



## **Book Review: Tranchese, Alessia. (2023). *From Fritzl to #metoo: Twelve Years of Rape Coverage in the British Press*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 442**

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You would be forgiven for thinking that #metoo has improved societal attitudes to the issue of male violence against women, and we have consequently evolved into a society where women are liberated from male sexual violence. Certainly, figures show that more women feel emboldened to report sexual violence to the police, and perhaps stigma associated with being a victim has dissipated. But whether victims of sexual abuse are taken more seriously, and whether their claims for justice are more likely to be met is questionable. Journalists, feminists and women's rights groups in the UK have been working to raise the alarm about the deeply troubling legal situation that has arisen in that country whereby rape has effectively been decriminalised. According to Rape Crisis England and Wales, a feminist charity organisation that works to eliminate sexual violence and abuse, of the 55,259 rapes reported to police in 2019, a mere 1,659 were prosecuted, of which only 702 were convicted (Rape Crisis England and Wales).

Another report in 2021/2022 had similarly depressing results (Baird 2022). In 2021, 67,125 rape offences were recorded. This was a record high, which suggests victims feel more comfortable than ever reporting the crime to police. In 2020-2021 there were 2,409 prosecutions. Compared to 5,190 prosecutions in 2016-2017 when there were fewer reports, we can see a large drop off in rape prosecutions relative to

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reported case numbers; and convictions nearly halved in the same period. Both reports spotlight problems in the UK criminal justice system related to rape crimes, including the fact that the police take rape complaints less seriously than in the past, and the courts are still influenced by rape myths.

In sum, the UK has a serious problem with the way rape and sexual assault, which are crimes usually perpetrated by men against women, are managed. The criminal justice system's approach to sexual violence is underpinned by societal values and reflects mainstream beliefs about what is important and what is not. Laws shape cultural values, but the legal system itself is shaped by societal attitudes, and the same can be said for the police. In other words, the criminal justice system is a social institution whereby norms and values are sustained (and specifically, encoded into law), reflecting back to us our values and beliefs by telling us what is right, what is expected, and what is forbidden. Another social institution that has a similar dialectical relationship with society, while not policing or legally enforcing anything, is the media, and it is this institution's role in shaping public attitudes to sexual abuse that Tranchese tackles in her 2023 book *From Fritzl to #metoo: Twelve Years of Rape Coverage in the British Press*.

## 1. Linguistic analysis of media reporting on sexual violence

*From Fritzl to #metoo* is a linguistic analysis of mainstream press coverage (both online and physical) of sexual violence against women between 2008 and 2019. Tranchese studied the six most widely circulated British national newspapers and their Sunday and online editions. Adopting feminist critical discourse analysis, the author combed through 12 years of newspaper articles related to sexual violence against women and found that this issue remains chronically misrepresented by the mainstream media. She argues that this is because the media does three significant things when reporting on violence against women: it perpetuates rape myths, it turns victims into villains, and it is complicit in social amnesia.

### 1.1. The perpetuation of rape myths

Tranchese shows how rape myths persist, but in different ways than in the past, as part of enduring patriarchal structures that evolve to counter feminist gains towards improved social conditions for women. Common rape myths that readers are probably familiar with include the idea that a woman dressed a certain way should have known better, or that flirting with a man is the same as consent to sexual intercourse. Tranchese argues that these myths have all but died out, but in their

place have sprung new ones. The two most common of these are the 'cry-rape girl' myth, and the myth that rape is a violent crime perpetrated by a few 'bad apples'.

