

# *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications*



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# Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications

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The current issue is the first of the ninth volume of the *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications (AJMMC)*, published by the [Mass Media & Communication Unit](#) of ATINER.

Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
ATINER



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The [Mass Media & Communication Unit](#) of ATINER organizes its **20<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, 9-12 May 2022, Athens, Greece** sponsored by the [Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications](#). The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers of Communications, Mass Media and other related disciplines. Please submit a proposal using the form available (<https://www.atiner.gr/2022/FORM-MED.doc>).

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## **Off Thin Ice: After Decades of Media Abuse, it Took Hollywood to Repair Tonya Harding’s Image and Reputation**

*By Adam Pitluk<sup>\*</sup>, Courtney Hazlett<sup>±</sup> & Wendy Weinhold<sup>°</sup>*

*This qualitative study examines Tonya Harding’s experiences after she was excoriated by news media in the 1990s and given an opportunity in 2017 to tell her story through the film, *I, Tonya*. The critical thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview with Harding contends that her assessment of how her image was recuperated by the film is informed by her experiences with news media’s classism and sexism before and following the notorious attack on Nancy Kerrigan.*

**Keywords:** *image restoration, figure skating, classism, Olympics, Tonya Harding, media, communication*

### **Introduction**

The 1990s and early 2000s were filled with news media coverage of scandals involving women, especially Tonya Harding. Scholarship about this period attests to the ways ideological issues such as classism and sexism informed news media coverage of women generally and particularly of Harding (e.g., Everbach, 2017; Foote, 2003). In his critical analysis of network news coverage of Harding, Gaines (1995) described the “patriarchal ideology” of journalists at the time (p. 1). Harding has been a part of the news spectacle for nearly 30 years, and the media’s hostility toward her has often been palpable. It wasn’t until Hollywood addressed her story in the 2017 movie *I, Tonya* (Gillespie & Rogers, 2017), based on Harding’s life story with emphasis placed on the period surrounding the 1994 Winter Olympics, that the record was finally set straight. The public was able to see a repaired image of Harding as a fallible-cum-sympathetic person who was not given a fair chance by the media institution that claimed its public service mission was to investigate facts and put forth truth. On the contrary, our research shows that the media was to blame for Harding’s sullied reputation from 1994 until 2017, even though she was neither the perpetrator nor the mastermind of the battery of teammate Nancy Kerrigan. As our research shows, she was more victim than villain, and Hollywood helped her to right the wrong.

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## Literature Review

According to Harding, the news media's role in her saga throughout the 1990s was one of nescient gossip-mongering. Our research for this project leads us to agree with her. The attack on Harding's U.S. Olympic skating teammate Nancy Kerrigan occurred on January 6, 1994. The Winter Olympic Games were held in Lillehammer, Norway, from February 12-27, 1994. As early as the second day of the Olympic Games, reporters discussed Harding as though she was a mastermind of the plot against Kerrigan, even before all of the facts of the case were in. Writing in the *Chicago Tribune* on February 13, 1994, a day after the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, reporter Michael Precker interviewed Stanford University business and ethics professor Kirk Hanson about the ethics of the Harding/Kerrigan situation, and Hanson made a wisecrack that made the print edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. Even though Harding had not been convicted of a crime, Hanson said, "I guess it isn't just Texas cheerleading that leads people to this," (Precker, 1994). Hanson was referring to another scandal that occurred around the same time as the Harding/Kerrigan situation in which a Texas woman attempted to arrange a murder so her daughter could make the school cheerleading squad.

This comparison is outrageous, as in the latter incident, the Texas woman was accused of attempted murder-for-hire, and in the former incident, Harding was not charged with any crime. Seemingly the only similarity the two women had in common is that they were women (the Texas woman was not even an athlete, her daughter was) (Thompson, 1992; Hatch & Hendricks, 2018). Still, the disconnect in subject matter did not stop Precker (1994) from quoting another academic, SMU's Department of Religious Studies Chair Lonnie Kliever, who implied Harding was part of a pattern of athletes who will do anything for a competitive edge. Perhaps the most disparaging and one-sided assertion in the *Chicago Tribune* article is when Precker used a dismissive lead-in to a Kliever quotation:

Regardless of whether Tonya Harding was involved, Kliever says, the attack on Kerrigan "isn't surprising if you see it in a longer history of efforts to maximize your advantage in ways that violate the canons of fair play." (Michael Precker, *Chicago Tribune*).

Journalists like Precker used Harding's purported crime to illustrate a larger point, even though prima facie, there was no correlation (Huisman, 2008; Thompson, 1992). Effectively, Precker (1994) did not care whether the article's premise of Harding's guilt was right or wrong. Moreover, the *Tribune* reporter doubled down on his devil-may-care insinuation that Harding is no better than the Texas cheerleader's mother accused of murder-for-hire. According to the *Tribune*, Harding was guilty of a crime even if she was not. The phrase, "Regardless of whether Tonya Harding was involved," is not only misleading for the readers, but it smacks of unethical journalism.

News media reporting on Harding seemed to delight in misogyny. Consider this story, also from the *Chicago Tribune* from four days after the Precker story,

whose headline boasts, “Oh, the excitement of seeing Kerrigan, Harding at Practice,” (Barry, 1994). A passage from that article reads:

You should have seen the media reaction Wednesday night when Tonya Harding’s breasts arrived at the main Olympic press center. OK, technically they were not her actual breasts; but they were actual photographs of her breasts in a British newspaper. They were immediately reproduced numerous times on Xerox brand copiers (The Official Breast Duplicators of the Olympic Games) and passed around the media center, where they became the subject of intense scrutiny and professional news analysis.

I just wish you young aspiring journalists out there could have witnessed, firsthand, this example of how the “pros” handle a big story. (Dave Barry, *Chicago Tribune*)

Young aspiring journalists reading this research should be aware Tonya Harding was only 24 years old when the *Chicago Tribune* sounded the starting gun for other media to take potshots at the Olympic athlete.

Thus commenced the long, sordid affair Harding unwittingly had with the news media throughout the remainder of the 1990s and early-to-mid 2000s. A ProQuest search of the terms “Tonya Harding” and “figure skating” returned tens of thousands of stories and news clips in print and broadcast about her, and a Google search for the same terms returned 9.8 million hits. However, very few reporters were granted interviews with Harding before her disastrous interview with Connie Chung on *Eye-to-Eye* in 1994. After Harding performed in a nervous manner answering Chung’s questions, news media responded by creating a narrative that Harding was aloof and difficult.

### Theoretical Lens

Image restoration, also known as image restoration discourse (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994; Mishne, 2018), serves as the theoretical lens for this study. According to this theory, image restoration discourse is a way for a person to restore his/her image after alleged wrongdoing – assuming they are innocent of what is being alleged – through a rhetorical design (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Mishne, 2018). When a person’s image is threatened, that person feels a range of emotions and compulsions, including: a desire to offer explanations for their behavior; a desire to vigorously defend their behavior; a desire to offer justifications for their behavior; a desire to offer rationalizations for their behavior; and/or a desire to apologize for their behavior (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). These actions are an important part of persuasive discourse and image repair rhetoric.

Benoit and Hanczor (1994) critically analyzed Harding’s image repair efforts in her interview on the *Eye-to-Eye* television news program with broadcast journalist Connie Chung. They then applied the theory of image restoration discourse to Harding’s television appearance and assessed whether the figure skater successfully repaired her image. The episode aired on February 10, 1994, roughly a month after the 1994 Winter Olympic games, and Harding’s appearance

received scholarly attention from Benoit and Hanczor (1994) because, “during the 1994 Winter Olympics, news media shamelessly exploited the suspicion that Tonya Harding was involved in the attack on Nancy Kerrigan to fuel conflict and interest in the Games,” (p. 417). As such, Benoit and Hanczor ran Harding’s appearance on *Eye-to-Eye*’s news show through a battery of assessments by which image repair strategies are organized.

There are five broad categories to image repair theory, with three of those categories having variants or subcategories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness (by bolstering), corrective action, and mortification. According to Benoit and Hanczor (1994), Harding employed three of the techniques in her attempt to repair her image on Connie Chung’s program. Those techniques reduced Harding’s offensiveness by bolstering, denial, and attacking her accuser. According to Benoit and Hanczor:

Those accused of committing heinous acts may help their reputations through denial (assuming, of course, that they are innocent). Similarly, showing oneself to be a good person (bolstering) may counterbalance any residual negative feeling, and it could also reinforce one’s denial (a good person isn’t likely to do bad things). Attacking one’s accuser(s) may lessen the effectiveness of the accusations, thereby helping to restore one’s good reputation. Defeasibility makes the claim that events beyond one’s control are actually responsible for offensive actions, and is a plausible way to avoid blame (p. 425).

Previous research has established that, when operationalized appropriately, denial (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Lindsey, 1987), bolstering (Benoit, 1994; Benoit and Brinson, 1994; Benoit et al., 1991; Benoit and Lindsey, 1987), and attacking one’s accuser (Benoit, 1994) can be effective image repair strategies. Benoit and Hanczor maintained that unless Harding was guilty, she selected appropriate strategies for repairing her image on Connie Chung’s *Eye-to-Eye* program.

Ultimately, Benoit and Hanczor (1994) believed Harding was unsuccessful in her image restoration attempt, a month after the 1994 Winter Olympics, because although the strategies she selected from image restoration theory were appropriate, “the defense she constructed to operationalize them was not very well developed” (p. 429). The authors conclude: “In sum, this instance of rhetoric from a sports celebrity provides insight into the effectiveness of image restoration discourse” (p. 430).

