taken" have shed light on the reality of the trafficking industry, while news articles over Epstein's Island and the Polk County "Operation March Sadness 2024" cases draw attention to real life instances of trafficking. Across all mass media platforms, the common ethical concern with human trafficking is how the issue is framed, and what underlying misconceptions are being represented (Sanford et al., 2016).

Emily Mills spoke on the dangers of framing human trafficking to push an agenda, and the overwhelming consequences of reporting without first identifying personal misconceptions or prejudices. When approaching the topic, Mills said "it takes a lot of working through your own biases as you're reporting and it absolutely can be harmful if it's just reporting for the sake of using and exploiting survivors in order to push an agenda outside of human rights." Not only can pushing an agenda harm the public's opinion as well as hurt victims and survivors, but underlying misconceptions can be detrimental in their impact.

The New York Times Ethical Reporting

In 2004, the New York Times Magazine released an article about the hidden truths of the human trafficking industry. It is focused primarily on the sex industry, however does mention girls being coerced into trafficking through false job opportunities. This article will be evaluated

using the TARES test and all established ethical problems posed by reporting on human trafficking. The TARES test evaluates the ethics of reporting by assessing the truthfulness of the contents, the authenticity of the reporter, the respect given to the persuadee, the equity of the appeal and the social responsibility of the work to benefit the common good (Baker & Martinson, 2003).

The first aspect to be evaluated is the truthfulness of the article. This article frequently refers to the victims as weak, helpless women and children. While this is not untrue, it paints a deceptive picture of the reality of the human trafficking industry and sensationalizes the contents. The article states, “they are always hungry, pale, always shaking and cold. But they never complain. If they do, they’ll be beaten or killed,” (Landesman, 2004, 22). Not only does the article portray trafficking victims as weak, but also suggests that all victims are kidnapped or tricked. It states “under-age girls and young women from dozens of countries are trafficked and held captive... some of them have been baited by promises of legitimate jobs and a better life in America; many have been abducted; others have been bought from or abandoned by their impoverished families,” (Landesman, 2004, 2). In reality, “many victims reportedly do have some idea of what kind of work they will be expected to do... victims are rarely kidnapped or abducted. Despite this, such women are nevertheless trafficking victims,” (Jahic & Finckenauer, 2005, p. 27). Additionally, the article insinuates that all victims of human trafficking in the United States are brought in from third world countries. This framing is inconsistent with data presented by the United States Department of State, which found “63 percent of clients served were U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, 31 percent were foreign nationals, and the status of six percent was unknown,” (Trafficking In Persons Report, 2023).

The second aspect of the TARES test is assessing the authenticity of the persuader, or journalist. In a 2005 Slate article, journalist Jack Shafer challenged the authenticity of Landesman in his article “The Girls Next Door”. After back and forth commentary regarding facts, motivation and authenticity, Shafer makes the claim that “Peter Landesman is the sort of journalist whose idea of “experts” is people who agree with his sensationalist approach,” (Shafer, 2005). Landesman’s description of what occurs during sex trafficking aligns with the ethical concern that stories of highly sexual occurrences are more commonly written because they are more attractive to readers, which results in journalists objectifying victims to gain readers (Rodríguez-López, 2018). Emily Mills spoke on the framing of stories regarding human trafficking, and said for journalists to write with integrity, they must also be willing to write a story for what it is and not just what is sensational enough to sell. Mills said “it takes a really objective [person] and a lot of integrity to be willing to look at a story faithfully of what it is even if it means you don’t like the outcome of what you’re going to have to say.” Given the deceptive nature and sensational approach to the issue of human trafficking, the ability of Landesman to write the story truthfully and not just as an attention grabbing article is brought into question, and with it is his authenticity in the article’s production.

The third aspect of the TARES test is the respect given to the persuadee. While many journalists use government officials as their primary, and sometimes only, sources for articles of human trafficking (Sanford et al., 2016), Landesman honors those impacted by going to victims directly and allowing them to share their stories. Mills spoke on the importance of giving victims of human trafficking a voice in journalism, and said “journalists need to always have in mind when they’re telling a story of oppression they have to go to the source of the oppressed, and that is often the real story that is not always getting the most attention.”

The fourth aspect of the TARES test is the equity of the appeal, which requires a lack of partiality or ulterior motivation (Baker & Martinson, 2003). While Landesman's article highlights the extreme possibilities of cruelty in the human trafficking industry, this article appears to lack persuasion toward the human rights case. Human trafficking can be used to push agendas (Jahic & Finckenauer, 2005), and this article is primarily focused on illegal migration and organized crime networks than it is on human injustices and intervention. It frequently references 'criminal networks' and illegal migration across the U.S. Mexico border. While these are aspects of human trafficking issues, trafficking on its own is a problem worthy of being addressed, as Mills said. She spoke to the nature of agenda pushing in journalism, and said "we have to tell the stories in order to change agendas... but we need to tell stories and be faithful to the integrity of the story and think differently than the common narrative or what the assumption is about human trafficking." She continued to explain that when human trafficking becomes a part of a problem, people don't focus on a solution to trafficking and it soon becomes overlooked.

The final aspect of the TARES test is the social responsibility of the work, and its benefit to the common good. This article sensationalizes the human trafficking industry, and as a result creates an 'ideal victim' (Rodríguez-López, 2018) which can harm public opinion on individuals who do not fit this criteria — which in reality is the majority of trafficking victims. Additionally, by dramatizing trafficking and the focus of third world country victims, the public is unable to associate themselves with the at-risk population, which is everyone (DHS). This lack of clarity in who can be affected puts people in danger because they begin to assume something like trafficking could never happen to them or their children. This article is not socially responsible as its contents are misleading.

Conclusion

Human trafficking is the largest form of modern day slavery, and impacts people of all backgrounds (USDS). Journalists have the responsibility to report on human trafficking in an ethical manner, however often times fall short of this standard. Stories regarding human trafficking can be used to push other political agendas like illegal migration, prostitution and organized crime, and as a result neglecting the human rights issue independently. This not only harms victims, but puts the public at risk of becoming a victim by being unaware of the nature of the industry. Furthermore, government officials are often sourced in stories about human trafficking, leaving victims' perspectives overlooked and unheard. The New York Times Magazine article “The Girls Next Door” models the way mass media can frame human trafficking through a dramatized lens, therefore being deceptive and unethical in nature.

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