The first of these myths is perpetuated by the media when it adopts language that casts doubt on the victim's words and even denies the incident altogether. Tranchese argues that although the myth that women lie about rape is an old one, troublingly, it has found new strength over time. Granular analysis of individual word appearances reveals that the phrase 'alleged rape' increased after 2011, when Nafissatou Diallo, a housekeeper at the Sofitel in Manhattan, accused IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn of sexually assaulting her while she attempted to clean his hotel room. The use of the word 'alleged' instead of a more neutral term like 'reported' insinuates that the accuser might not be telling the truth. Tranchese points out that while the media apparently uses the word 'allege' to avoid defamation, the increase in the use of the word (as well as 'allegedly') from 2015 was specific to sex crimes and not to other crimes (pp. 217-218). The increase in the phrase 'alleged rape' coincided with the increase in rape reports, which points to, argues Tranchese, a backlash of disbelieving women that accompanied the improved social understanding of the issue of sexual violence (p. 239).

The second myth of the violent, aberrant rapist is perpetuated, says Tranchese, by the celebritisation of the news, the ongoing racism and 'othering' of sexual violence by the press, and the obsessive reporting of sensationalist and unusually violent rape cases. The picture the media portrays is that 'real rape' is violent and is perpetrated by 'monsters'—strangers or 'others' (outside the UK), or during wartime (also outside the UK)—when in fact, most rapes are perpetrated by a man the victim knows, often someone who is supposed to love and care for the victim, such as an intimate partner, family member, or teacher/caregiver (pp. 112-113). The title of the book refers to one of these 'monsters' – Josef Fritzl, who imprisoned his daughter, Elisabeth, and abused her as a sex slave for 24 years in the basement of his home in Austria. Elisabeth had 7 children from the rapes. 'Monsters' like Fritzl receive disproportionate amounts of press coverage, reinforcing the idea of the rapist as a deviant individual – he is 'an exceptional man, a predictable subhuman, and an abnormal and dangerous figure who is capable of committing the most heinous acts' (p. 175). He is also often located overseas. Another example is the 2012 Delhi rape and murder of Jyoti Singh. The press reported this widely, and in sensationalist terms and in doing so, reinforced, Tranchese convincingly asserts, the idea of the 'monster rapist'. In this case too, the otherness was amplified by the fact the incident occurred 'over there' and not in the UK. Further, Tranchese finds a disproportionate frequency of the words 'rape' and 'murder' used together, when in fact most rape cases do not end in murder, and most femicides do not include rape or sexual

assault (p. 295). As well, serial domestic abusers are not reported on as much as serial killers, even though they are more common. The serial killer is more likely to end up in the news than the man who routinely assaults his partner, eventually killing her. Perpetuation by the media of the idea of 'real rape' promotes a distorted view of reality. This is a problem 'because the cumulative effect of these (mis)representations is likely to produce a skewed sense of what rape looks like, where it happens, and how it happens, while simultaneously undermining the seriousness of other forms of violence' (p. 113). The media's choice to report on sensationalist 'sexual murders' serves to distract readers from the real issue of structural inequality between men and women that is fuelled by and results in male violence against women.

### 1.2. Victims (and feminists and women in general) turned into villains while men remain protected

While the presumption of innocence is maintained for the perpetrator, for the victim there is a presumption of guilt (dishonesty), and she is not believed until *her innocence* is proven (p. 228).

The radical feminist theoretical framework within which Tranchese locates her analysis allows her to argue that the eager adoption by the mainstream of popular, 'a-political feminism' has meant that incidents of sexual violence are treated as though they are devoid of power imbalances and so both parties deserve 'fairness' and 'equality' (p. 255). Accused men therefore are portrayed as equally as vulnerable as rape victims (who might well be lying).

In her study, Tranchese shows how the 'cry-rape girl' is a particularly venomous rape myth for its function in turning victims of sexual violence into villains. The discourse of the 'presumption of innocence' of accused rapists was of course not created by the media, and it is a discourse so deeply entrenched in society that most people barely think about its meaning. It is well established, but perhaps not well known, that a woman who falsely or even mistakenly accuses a man of rape is a *rarity* – she is the deviant, not the man who rapes (p. 377). Society protects men by assuming their innocence while simultaneously assuming dishonesty in women who say they have been raped. The way the media plants seeds of doubt into readers' heads can be very subtle. Tranchese argues that celebrities, particularly young, white athletes, are often given 'himpathy'<sup>2</sup> by the media, by for example, referring to them as 'stars' instead of using more neutral terms, or by using the adverb 'vehemently' as in

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<sup>2</sup> This is a word coined by Kate Manne (2020).