While we agree with the sentiment of Benoit and Hanczor (1994) vis-à-vis image restoration discourse as it pertained to Connie Chung’s television show in 1994, we disagree that Harding should be left with all the blame for not properly restoring her reputation. After all, a Gallup poll (1994) conducted shortly after the television interview reported that 73% of Americans had seen or heard a great deal of news about the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan incident; 20% had heard or seen some of the news; and only 2% said they knew nothing about it. That is a lot of public opinion generated by an insatiable media for a 24-year-old with a GED and limited social support to have to tamp down. Benoit and Hanczor did not explore the challenges Harding faced because of her family, her limited education, or her youth. It is important to remember she was a 24-year-old who was

essentially being stalked morning, noon, and night by domestic and international media.

### Method

With this study, we worked to build on and forward the research begun by Benoit and Hanczor (1994) almost 30 years ago. This time, however, we sought Harding's assessment of Hollywood's role in restoring her image rather than exclusively looking at Harding's own attempts to restore her image. We worked to revisit Harding's position and let her tell us – in her own words – whether she believed news media of the 1990s and early 2000s were to blame for misinformation and a negative impression of her, and whether Hollywood helped restore her image in 2017 with the movie *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017).

Our research is rooted in critical approaches that inform our qualitative interview practices. We value critical perspectives that allow us to understand how Harding experiences the news media discourses, practices, and social systems that have covered her since the height of her figure skating career. We are guided by Lawless and Chen's (2019) operationalized critical method for studying interviews, which is grounded in critical epistemology. Qualitative interviews are flexible and powerful resources for collecting detailed information about a person's thoughts and attitudes (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Through our research and preparation for the interview with Harding, we knew we wanted to discuss news media's treatment of her along at least the four following critically informed themes: (1) classism, (2) misogyny, (3) domestic violence and (4) the consequences of getting caught up in the "media maelstrom" (Lewinsky, 2015). These themes guided our development of interview questions.

Because Harding is a celebrity, we worked to secure an interview with her by contacting her publicist and advisor, Linda Lewis. One of the researchers, who is a professional journalist based in Los Angeles with extensive experience covering celebrity news and the entertainment industry, coordinated and led all communication with Harding and Lewis, including the interview where both women were present. During the initial email conversation with Lewis, we were instructed we could ask four interview questions that had to be provided to Harding in advance. We were not given a time limit for the interview. Working collaboratively, we wrote the four questions. We informed Lewis and Harding that the method would be semi-structured interviewing technique, thereby allowing us to ask follow-up questions predicated on Harding's answers to the four IQs. Our interview questions were as follows:

IQ 1: How would you summarize the media's interpretation of you as a person and your role in the incident in the 1990s?

IQ 2: In the 1990s, male professional athletes like Dennis Rodman, Charles Barkley, Mike Tyson, and Brett Favre were given the space to "be themselves" yet you appeared to be punished for it on the ice and off. Why do you think that is?

IQ 3: Why did you feel comfortable having your story told in a scripted, theatrical format such as *I, Tonya*?

IQ 4: In what ways did *I, Tonya* help to repair parts of your reputation damaged by the media in the 1990s?

These questions formed our semi-structured interview guide, allowing for flexibility in addressing narratives as they emerged in the interview conversation with Harding. The day before the interview was originally scheduled to occur, Lewis contacted us to explain Harding was ill, and the interview was postponed for a few days. After Harding recovered, she joined us by phone from Portland, Oregon, where she lives. Harding was very open during the interview and excited to participate in our research. The interview lasted 42 minutes with subsequent follow-up questions answered over text during the writing of this research. The interview was recorded for accuracy and transcribed the day of the interview.

Using the transcripts, we conducted a critical thematic analysis of our semi-structured interview with Harding to explore how she makes sense of her experiences with and treatment by news media and the public during two distinct periods in her life: first, in the 1990s, and second, since the release of *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017). According to Lawless and Chen (2019), critical thematic analysis (CTA) provides a systematic method for studying interview data and examining the connections between discourses, social practices, power relations, and ideologies. This critical approach focuses on “connecting everyday discourses with larger social and cultural practices nested in unequal power relations” (p. 93). Lawless and Chen explain, “Qualitative researchers have a unique opportunity to elicit shared experiences under interpretive lenses and move to critical methodologies that interrogate power” (pp. 96–97). CTA is guided by acute awareness of the social, historical, political, economic, institutional, and ideological forces that shape individual and shared experiences of interview participants. This inductive approach identifies patterns in interview discourses using Owen’s (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, which guides coding of themes. All three authors engaged in repetitive reading of the interview transcripts.

Consistent with a critical analysis of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, we focused our analysis on Harding’s interview discourses as they relate to larger social ideologies. Our analytical process of CTA moved from open coding to closed coding. We began by identifying moments of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness in Harding’s discourses and then worked to connect the interview discourses with larger social forces, such as Harding’s economic conditions and the institutions that have shaped her life, including media, family, athletics, and law enforcement.

## Results

- Timeline: Attack: January 6, 1994
- Film release date of *I, Tonya*: December 8, 2017
- Research interview with Tonya Harding: March 22, 2022

Based on our critical thematic analysis of our interview with Harding, we contend the reputational repair she has experienced since the January 6, 1994, attack on Kerrigan is a direct result of the release of the scripted feature film *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017). In the following pages, we discuss how, four years after the release of the film, and 27 years after the event itself, Harding believes *I, Tonya* merits credit for the shift in public opinion that she has experienced.

### **News Media Chose to Pin Guilt on Tonya from the Beginning**

Media coverage of Harding in the years since the Kerrigan attack relied on the issue of class to conceal sexist codes about femininity that devalued her and reduced her to a common criminal. “They interpreted me like a piece of shit,” Harding said as we discussed the treatment she received from the media in the aftermath of the incident and throughout the 1990s. “The media convicted me the first day, of hurting someone, and being associated with these people that hurt someone.”

The media swiftly established their narrative of Harding, one that portrayed her as a highly suspicious, if not totally guilty figure (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). Because of this, Harding was unable to move forward personally or professionally without the incident factoring into her life. Harding described news media’s toxic behaviors toward her:

I had never been put in that situation before—trying to defend myself for not doing a freaking thing. It was really difficult because I could not train because they kept flashing their cameras in front of me. I asked them so many times nicely to please turn off your flash. They were deliberately trying to hurt me. And I lived with this on a daily basis ever since then. I get my life threatened all the time, and people think it’s a joke.

Harding said the errors news media made in reporting about the incident were two-fold: They got her character wrong, and they got the role she played in the incident wrong. Regarding the latter, Harding said that she had nothing to do with Kerrigan’s attack before it was carried out, and she certainly had nothing to do with it when it was carried out:

I didn’t play any role. I did not know anything prior to what happened. It didn’t matter what I did, where I went. I was followed, I was harassed, pushed down, hit in the head with their freaking cameras. I was asleep when it happened. I got woke up by my choreographer, who told me what happened. And I was convicted of hindering the prosecution. That’s it. Period.

As for the former, the claim that that the media got her character wrong, Harding had a swift assessment: “I was treated differently basically my whole life because I came from the other side of the tracks, and I don’t come from money.” Class was a significant factor in the way Harding experienced and understood

news media's treatment of her. Her experiences with poverty and inability to afford expensive figure skating costumes made her a media target.

### **Male Athletes Got a Pass for Their Behavior; Harding Did Not**

Professional sport in the 1990s was not without other notable expressions of athletes' personalities both within their respective games and outside of them. While many male athletes were given latitude for their mistakes by news media, Harding was not. For example, Chicago Bulls basketball player Dennis Rodman was characterized as having an "unpredictable" relationship with the media, and he was labeled "disruptive" and "counter-cultural," yet he was later lauded for having "redefined representations of gender, race, and desire" within American cultural imagery (Lafrance and Rail, 2002). He even wore a wedding dress to promote his 1996 autobiography, titled, *Bad as I Want to Be* (Magubane, 2002). Another example of differing media treatment given to male athletes is from professional boxer and convicted rapist Mike Tyson, who bit a chunk off of opponent Evander Holyfield's ear during a boxing match the year after the Kerrigan attack. While Tyson's role in the assault literally played out on live television, he experienced reputational repair via documentaries that relied on media coverage of his life and events (Fuhs, 2017).

Harding's situation could not be more different: After Kerrigan was attacked, news media painted a picture of Harding as a scorned athlete, one who was desperate to win by any means necessary, even if it meant colluding, planning and attacking a competitor (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). To put it simply, news media treated Harding with hostility, and Harding told us it has everything to do with class and the fact that she was not a polished female athlete like her peers in figure skating. She explained: "I have a brain, and I think for myself. And sometimes I'll say stuff that comes out of my mouth but that's just who I am."

Among the "stuff" Harding referenced was when she was asked, after the attacks, how she felt about going to the Winter Olympics with Kerrigan. Harding said her response was, "I can't wait to get to compete against her and kick her butt." That, she said, was completely taken out of context by the media and played into the narrative that she was a violent criminal. Harding explained, "because that's what it's all about, it's a competition, it's just how I talk." In the context of the attack, news media treated the comment as if it were offensive.

Harding recognized class was one part of why she was treated differently, but she also recognized that her gender might have played a part, too, which would also separate her from the other salacious male athletes of the time. She explained: "It has to do with me being a woman, me being where I come from. I come from nothing, and yet I chose to be the best that I could, because I wanted to be better than my mother." Reporters could have reported about Harding's experiences that are documented in the film, but news media instead focused on the spectacle. The turbulent relationship with her mother was out in the open for any reporter willing to interview any of the coaches or fellow figure skaters in Portland, Oregon. Harding's mother was notorious. However, none of the familial tension was reported.



My mother was the horrible one. Beating me all the time. My coach was told and knew about it, and she told other people not to turn my mother in, and I just found that out when the movie came out.

### ***I, Tonya* Was a Theatrical Film, But There Were No “Theatrics” Involved**

Given that Harding did not grant many interviews during the time immediately after the attack or since, a natural question arose about why she would participate in a scripted, theatrical version of her life. But “there were no theatrics about it,” Harding told us. She explained that her involvement with *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) included sitting for hours of interviews with the film’s writer, Steven Rogers; her ex-husband, Jeff Gillooly, did the same. The script was then written, and the film was shot and edited, all without her further participation. After Harding’s interviews with Rogers, she said she had nothing to do with the film until she viewed it in a private screening in Oregon after its completion, just a few months before it hit theaters.

Harding said the film was extremely accurate, and there were only five instances of creative decision-making that stretched the truth. She said the first alteration was that her “mother was never smoking on the ice.” It is important to note that during the interview, Tonya emphasized the word “on.” Her mother smoked plenty, but storming the actual ice at the rink while smoking a cigarette was not a thing that happened.

The second point of creative license Harding highlighted had to do with a scene in the film where Tonya, the character, takes aim at her husband Jeff, the character, with a shotgun. Harding explained the facts:

And I never had a shotgun that I pulled out and fired at him although he did shoot me once, got away with it, blood all over my face. The cops had him and me, and they let him take me home. They don’t care if you’re from the other side of the tracks. To them, I never represented them the right way. Because I have a brain, I want to speak my own mouth. I want to skate to music that makes me happy, that makes me want to do it, so that the people can get into the music and make it fun for everybody. Because to me, I wasn’t competing for other people, I was competing against myself, because I’m there to show the judges what I can do. I’m not there to show the other skaters what I can do. I don’t care. I wanted to go out and be the best that I could be.

Harding’s third point of clarification was far more succinct: “I didn’t tell the judges to suck my dick.” But Harding, who has established that she likes to say what is on her mind, had more to share with us, which led her to point out inaccuracy number four:

I never spoke to the judges like that on the ice. I did speak to a judge, with my coach. In 1990, well it happened many times, but the most important one to me was in 1990 when I wore the bright pink dress.

It is important to note here that the “bright pink dress” is not just what she was wearing when she did not, in real life, suggest a judge suck on a specific part of the male anatomy. It is part of a larger plot point and an earlier scene in *I, Tonya*

(Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) that shows a young Harding sewing the dress herself because she did not have the money to buy one off the rack. Harding explained the background on the pink dress:

Well, I made that, and after I competed and one of the judges came back to me with my coach and said if I ever wear anything like that again, they will never give me the marks that I deserve because that was the shittiest, ugliest dress they had ever seen in their life. And I said, well, when you have \$5,000 like those other girls do to make a dress that is ok for you, then I'll start wearing that. But until then--and I turned around and kind of flipped her off as I walked away. Because I'm not going to be treated like that, I don't deserve to be treated like that ever.

This was a significant recollection, less so because of the accuracy that was or was not involved; after all it is a scripted film, not a documentary, which means creative license can and likely will occur. Instead, the recollection drives home the point that Harding, while being unapologetically herself, was constantly up against the fact that she felt othered by her social and financial status in ways that directly impacted how she was evaluated in her sport.

Harding's final fact check of the film was that when her dad left her family, she had just turned 14, not 9, as *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) depicts. And while the film showed a young Tonya standing in the way of his car crying, doing everything in her power to get him to stay, Harding said she understood why he was leaving. And again, the reason had to do with money. She explained:

My dad talked to me every single day. I knew what he was doing was best for him and for me. I had to look at it that way. My dad had to move to Idaho for a nice job, that had a place for him to live.

If the attack on Kerrigan is the film's dénouement, the critical themes that bring us to that point are Harding's class, the abuse she endured at the hands of her mother, and her tumultuous relationship with her ex-husband Gillooly. The latter of the three elements was widely known and served as media catnip. The fact that the film exposed class as it relates to Harding's experience as well as the abuse at the hands of her mother would be a new revelation about Harding with an outcome that was impossible to predict. But Harding said she had no reservations about the project. "I had nothing to lose. The truth will come out, which it did," she told us.

It did, and thanks to the film, it reached a lot of people. At the height of its theatrical release *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) played all over the world and on 1,450 screens in the United States and Canada alone; worldwide the film grossed nearly \$54 million, according to <https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt5580036/boxoffice>. In 2018, the film received 25 major film nominations, and it won 8 of them. Among them, Allison Janney, who played Harding's chain-smoking (even when on the ice) mother, won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, and Margot Robbie, who played Harding, won a Critics Choice Award for Best Actress.

## ***I, Tonya* made it Possible for the Real Tonya to Experience Reputational Repair**

Our final point of analysis attends to whether the release of *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) was an effective form of reputational repair for Harding. While it was important for Harding that her truth come out, she said she also wanted something positive to come out of the experience. During the interview, she repeatedly referred to *I, Tonya* (Gillespie and Rogers, 2017) as “my movie.” Harding’s interview made it clear to us the movie has helped her. She told us: “I told my story and then everybody else told their story. And [ex-husband] Jeff admitted that he did it. What more proof can you get finally after all of these years?”

### **Conclusions**

It is clear from our research Harding feels she has been exonerated as a direct result of the film, and that since *I, Tonya*, people “absolutely” have a better understanding of where she came from, what she was up against with her mom, and how her circumstances were different than the girls who could afford the \$5,000 dresses. When Harding said, “Jeff admitted that he did it,” Harding meant Gillooly admitted to his role in planning the attack, which was carried out by Shane Stant (Benoit and Hanczor, 1994). That revelation was enough for Harding, who shared her frustration that aside from those who have watched the film, “there are people still to this day who believe the media, that said that I hit Nancy Kerrigan on the knee with a stick.”

One of the few interviews Harding has granted since the 1990s was to the *New York Times*, around the time of the film’s release. The story ran with the headline, “Tonya Harding Would Like Her Apology Now (Brodesser-Akner, 2018). We asked Harding if she has gotten an apology yet, and Harding said she actually never wanted one in the first place: “I just wanted people to stop lying about me and treat me like a freaking human being instead of a piece of shit they want to stomp on.”

Harding said she has received positive feedback from viewers who are not necessarily offering apologies, but admissions of learning something new, of having empathy where it did not exist before. She described the public response to the film:

There are thousands and thousands of people that are truly nice people that have a heart and have said wonderful, wonderful things to me. And I thank them. People go on Instagram now and say, ‘I just watched your movie *I, Tonya*, and I can’t believe you went through that, you’re such an inspiration and you’re strong,’ and I write back and say, ‘Thank you so much’ and ‘God bless.’

Before we concluded the interview, Harding reiterated that while she experienced real reputational harm, “there’s no apologies necessary. I just want to see the media cleaned up for the future generation.”

And how would they clean up?

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a man or a woman. You need to speak the truth,” she said.

Harding has felt the tide of public opinion turn incrementally since the film’s release, but the harm she experienced left her with strong opinions about the media: “The media do not care about you. They do not care about anything except making a story and making money.”

### Limitations

The main limitation was that we were told we would only have four questions with Harding, although we were not given a time limit. That somewhat hindered our preparation, as we felt we had a lot of ground to cover over a roughly-30-year period of time. That limitation subsided when Harding stayed on the phone as long as we needed and then responded to follow-up text questions. Additionally, we would have preferred this interview happen over Zoom, but Harding was ill and preferred to do a phone interview, which we honored. That said, according to Google Scholar, there have been 3,550 research papers published about Tonya Harding since 1994. This paper is the first and only scholarly research paper that has had Tonya Harding on the record for the sole purpose of scholarly research.

### Future Research

Because of the successful outcome of our research about Harding as it pertains to Hollywood’s role in repairing and restoring an image of her that the media tarnished, we believe future research of similar celebrities could benefit from critical analyses informed by image restoration theory. Monica Lewinsky was a private citizen who had her affair with then-President Bill Clinton come to public light and become the object of shame (Everbach, 2017). The scripted television series, *Impeachment: Crime Story* might have created a milieu similar to Harding’s for reputational repair.

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## **Exploring the Newspaper Representation on Victim-Blaming in Bangladesh: A Recent Case Study**

*By Md. Raisul Islam\* & Sk. Abu Raihan Siddique<sup>‡</sup>*

The study investigates the depiction of victim-blaming culture in Bangladeshi newspapers in the context of a specific suicidal case, employing content analysis to explore the representation of the particular incident on a grander scale than previously thought. Using the “Social Representation Theory,” this research focuses on the representation of the victim in Bangladeshi newspapers and attempts to establish the blaming culture prevalent in the country through a specific instance. This mixed-methods study analyzes 27 selected news items regarding the particular case. Data is gathered from five major newspapers (The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, KalerKantho, Samakal, and DeshRupantor) and evaluated using a range of statistical methods. This study describes the victim’s linguistic representation in society through textual analysis of four major elements. It is discovered in this paper that the involvement of a well-known figure was the most concerning issue, but that the print media, specifically newspapers, attempted to conceal that involvement by focusing on other factors such as the victim’s lifestyle, occupation, and identity, all of which were found to be of great concern by selective newspapers, resulting in negative public opinion toward the victim. According to the authors, even if they are subjected to ownership pressures or pressures from other perpetrators, the national dailies of Bangladesh should portray the actual situation as accurately as possible.