'vehemently denies' instead of just 'denies' (189), or by referring to their 'wasted talent' (231). Why, asks Tranchese, does the media choose not to use the word 'alleged' which is used so frequently as an adverb for women's reports of sexual violence, to say 'he alleged he did not commit the crime'? (p. 192) The media's method of generating 'himpathy' is not exclusively linguistic – Welsh footballer Ched Evans was convicted of rape in 2012 (later overturned) and despite this, reporting at the time generated himpathy by, for example, talking about the impact of the incident on his career, labelling discussion about the seriousness of his crime 'hysteria', and quoting his mother—a figure likely to garner sympathy—as 'defending her son's name' (p. 276).

Interestingly, not all celebrities are worthy of 'himpathy'. Results of this study show the media has little problem in withholding sympathy from men whose careers are nearly over (think Harvey Weinstein, Jimmy Saville or Rolf Harris). These men can be seen as 'ideal perpetrators' (p. 224) because they are either old, dead and/or have been found guilty of sexual abuse of children (another kind of 'monster').

Even #metoo, which was a moment in time created by women and meant for women's benefit, was reported by the mainstream media as either having been a 'failure' – the responsibility of which was on women themselves – or of having 'gone too far' (p. 353). But what, asks Tranchese, were people anticipating? To expect a burst of online feminist activism to quickly and completely topple the patriarchy is excessively optimistic and sets feminists up for failure: '[T]he media set the bar too high for feminism and when expectations were not met, women were blamed for it. While both feminism and #metoo emerged in response to social injustice, and both exist within an unjust social structure, society criticised *them* for being unjust, rather than criticising the structures within which they exist' (p. 353).

### 1.3. Complicit in social amnesia

One of the main conclusions of the study, says Tranchese, is that *continuity* of patterns in the way the media portrays sexual violence is more conspicuous than any potential positive *changes*. The most surprising and disappointing finding that Tranchese outlines is the way the media's representation of sexual violence continues to perpetuate the idea that sexual assaults of women by men are isolated incidents rather than expressions of the patriarchy, which occur on an unbroken continuum whereby women as a class are subjugated to men as a class. The perpetuation of this idea by the media, asserts the author, stymies feminist attempts to abolish male violence against women. The study shows that the UK media reports incidents of male violence against women as though they are new and ghastly

aberrations when in fact, they represent the mostly unchanging status quo. This is reflective of the apparent social need for everything to be turned into a new phenomenon: the humdrum ongoing status quo is often not deemed newsworthy and so incidents are sensationalised instead of being situated in what is a structural problem of male violence against women.

The UK media is guilty of equally bad, if not worse social amnesia when it comes to feminist battles and feminist struggles. For example, the press portrays feminist 'movements' like #metoo as though they are 'watershed' events whereby women are 'finally' being heard, seemingly forgetting decades-old and ceaseless anti-violence feminist struggles (pp. 343-344). This is perhaps one of the more disheartening elements of the endurance of patriarchy: the way that feminist struggles quietly disappear, meaning that future generations are unaware of the wide range and ongoing nature of feminist work. The late feminist linguist Dale Spender (1985) lamented that the loss of the continuum of women writers meant women are faced with gaping chasms where women writers who were highly successful in their lifetimes have simply faded into invisibility. Similarly, even though feminists have been speaking up about male violence for aeons, one look at media reports of #metoo would have us believe that this is brand new territory.

The good news, Trachese tells us, is that because of increased media representation of sexual harassment since #metoo, representation has shifted to a more 'grey' understanding of sexual violence (one that is less, or not necessarily, physically violent) and better presence of women's voices (p. 389).