*Keywords:* explore, newspaper representation, victim-blaming, Bangladesh

### **Introduction**

According to researchers and academics, victim-blaming is one of the most pernicious social problems. The blaming culture preserves social control relations and enables individuals to distance themselves socially from crime victims while absolving perpetrators or people of higher punishment status (Ryan, 1971). In this instance, we find the news media’s critical role in shaping society’s perception of crime and public opinion toward wrongdoers and victims. According to Kellner, electronic media play a significant role in shaping popular perceptions of the world, influencing “what we judge to be good or terrible, positive or negative, moral or evil” (p. 24).

Numerous reports in Bangladesh’s print and electronic media emphasized rape victims’ blaming experiences, encouraging additional discussion. Numerous feminist studies reveal that how women are portrayed reflects their social status (Croteau and Hoynes, 1997). According to scholars, only the media, above and

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beyond all other social strengths, has a significant impact on individuals' behaviors and opinions (Chermak, 1995; Croteau and Hoynes, 1997). In this sense, by undervaluing victims and supporting perpetrators through victim-blaming language, the media conveys a clear message to its viewers that violence against women is not a serious crime and that, in certain situations, women are to blame for their victimization. Domestic abuse professionals and intimate friends and family members of the victims rarely use media sources to report on this type of situation (Bullock and Cubert, 2002; Byerly, 1994; Meyers, 1997; Taylor, 2009). As a result, journalists frequently reinforce preconceptions about victims and perpetrators and neglect to report on the underlying societal reasons for violence (Heeren and Messing, 2009, p. 208). Occasionally, the media generalize social culture and are always on the lookout for the victims' wrong approaches; if they discover any evidence of the victims' wrongdoing or unconsciousness, the real scenario then turns against the victims.

Several previous cases in Bangladesh demonstrated how women victims are undervalued, even though death does not shield them from the onslaught of misogynistic remarks from strangers. A more dangerous fact is the role of news organizations in playing a virulent and presumptuous role alongside others. Even after the perpetrator confessed, the case of a 17-year-old O-level student who was raped and died of her injuries in January 2021 was emphasized as a dramatic rape case, and she became the target of societal censure and defamation. The same thing occurred in another instance involving Shohagi Jahan Tonu, a second-year college girl who was raped and murdered by unidentified perpetrators, and in that case, her reputation was also placed on trial by several media outlets. Without sensationalizing reporting about a victim's lifestyle or previous relationships, the media is responsible for establishing the truth about a crime and the facts by avoiding unnecessary, irrelevant information that portrays the victim as someone who "deserves" what happened to her. By identifying these examples, researchers can ascertain the mainstream media's position on a recent case involving Mosharat Jahan Munia, a 21-year-old woman.

On April 26, Mosarat Jahan Munia, a 21-year-old college student, was discovered hanged in the capital's Gulshan neighborhood. This episode quickly made headlines when one of the country's business heavyweights, Sayem Sobhan Anvir, managing director of Bashundhara Group, filed a lawsuit alleging suicide facilitation. In this scenario, some media outlets chose not to publicize the incident, and as a result, the incident remained dormant for an entire day, even though the media covered it. Nonetheless, the incident was brought to light through social media, and then some of our news outlets began to cover the story, although they attempted to protect the accused by withholding their identity. Thus, a blame game ensues, with the media placing the responsibility squarely on the victim and her family. This research will explore how victim-blaming is depicted in society by using this specific example to comprehend better the media's role in establishing the blaming culture. Additionally, the study seeks to ascertain how the country's leading media sources addressed this issue and if the media attempted to unravel or exacerbate society's vicious, vulgar chatter.



## **Objectives**

This study examines the social depiction of suicides linked with the suicidal case of Mosharat Jahan Munia in news articles, utilizing the content analysis to examine how these instances are portrayed on a larger scale. The mixed-methods approach of this study enables us to examine representations in detail and the frequency with which certain characteristics of those representations, which have been demonstrated in previous research to be particularly prominent in suicide coverage, appear in these news items. The research plan is based on thoroughly understanding the dynamic relationship between victim blaming and the social construction of victims based on the response of many actors in our society in the aftermath.

## **Literature Review**

In the 1960s and 1970s, public opinion in the United States began to shift toward victimization and victim-blaming, adversely affected by the civil rights movement, the women's movement, which placed a greater emphasis on crime response and control, and the development of the mental health profession (Best, 1997, pp. 8–10; Karmen, 1956). Throughout the early 1970s, a number of feminist researchers in developed countries questioned concerns about victim accusation, particularly in the context of assault, arguing that by focusing solely on the victim's association, attention was diverted away from the root causes of women's victimization. Cliché depictions of female casualties imply that women who fall short of prescribed gender roles such as devoted husbands and mothers expedite their mistreatment (Belknap, 2007).

Jamieson et al. (2003) state that suicide contagion acts in one of two ways: by informing news audiences about viable tactics for self-murder or by lowering the barrier to action for vulnerable people. According to Stack (2005), research on the role of suicide news broadcasts as a cause for suicide is inconsistent. Roemer et al. (2009) revealed that media coverage of one suicide topic could persuade some people to end their lives, despite providing some protection for others.

Suicide impacts may be influenced by the altered substance of media suicide scope. In Austria, news reports about individuals who considered suicide but did not attempt it were associated with a decrease in suicide rates, but stories about suicides increasing were associated with an increase in suicide rates (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). The WHO-sponsored Multi-Country Study on women's health and domestic violence against women stated Tanzania had a greater rate of women aged 15 reporting abuse than Ethiopia (11.5 percent in Tanzania and 0.3 percent in Ethiopia). Pallittoet al. (2012) Additionally, the variation in predominance rates reflects the sample type. Consequences and context of the research and structural patterns of violence.

On October 24, 2017, Tarana Burke introduced the #MeToo hashtag. After more than a decade, #MeToo became a global hashtag in 2017 when Alyssa Milano and other women began discussing the Hollywood producer Harvey

Weinstein's sexual assault allegations. The slogan and hashtag swiftly grew in popularity, becoming an international movement. Milano invited the public to expose the scope of the sexual harassment problem by using the hashtag #MeToo. The hashtag was used 12 million times in the first 24 hours alone, generating widespread public and media interest (CBS News, 2017).

Gould et al. (2007) conducted a study of the U.S. media and discovered that the term "suicide" was included prominently in the headlines of more than 60% of articles, with almost 50% of news pieces describing the procedure. Tatum et al. (2010) also discovered that 77% of newspaper articles in the U.S. referenced the suicide method, whereas 69% contained no material about suicide prevention, and only 1% featured news items focusing on suicide risk factors or warnings. Meyers' (1994) assertion is backed up by Bullock and Cubert's (2002) findings, which concern news coverage, which is viewed as highly sensitive to gender myths and stereotypes. Additionally, these researchers' findings emphasized the critical nature of adding feminist perspectives when examining how domestic violence is presented in the news media. Another study examined changes in suicide reporting in Hong Kong newspapers before and after the World Health Organization's media guidelines titled "Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals" were published, as well as the commencement of an awareness campaign. The study discovered an increase in certain aspects of suicide coverage, which is especially visible in tabloid newspapers (Fu and Yip, 2008).

In some cases, victim-blaming was shown to be unaffected by inebriation level, although an alcoholic victim was viewed as more accountable for her attack than a sober victim (Richardson and Campbell, 1992). Additionally, social power appears to play a substantial influence in determining blame. Social forces, in particular, appear to play a considerable role in determining fault. Both kind sexism and the force relations subcomponent of the hostile sexism scale are concerned with maintaining an inconsistency in the force differential between individuals in the public sphere. Support for such beliefs contributes to an increase in notable victim-blaming (Abrams et al. 2003; Pederson and Strömwall, 2013; Viki and Abrams, 2002; Yamawaki et al., 2007).

Another study included interviews with journalists and discovered that journalists who cover suicide situations are more receptive to reporting on them as being in the public interest, and they firmly believe that an accurate portrayal of suicide could deter others from committing the same crimes (Collings and Kemp, 2010; Subramanian, 2014). This study paved the way for further research on suicide contagion. Indeed, it is a widespread belief that media publicity can readily trigger suicide (Collings and Kemp, 2010; Subramanian, 2014). Additionally, in a few news stories, exposing the subtle details of suicide is considered critical because it can help expose or hold accountable organizations such as hospitals or clinics that are perceived to have failed to protect high-risk individuals (Subramanian, 2014).

Additional research was conducted on suicide coverage in the Australian news media to determine whether the dissemination of the suicide reporting guideline document "Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness" enhanced coverage of this subject between 2000 and 2007 (Pirkis et al., 2009). The study discovered a

noticeable improvement in the quality of reporting across multiple dimensions, including a drop in the use of inapplicable terminology, a decrease in the detail of suicide methods, and an increase in the provision of information regarding support resources. Another study evaluating the outcome of suicide reporting guidelines in Austria found that the guidelines enhanced the quality of reporting, which indirectly reduced the suicide rate (Niederkrötenhaler and Sonneck, 2007).

According to Amin (2021), victim-blaming has always been a predicted outcome anytime a crime is committed against a woman. In a piece headed “Victim Blaming is a Crime,” he wrote in a piece titled “Victim Blaming is a Crime.” Who are its enablers? The author casts doubt on the mainstream media’s participation in a particular death case involving Mosharat Jahan Munia, who was discovered hung in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Following the filing of a complaint against a prominent business figure in a large conglomerate, it was discovered that the business personality engaged in loud character assassination of the young woman, who is unable to defend herself against the terrible charges leveled against her. When purported mobile phone conversations between the victim and the accused are leaked to social media and then picked up by mainstream media, mainstream media’s role becomes murky (Amin, 2021).

Blaming the victim is not a new occurrence; it appears to have been a part of human civilization throughout history. Rape victims, researchers, discover, experience a disproportionate amount of violence. As a result, scholars have classified rape into three categories: stranger rape, date/acquaintance rape, and marital rape. Stranger rape refers to a rape where the victim and offender have never met or worked together previously. When an individual is physically assaulted by someone she knows—for example, a companion, colleague, or someone with whom she has had a few dates—it is referred to as a date/ acquaintance rape (Calhoun et al., 1976; Check and Malamuth, 1983; Estrich, 1987; Johnson and Jackson, 1988; Quackenbush, 1989). In all of these instances, women experience social harassment, and society is more hesitant to place the entire blame on them, as society believes that women should be more cautious about fraternizing with males.

### **Research Questions**

According to the most recent information of Bangladeshi newspaper representations of blame culture, the study investigates the news from the country’s most reputable newspapers, explicitly seeking to report the victim throughout this period. The following questions will guide our analysis:

1. How does the news coverage tend to blame the victim for her suicide through direct or indirect victim-blaming language?
2. How the newspaper tends not to highlight the issue? Moreover, if they were pushed to cover this incident, what would their (the news media) approach be?
3. How often do the articles portray the event as isolated as a societal issue?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Serge Moscovici's theory of social representations has impacted scholars from various fields but is primarily unknown among media researchers. The theory proposes a new method for examining how the media and individuals build societal and political concerns that define our generation or a particular period in history. Social representations are about the processes through which aspects are considered that result in shared interests and sentiments that help to enhance the social bonds that connect societies, organizations, and communities. It concentrates attention on events that become the subject of passionate debate, high emotions, conflicts, and ideological struggle, and as a result, it transforms society's collective thinking. As a communication theory, it establishes a link between society and the individual and between the media and the general audience. The concept is relevant in various ways for media and communication studies. It describes several communication mechanisms that explain how ideas are transmitted and transformed into what is considered common sense in everyday contexts.

The SRT is a social bonding theory that clarifies what links us and teaches us how social bonds are formed (Rateau et al., 2012). The idea relates to the process of collective meaning formation, emphasizing phenomena that become the topic of debate, intense emotions, conflicts, and ideological struggle, hence altering society's collective thinking. A communication theory establishes a connection between society and individuals, the media, and the public. The idea applies to the media and communication (Hoiijer, 2011), as it describes how media texts address and depict national, regional, and societal concerns and events to an audience. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) assert that "representations are embedded in communication and individual minds, shared in a manner comparable to language." Washer (2004) defines these representations as "pictures, phrases, descriptions, instances, models, and metaphors that form the world." The researchers seek to focus on media representations and measure what the public generalizes or believes, much like a "media effects" approach would. From a social learning perspective, this work may serve as a model for suicide behavior, influencing vulnerable readers who may attempt to replicate similar activities. According to preliminary research, Internet searches for keywords connected to techniques increase significantly following news coverage, including suicide methods (Chang et al. 2011).

The purpose of this paper is to present the theory and its communication principles and make them relevant for media studies theorists and researchers. Using the "Social Representation Theory," this research focuses on the victim's representation and uncovers a culture of victim-blaming in Bangladeshi newspapers. Rather than monitoring what the general public believes or even thinks, a "media impacts" strategy would focus on public perceptions of a specific instance rather than monitoring what the overall public believes or even thinks, as would be the case in this research.

## **Methodology**

The research examined the first ten days following the case's discovery, from April 26, 2021, to May 5, 2021, to ascertain the early pattern of news coverage for this selected case in the country's top-tier publications. This timeframe was chosen based on current events to comprehend the incident's aftermath and become acquainted with the mainstream media's (Newspaper) discourse around the chosen case. This study will use a content analysis approach to investigate the print media's strategy for building a representation of this case by linguistically assessing all news items published within the chosen timeframe.

Based on their circulation, five prominent daily newspapers (The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, KalerKantho, Samakal, and DeshRupantor) were chosen to investigate how the mainstream print media in Bangladesh addressed this type of issue and what their position and motivations were in presenting this type of case to the general public.

The figures are derived from a survey of five nationally distributed publications. The "ProthomAlo" is Bangladesh's most prominent, extensively circulated, and widely read the newspaper, with over 6.6 million daily readers. It is owned by Transcom Group, one of its most prominent business conglomerates (Prothom Alo, 2018). The Daily Star is also included as a sample because it is the most widely read English daily in Bangladesh, with nearly 45,000 circulations (BD-INFO.com, 2020), and is owned by the same group as ProthomAlo, while the "KalerKantho" is one of the most widely read vernacular daily newspapers in Bangladesh, with 2.9 million circulations, and is owned by the same group as Prothom Alo (Wikipedia, 2021). It is a subsidiary of East-West Media Group, a subsidiary of the Bashundhara Group, Bangladesh's largest conglomerate. Due to its popularity, following Prothom Alo (Wikipedia, 2021) is also included as a sample. This illustrious vernacular daily is owned by Times Media Limited, a subsidiary of Ha-Meem Group, one of Bangladesh's major textile and textile companies. Furthermore, the "DeshRupantor" is regarded as one of the capital's most current daily publications, owned by the Rupayan Group. As previously stated, these newspapers were chosen as a sample based on their circulation and popularity, as determined by National Media Survey numbers (NMS).

The quantitative content indicates the data frequency for an inevitable occurrence, including articles about the victims, primary stories, and the number of topics. A total of 27 articles from Munia's news feed were chosen for examination. The content was culled from the selective daily's internet archive, where the printed issues are typically preserved. To gather the information, we used a combination of observation and note-taking techniques. According to the research, the Daily Star published ten articles in the first ten days following the tragedy. Seven, five, and five news stories have been published by Prothom Alo, Samakal, and DeshRupantor, respectively, about the topic. Research on the KalerKantho has yielded no information regarding the episode, which is unusual (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample of the Study

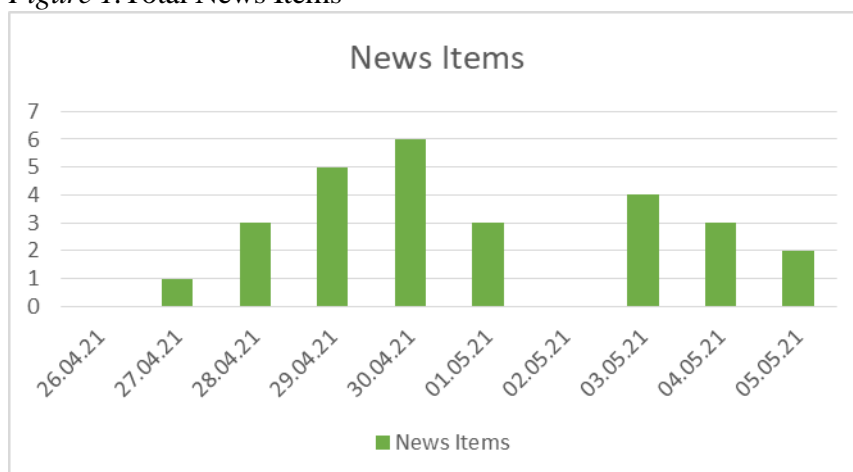
Name of the newspapers	Sample of the study	Percentage
The Daily Star	10	37.00%
Prothom Alo	7	26.00%
Kaler Kantho	0	0.00%
Samakal	5	18.50%
Desh Rupantor	5	18.50%

The purpose of this study is to identify some similar themes examined in the current literature on victim-blaming and the media's reaction to the victim. The researchers found four primary themes: protecting the accused, accusing the victim of suicide, blaming the victim's family, and fabricating narratives through perplexing tales. The qualitative analysis discusses how the victim's words, phrases, and images are formed in mainstream media stories to support the common societal ideology of blaming women and how the media's political economy is constructed. In general, this study attempts to identify the blaming culture generated by the Bangladeshi media by evaluating a specific case.