## 2. A word on structure and methodology

Each chapter in *From Fritzl to #metoo* starts with an explanation of the linguistic methodology deployed to analyse the data. These sections are very detailed and might be too dense for those from disciplines outside linguistics. But they are a treasure trove for linguists eager to learn about the practical utility of various types of linguistic analytical tools. These sections, and the assiduousness of the research more generally mean that the book, at nearly 450 pages, is very long. I would urge you to not let this deter you from reading it. Skim the chapters' beginnings if necessary, but the findings of the study are well worth reading.

Radical feminist theory was an appropriate theoretical framework for this work and the consistency with which it was applied was mostly excellent. I did feel somewhat bereft (and sometimes confused) at the criticism that Trachese levelled at #metoo's lack of inclusivity, and prioritisation of 'white feminism'. It seemed like Trachese

was calling out the press for making this criticism of #metoo while also doing it herself. A radical feminist criticism of #metoo certainly takes aim at the elitist nature of it, but Tranchese seemed unaware of perhaps the main radical feminist criticism of #metoo – that it completely ignored the links of pornography (and other elements of liberal feminist ‘sex positivism’) to sexual violence (Farley 2018; McVey et al. 2021), a link to which Tranchese herself draws attention (pp. 6-7; p. 26).

### 3. Media literacy

The findings of this study should be compulsory reading for all people working in the media, and in the criminal justice system. They should also be provided to anyone called up for jury duty for a rape trial, and more generally, anyone who reads newspapers! While writing this review, German tennis player Alexander Zverev narrowly missed out on progressing to the finals of the 2024 Australian Open by losing in the semi-finals. In November 2023, a Berlin court had issued him a 450,000 Euro penalty order for domestic abuse of a former girlfriend and mother of his child Brenda Patea. He appealed this fine, which meant that he would have to go to court in May 2024 to face charges of domestic violence. In many sporting codes, athletes are stood down (often with pay) in cases like this until the legal case is over. The lack of action by the Association of Tennis Professionals by contrast was conspicuous. Rather extraordinarily, two weeks before the Australian Open started, Zverev was voted in by other players as a new member of the ATP Player Advisory Council. In addition to the legal accusations by Brenda Patea, another former girlfriend Olga Sharypova had also reported in 2020 that he had violently attacked her.

At the Australian Open, one brave journalist broke the deafening silence surrounding this issue by persistently asking uncomfortable questions of top players in their post-match press interviews, including Zverev himself: specifically raising the question of whether Zverev should even be playing in the tournament given the cloud hanging over him. On twitter, cries of ‘innocent until proven guilty’ ensued. After reading Tranchese’s book I was acutely aware of the language used in the mainstream reporting of this case (the little there was of it). An article in *The Guardian* (Carayol 2024) had the headline, ‘Alexander Zverev bristles at questions over impending trial for domestic abuse’, followed by the subtitle, ‘German denies physically abusing girlfriend in 2020’. Equipped now with updated media literacy acquired from reading *From Fritzl to #metoo* I was able to see that this short subtitle alone implies that the woman is lying, that there is only one accusation (when in fact two women have said they were abused by Zverev) and that Zverev is the subject/agent and the victim is nowhere to be seen. An online article by *The Sporting News* (Mayne 2024) is littered with the words ‘alleged’ and ‘denied’, with the focus on

Zverev's response to the victim's accusations and only one line each dedicated to the violent incidents as described by the two women. Mainstream reports of these accusations have generally called Zverev a 'tennis star' (instead of the neutral 'tennis player') and focused on his denials rather than the women's testimonials.

In other words, this book has made me much more alert to the biased language used by the media's reporting on male violence against women. Even those who already possess excellent media literacy and whose feminist lens is clear will learn much from this book and likely develop clearer vision for deep and critical reading of the news.

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## Article history

*Paper received: 21 February 2024*

*Paper received in revised form and accepted for publication: 11 April 2024*

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## Declaration of Interest

The author hereby confirms that there are no identifiable conflicting commercial interests or personal associations that might have seemed to impact the research presented in this paper.