### Results and Discussion

Between April 26 and May 5, 2021, 27 news items were discovered in five newspapers. The news contains standard pieces such as filling out cases from the victims' families and following the investigation's progress, but not a single story appears as an editorial or op-ed column. As indicated initially, the case becomes complicated and compounded by the media when one of the most prominent corporate personalities is charged. Due to the businessman's ownership of several media organizations, the KalerKantho did not publish a single news item on the subject during the designated period. Additionally, all five newspapers placed a lower premium on publishing suicide news, as researchers discovered no news items on April 26, even in these days' online editions. The following day (April 27), only Prothom Alo published a single news column. The Daily Star and Samakal, on the other hand, both published news about the incident on April 28, while the DeshRupantor did so on April 29. The researchers discovered that most news pieces (6 out of 27) about Munia's suicide attempt were published on April 30, with The Daily Star publishing 50% (3 out of 6) of the news items on that day. Furthermore, this study found that after May 4, publications appear to shift their focus away from the tragedies, with only two news articles discovered on May 5 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Total News Items



The issue's lack of publicity could be due to a desire to conceal the name of the accused businessman, SayemSobhanAnvir, Managing Director of Bashundhara Group, and a pervasive societal mentality of blaming the female victims. According to this article, The Daily Star published the most items, while Prothom Alo published the second most. This may have occurred due to the struggle between two powerful conglomerates (Transcom and Bashundhara), as the Transcom group owns the two daily newspapers. Except for KalerKantho, the other two dailies have expressed their unintentional support for the accused businessman. The Daily Star placed seven things on the front page out of ten, while the Prothom Alo placed four items on the front page out of seven. On the contrary, Samakal's front page was devoid of news articles. Interestingly, while the DeshRupantor had three things on its front page, the daily news articles criticized the victim and her family.

### Analysis

Identifying themes, the meaning of words, sense-making strategies, and images are the primary goals of textual analysis, adding more to the content analysis (Patton, 1990). Four themes will be examined to provide an answer to the first and second research questions, which are concerned with societal representation and the approach of the media in constructing a representation of suicide, respectively: a) Protecting the accused; b) Blame on the victim for suicide; c) Blame on the victim's family, and d) Creating stories through confusing tales. In this case, the involvement of a well-known figure was the most concerning issue for the media, so it is essential to observe the media's role in highlighting the incident to its readers or audience. From the quantitative perspective, researchers found the same items placed with different perspectives by different dailies. Researchers tend to identify the newspapers' linguistic representation of society through textual analysis by discussing the four major themes.

### **Representing the Accused**

The newspaper is exceptionally effective at constructing social values and culture. Thus, it is up to print journalism to reconstruct the actual worth or negative value. Media outlets, specifically the print, must rely on their owners to address any difficulties in the present era. The political economy of the newspaper has become a familiar narrative, as very few media organizations are identified solely by their activities rather than by the group of companies to which they belong. When an incident occurs against the group or the group's owner, the particular media outlet has no other alternative to concealing the incident.

Additionally, it remains silent on portraying the issue to its audience or society. The researchers discovered that the KalerKantho engaged in the same behavior in the suicide case of Munia as they did with their managing director. Though the newspaper is the third most widely circulated daily publication, it has shown no interest in publishing-related stories. According to researchers, this form of quiet supports and protects the accused. The researchers discovered that The Daily Star and Prothom Alo regularly publish news on this subject. However, both media have highlighted a passage that is found in favor of the accused. On April 27, researchers discovered the first mention of the subject in Prothom Alo. However, the article highlighted the victim's relationship status, as in "the college student was in a relationship." Thus, the publication purposefully attempted to create a poor image of the victim, implying a desire to protect the guilty.

Additionally, both dailies (Prothom Alo and The Daily Star) have constantly emphasized the rent for the flat where the girl (Munia, the victim) used to live alone. After two days of investigation and adequate treatment, The Daily Star featured the occurrence on its front page on April 28. The terms "love affair" and "romantic relationship" were frequently used by the newspaper, which the researchers defined as a way to vilify the victim. On the other hand, the DeshRupantor was more active in defending the guilty and blaming the victim and her family. The newspaper was highly interested in publishing a feature story blaming the victim for his or her character flaws.

### **Assigning Blame to the Victim**

Generally, when a crime happens, the offender's involvement and activities receive the most focus throughout the discussion of the incident. On the other hand, the media tends to do the same thing. However, when a sexual offense happens, the victim is thrust into the spotlight rather than the offender. Likewise, the media does. The media is fascinated by the victim role, and victims are frequently blamed for their victimization. The study discovered that newspapers were keen on blaming the victim in this instance. Even worse, several newspapers were so unconcerned about the culprit that they did not examine the current situation. The Daily Star and Prothom Alo were also found to carry regular follow-up news, such as the case's filing, the accused's bail petition, the autopsy report, and the police's overall assessment. However, both daily describe the victim, Munia, and exaggerate the accused's relationship issues. The researchers identified



this attitude as indirect blame directed at the victim. The Samakal published only five regular news stories about the occurrence, indicating that the paper paid little attention to the suicidal case. In addition to the daily frame, the paper emphasizes the importance of relationships. In its feature reporting, The DeshRupantor frequently finds reasons to blame the victim. According to the data in this study, DeshRupantor published only five publications during the sample period. No item is perceived to be published as hard news; instead, the daily intends to feature the victim somehow.

On April 29, the daily featured a story titled “Munia gets greedy due to her sister’s greed” on its main page. Additionally, the victim’s daily published images violate the editorial rules of media representation. The term “greedy” in the headline implies that the victim is responsible for her exploitation. The terms “uncontrolled lifestyle,” “targeting well-known people,” and “great ambition” are also used to place the victim’s responsibility purposely. As we all know, media outlets play a critical role in molding public attitudes (Hodgetts and Chamberlain, 2007).

Additionally, this study establishes that the media does not always present factual evidence. These distinctions in language are utilized to reinforce stereotyped beliefs. In this instance, this type of perception fosters social divisions and promotes the media’s unethical beliefs.

### **Place Blame on the Family**

In our society, when an occurrence happens to women, society usually derogates the victims for being more responsible for having been victimized, and as usual, the family of the victims has to face negative responses from the society as our culture is highly male-dominated like other media the newspaper also shows its character by supporting the societal culture. Ultimately, the victims and their families are heavily blamed, and somehow their social lives have become congested. A content analysis of this study finds some stories highly blaming the victim’s family for the victimization. Researchers find the daily DeshRupantor more interested in blaming the victim and her family. On April 30, the daily highlighted the role of Munia’s sister in blackmailing the reputed wealthy person. The daily tends to present that Munia’s family are too responsible for her suicide, and their “over greediness” has made Munia more reckless in her lifestyle. Some of the images of Munia’s family that led to Munia as a bullshitter are described as “selfishness,” “unwise decisions,” and “blackmailing tendency.” There is evidence that the national daily DeshRupantor has been influenced by the accused or offender, using words and images to blame the victim and her family members in postings on social media. In this sense, the Daily Star researchers found the pictures and detailed family identification of the victim and her family were published with the news articles, while no related pictures of the accused were seen printed, and even the names of the offenders were concealed cautiously by the newspapers.

### **Creating a News Story Based on “Misleading Tales”**

Contradictions abound in these stories, leaving readers perplexed as to the actual situation. Among the selected publications, the Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, and the Samakal all published regular news, but in some cases, all three emphasized the victim's link with the criminal and her lifestyle the most. As discussed, words or phrases that assign guilt to the sufferer were discovered. Those words might be used to characterize the purpose of the newspapers' highlighting specific articles. Additionally, when the victim's brother filed another complaint against another accused/offender on May 2, all three publications expressed a strong interest in publishing the news with great attention, as they discovered another narrative to share with the public to blame the victim. Such media attention is intended to divert attention away from the facts, making it more difficult to blame the actual criminal. The other daily, DeshRupantor, made prominently presenting some stories to defend the accused explicitly. On May 5, the daily published a headline captioned, “Is Nusrat (victim Munia's sister) about to face the accuser?” The daily attempted to blame the victims' family by fabricating several misleading stories, such as suggesting that the victim's family is more guilty of victimization and attempting to prove that the victim's sister may have orchestrated an assassination plot for the victim's suicide. This newspaper brought to light the attachment of another offender (SharunChowdury) with another plot of the narrative, as the paper underlined in its report that the victim had another relationship with Sharun, and her family was well informed about it. The victim was characterized in this case through some perplexing newspaper stories. Nowadays, anytime an accused person is discovered to be necessary, the media outlets endeavor to protect him/her, and as part of this, the media attempt to disarticulate the inquiry process by disseminating inflated stories about the victim's character.

### **Conclusion**

The study examines the victim-blaming tendency evident in the significant Bangladeshi newspapers' reporting of the college girl Munia's suicidal death. This study discovered that the five national dailies devote less attention to even publishing the daily news. The subsequent reaction to the newspaper pieces varied according to the perspective taken by the various media outlets. Ownership is critical in this case, as the media's primary focus was on the involvement of a well-known media owner and corporate executives. As a result, the media outlet of the accused, KalerKantho, has shown no interest in publishing a single piece of news on the subject. The victim's socioeconomic and demographic status and the traits that accompanied it were the most contentious points. Among the five selective tier-1 newspapers, The Daily Star did its best to elevate the topic for publication, even though it took time to do so. The Daily Star did not use the victims' photographs due to editorial guidelines, but the most widely read vernacular daily, Prothom Alo, did. The DeshRupantor was discovered to be more

aggressive in blaming the victim and attempted to shield the accused by blaming the victim's relatives and fabricating inflated and confusing stories about the victim, Munia. The study discovers a resemblance between this issue and Social Representation theory in this area. As part of the social representations process, the newspaper conventionalizes the Munia issue, as well as the people and events that certain newspapers meet by giving the issue a characteristic shape, categorizing the issue, and gradually establishing the issue as a distinct and shared cognition. The patriarchal tradition of Bangladeshi society frequently depicts men in prominent and influential roles; this study demonstrates how this culture has been developed through the newspaper. Blaming the victim and family diverts attention away from the culprit, and the media's portrayal of the offender, as well as cultural factors, persecutes the victim's family. The victim's lifestyle, work, and identity are all deemed cause for alarm by the selective publications. This type of conduct generates strong public opinion against the victims, which hurts the victim's and her family's reputations as well as the larger society. This may incite the perpetrator to commit other acts of violence against girls and women.

### Reflection

The media's role in establishing a violence-free, gender-equal society is more critical. If the media becomes more attentive to fulfilling this constructive function, the benefits will accrue to women, society, and the country's overall growth.

Additionally, this study recommended that the newspaper portray the true situation regardless of ownership demands or pressures from other perpetrators. From a societal standpoint, the news media should be more accountable and exercise greater authenticity. The victim-blaming culture must end, and the newspaper must reflect healthy communication through proper investigation.

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## **A User Research on Alternative Media**

*By Deniz Demir\**

This research aims to contribute to the debate on the concept of alternative media by trying to understand what this term means for its users. The responses that emerged in the focus group discussions revealed which values and which characteristics are important in the eyes of the participants to define a media as “alternative”. The interviews were analyzed with the grounded theory method and the themes and sub-themes were determined with the open coding method. The first point to note is that interviewees consider a wide range of media as alternative. These include a channel affiliated with a large conglomerate; news broadcasters of different countries; some small-scale media organizations, journalists broadcasting through social media platforms, opposition and pro-government publishers coexist. In the study, it was determined that the alternative media users of the focus groups attach more importance to the content than the formal features such as being non-commercial.

*Keywords:* alternative media, mainstream media, user research, journalism, focus group

### **Introduction**

This study contributes to the debate on the concept of alternative media, by trying to understand what this term means for its users. Focus group discussions with journalism students who are also alternative media users disclosed which principles and features are indispensable for the participants to describe a media as alternative. Marmara University Journalism Department students were chosen as the sample of the study. The first point to note is that interviewees consider a wide range of media as alternative. Among them, there are channels like Fox TV, which is actually affiliated with a large holding; news channels of different countries such as BBC Turkish, Deutsche Welle Turkish and Sputnik Turkey; and also small-scale organizations such as Onedio.com, 140journos and independent journalists broadcasting on YouTube.

Although the majority of interviewees criticize the mainstream media for its links to capital and the government, and say that alternative media should definitely act with a different motive, they still consider a commercial establishment such as Fox TV as an alternative media. Of course, this situation is not independent of Turkey’s political atmosphere. This research found that alternative media users attach more importance to critical content, like publications addressing issues that the mainstream media ignores, and diverse voices, than to structural features like being non-commercial and acting with non-profit purposes. This paper, first of all, discusses different definitions of alternative media by researchers working in this

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field. It then reviews the alternative media and user research literature. Finally, the paper presents the research focusing on what alternative media means to its users, including methods and findings.

### **Defining Alternative Media**

Alternative media has always been a difficult concept to define for researchers working on the subject. Looking at discussions about this concept, researchers mostly focus on specifying which feature of alternative media makes it “alternative”. For example, Downing (2001) defines alternative media as “radical media” and emphasizes its connection with social movements. Rodriguez (2001) claims that the element that renders alternative media alternative is the participation of ordinary citizens in the news production process, defining it as a kind of citizen’s media. According to Waltz (2005), alternative media is an activist media. Atton (2002) argues that alternative media should be autonomous, horizontally organized and open to participation. Christian Fuchs (2010) argues that the content of alternative media should create an alternative to existing content, but shouldn’t be necessarily alternative in terms of form.

A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America by Armstrong (1981) is one of the first academic works on alternative media. In this work, Armstrong links alternative media with social movements. He argues that the underground press, which diversified and increased in number with the rise of social movements, was the precursor of alternative media. Following Armstrong, Downing, in his famous work *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication*, examines the relationship between alternative media and social movements and infers that social movements can be created or kept alive by alternative media. When social movements fade, alternative media becomes a less used medium (Downing, 1984).

One of the first attempts to define alternative media was carried out by a British research group called Comedia. According to their definition, which positions alternative media as the exact opposite of mainstream media, alternative media should be against the established order and the capitalist system, should be closed to all mainstream interpretations and should not be traditional in terms of form (Comedia, 1984). Subsequent authors did not find this early definition satisfactory and especially the positioning of alternative media as the exact opposite of mainstream media was criticized. Today, many researchers consider alternative and mainstream media as parts of a whole or as a spectrum (Harcup, 2005).

Downing combined theories of power and hegemony with theories of alternative media creation and argued that social imperatives arising from power and hegemony led to the emergence of alternative media in many different forms. Following the lead of this study, other researchers expanded the function of alternative media to include preparing ground for various resistances, mobilizations and changing attitudes against the hegemonic structures of the society, taking it beyond merely being the voice of social movements (Atkinson, 2010). From a



similar point of view, Atton emphasizes the necessity of producing a model for alternative media that is not limited to political media and resistance media. Instead, Atton's purpose is to develop a model that includes artistic and literary media, in which relatively new cultural structures such as electronic journals and hybrid forms of electronic communication can be included (Atton, 2002).

Dominating the literature in this field is the view that the feature that makes alternative media "alternative" is the participation of ordinary users. Such views, which are called participatory approaches, argue that the active participation of non-professional users is a necessity in the production of alternative media. Advocates of participatory approaches emphasize the liberating effects for society of user participation in the production processes. According to Servaes (1999, p. 269), participatory communication is the most important element of social change, cultural development and democratization. Carpentier (2007, p. 88) claims that participation in alternative media strengthens the civic movement and enables citizens to become active in many micro-areas. Participatory media challenges the concentration of symbolic power (Couldry, 2003), and empowers ordinary people by giving them a voice (Carpentier, 2007; Dagron, 2004; Rodriguez, 2003) and helping them to live a self-determined life (Rodriguez, 2003).

Researchers approaching alternative media in the context of participatory media draw attention to how alternative media organizational structures differs from those of mainstream media. According to these researchers, user participation, collective and horizontal organizational structure and non-commercial financing are the distinguishing features of alternative media. Such participatory media approaches reveal participation in both media production and media management as indispensable features of defining alternative media. According to Atton, alternative publications should attach more importance to the free flow of ideas than profitability; it should be interactive, relevant to everyday life and the ordinary needs of people. Although collective organizational structure has different aspects, involving readers in the decision-making process is one of the most important ones. The vertical, top-down communication model commonly used by many media outlets is not suitable for alternative media. Horizontal communication between authors and readers is essential.

In describing alternative media, Atton emphasizes the fact that alternative media is a media that bypasses traditional commercial production and distribution, often organized and produced by ordinary people. According to Atton (2015, p. 1), alternative media is primarily associated with social and cultural practices that enable people to participate in media organization, production and distribution, and is responsible for representing phenomena that are underrepresented, excluded or ignored in the mainstream media. Alternative media are responsible for monitoring mainstream media's power and specifically its political power, and to warn the public against it. The role of alternative media as an observer of those in power is one of its fundamental characteristics (Forde, 2015, p. 296). These authors highlighted participatory approaches to alternative media, active participation in the production and circulation of media content; and argued that if this were achieved, alternative media will become a participatory citizen's media (Atton, 2002; Carpentier, 2007; Rodriguez, 2001).

Approaches that criticize the participatory approach, on the other hand, place the focus of alternative media on its content. They advocate the idea that alternative media should spread a worldview that questions dominant realities, that it should produce content for groups that are not represented by the mainstream media, and that these groups should have their voices heard with a critical perspective. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) argue that it is critical content that makes alternative media alternative.

Alternative media can only help social transformation and contribute to the establishment of a truly participatory society by producing critical content. For Sandoval and Fuchs, it is essential that alternative media be critical at the structural level and that media producers provide critical content that responds to the needs of individuals. As such, it is not necessary that these media are also alternative in terms of their production process and form as an economic product. In other words, commercial media and non-participatory media can also be called alternative media if they produce critical content (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). Although alternative media is ideally positioned completely differently from the mainstream media both in terms of structure and content, many researchers claim that this distinction is blurred in practice and the field needs different theories to deal with this. A small-scale, individualized alternative media alone cannot be a powerful part of large, transformative social movements. In many cases, such media remains a mere expression of a lifestyle that satisfies its producers. However, a voice that cannot reach large audiences is far from being a significant one and is therefore relatively ineffective (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2015).

Adaklı (2021), in her analysis on the problems of alternative journalism in Turkey, similarly states that when journalism experiences a lack of qualified labor and financial resources, the quality of its product declines in direct proportion. She adds that for good reporting, well-organized databases, professional reporters, a variety of news sources, and a significant source of finance are needed. In other words, she argues that a certain institutionalism is essential for doing good journalism. According to Adaklı (2021), if alternative media wants to do quality journalism, it has to earn an income in order to access serious financial resources and qualified workforce, as required by the capitalist market system we live in.

### **User Research Literature on Alternative Media**

While discussions on defining alternative media have been shaped around participatory theories and their criticisms, very little work has been done on how users themselves define this media. Considering the alternative media definitions that center the active participation of users, this situation seems paradoxical. Downing (2003) states that this gap needs to be filled urgently, and what alternative media means for this active community should be explored. He states that the vast majority of user research on mainstream media has been conducted by companies and is not open to public knowledge. Such research is mostly shaped around demographic data and looks at why media content attracts attention, but in the context of profitability. In other words, research on media users consists of

quantitative research, such as rating measurements, that is closely tied to marketing dynamics. Downing states that although some small-scale ethnographic studies were conducted in the 1980s, academic research on media users has followed this commercial trend. Commercial and subsequent academic research differs radically from research into understanding alternative media and its relevance to its users. As such, interacting with and understanding media users is definitely lacking in research on alternative media.

There are some exceptions in this area. One of them is Rauch's (2015) quantitative study of alternative media users in the United States. In her research, Rauch examined the dialectic between mainstream media and alternative media, and investigated what people thought the characteristics of alternative media should be, through a questionnaire to hybrid users, who follow both media. Another study on alternative media users is Harcup's (2011) *Alternative Journalism as Active Citizenship*, in which the author explores the relationships between alternative forms of journalism and the concepts of democracy and active citizenship. In his qualitative empirical research with alternative media users in England, Harcup concluded that although there is no consensus on a universal and precise definition of alternative media, this media can play a role in nurturing, motivating and activating a phenomenon that can be defined as active citizenship. In Turkey, too, an empirical study has been carried out on people who are both producers and users of alternative media (Kejanlıoğlu, 2012). This research focuses on the Independent Communication Network (Bianet) as an example of alternative media in Turkey. Using qualitative research methods, the study focuses on both alternative media producers and users; it questions participation, interaction and the conditions in which users can be productive.

In the digital age, new media platforms have provided tools appropriate for the expansion of oppositional and dissident public spaces, facilitated the participation of users in alternative media activities, and made it possible for alternative media to reach wider audiences (Vatikiotis, 2019). For this reason, alternative media has become a focus of interest both in academic literature and among users in recent years. Another reason for this interest is dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. This dissatisfaction leads those who are relatively more media literate to alternative news sources (Müller and Schulz, 2021). In recent years, trust in corporate media has seriously declined in some countries around the world, including Turkey (Newman, 2021). All these reasons have made the subject of alternative media, and what it means in the eyes of its users, come to the fore as a significant research topic.

### **Research: What Does Alternative Media Mean for its Users?**

This research is based on focus group discussions with alternative media users who are also journalism students. Discussions were held on how interviewees define alternative media, which media they position as alternative, which alternative media they follow, and which indispensable feature makes alternative media "alternative". Students from Marmara University's Department of

Journalism were chosen as the research sample. Of course, it should be kept in mind that the findings do not cover all alternative media users, they are limited to this selected micro sample and depend on the date and place of the research. Based on the view that every empirical effort can contribute to theory (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2003), the research is a contribution to the gap in the literature discussed above, by trying to describe how alternative media is defined by its users.

## **Methodology**

This study used the focus group interview as its method. The main purpose of the focus group is not to collect large numbers of statistically measurable data (Krueger and Casey, 2009), but it is a well-established research method in which insightful findings are obtained (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). While survey-based methods are more suitable for quantitative research, focus groups in qualitative research are ideal for examining people's experiences, ideas, wishes and concerns in a social context (Harcup, 2015). The type of social interaction in focus groups is seen as an integral part of user research. Rather than asking each person individually, researchers in a focus group study encourage participants to talk to each other, ask questions to each other, and comment on each other's experiences. In this way, in social sciences in general and media and communication studies in particular, focus group discussion helps the researcher understand how meaning is socially constructed in everyday speech (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

This emphasis on sociability and collectivity makes the focus group an ideal method for research on alternative media users, in that alternative media also has a social and collective basis (Harcup, 2015). The focus group is also well suited for studying communities that do not passively consume but actively participate, as it creates a shared meaning and treats participants not as individuals acting alone but as interacting members of a social group (Harcup, 2011). This method is considered essential for this study because it gives the chance to establish a direct relationship with the subject group, to address theoretical questions about alternative media, and to have direct interaction through which to understand the group.

Focus group interviews were conducted as group interviews in which the moderator led the discussion and prompted participants to participate by asking open-ended questions. The purpose of these focus group discussions, from an analytical point of view, was to identify some patterns based on the definitions made by the participants (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p. 119). In the analysis of the interviews, a grounded theory approach was used, in which the interviews were transcribed and read, and recurring themes were identified. Within the framework of this approach, the analysis took place in the form of researching concepts, key themes and categories on an open coding axis. In the focus group discussions, the moderator brought up the issues she wanted to be discussed and initially asked the participants in the group one by one what alternative media meant, and then encouraged them to continue the discussion. With one or two exceptions, the participants actively discussed the issues. In cases where the

participants hesitated to speak, the moderator stepped in and encouraged the interviewees to express themselves by asking questions.

### Research Findings

Focus group discussions were held in March 2021. All participants were informed about the purpose, subject and scope of the research. Data collection and analysis techniques were mentioned and the consent of participants was obtained. While analyzing the data, a coding was used to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. As seen in Table 1, participants consisted of six women and four men, aged between twenty-two and twenty-six, studying journalism at Marmara University. Discussions were held about how the interviewees define alternative media, which media they position as alternative, which alternative media they follow, and which indispensable feature makes alternative media “alternative”.

The research found that alternative media users give importance to both content and form of the broadcasts/publications they follow. As discussed above, acting on non-profit and non-commercial principles, not having a hierarchical structure from top to bottom, being open to user interaction and producing critical content are the main features referred to by researchers in the field when defining alternative media. These characteristics were similarly brought up in the interviews. Dissatisfaction with the mainstream media is also one of the themes frequently mentioned in the interviews. Female participants in the focus group were coded with the letter F and male participants with the letter M, and their ages were also included for explanatory purposes.

*Table 1.* Focus Group Interviewees

Interviewees	Age
F1	22
F2	24
F3	26
F4	23
F5	26
F6	23
M1	22
M2	25
M3	25
M4	25

All of the participants in the focus group were residing in Istanbul. Among the interviewees, F2 (24) and F4 (23) were doing internships in media organizations that they called alternatives. F1 (22) and M3 (25) were blogging about current social events. F3 (26) was a volunteer in a project on gender equality in a non-governmental organization. F1 (22) was making regular payments to an organization she called alternative media. Others stated that they would pay for an alternative entity that meets their expectations. Six of them had participated in a

number of social actions, including the Feminist Night March<sup>1</sup> and no war demonstrations. While many of them stated that they follow the mainstream media from time to time with a critical point of view, they also stated that their main news sources are media organizations which they describe as alternatives. As a result of the analysis of the focus group interviews the main categories of form and content came to the fore, although many sub-categories were included in the definitions of alternative media made by the interviewees.

## Discussion

### The Form of Alternative Media

Almost all of the interviewees agreed that alternative media should be a media that broadcasts digitally over the internet. When F1 referred to alternative media, she imagined something that can be accessed over the internet and spread quickly. F2 said that she thinks that alternative media is “a media that everyone can reach with one click thanks to the internet, rather than print”, while M1 stated that this digital broadcasting situation is a necessity rather than a choice: “Is there any alternative media other than that? I don’t think there will be much outside of the internet since they can’t afford it financially, because I think it requires a large amount of capital.” According to M2, alternative media are news sites that we can access more easily over the internet, unlike the news broadcast on television or printed in the newspaper. It was often expressed that alternative media is a media that is easily accessible and uses digital publishing tools for both financial and practical reasons.

The issue of active participation of users, which is frequently emphasized by researchers in the alternative media literature, was expressed by only two interviewees. F6 stated that she thinks that alternative media provides more space for its followers to express themselves because they are in digital environment, that this supports freedom of expression and that interaction with the reader/audience is higher compared to traditional media. F2, on the other hand, discussed participation in alternative media in terms of citizen media practice and stated that “many people now contribute to alternative media directly through social media, which we call citizen journalism.” F2, who also interned at an alternative media organization, stated that she thinks she is a part of alternative media formations through her interactions with social media. According to the interviewees, this interaction with users also shapes the language used by alternative media. F3 stated that alternative media has a very high potential for being “cancelled” when they use a wrong expression, and for this reason they behave more sensitively in the language they use: “The person who will limit alternative media is not the boss, but society itself. I think they are being more careful because they are in contact with society.”

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<sup>1</sup>Feminist Night March is the march of various women’s organizations against patriarchy, sexism, discrimination and male violence every 8 March in Turkey.

Horizontal organization styles, which is discussed by alternative media researchers and thought to be one of alternative media's indispensable features, was also expressed by one of the interviewees. F4, who had an internship at 140journos a small-scale media organization, stated that there should be no hierarchy among alternative media workers: "I did my internship at 140 for a month. It was a beautiful environment. Well, they said themselves 'we created a democracy here, we don't approach each other very professionally. We get ideas from each other, nobody is the boss'. They work in this way. I think that most alternative media work or should work this way, that there is no hierarchy, and that attracts the attention of young people in terms of freedom."

Non-profit or non-commercial features, which are considered another important feature of alternative media, also came up in the focus group discussions. M2 stated that alternative media is "a media based on ideas beyond certain kinds of capital" and that it should consist of "small-scale non-profit organizations." M3 stated that if alternative media is successful, it can be bought out by a large corporate company as a way for alternative media organizations to make money. M3 thought that this would be perfectly acceptable (M3). In response to M3, F3 stated that such a situation encompasses the risk of alternative media being included in mainstream media: "It will definitely be censored. In the first place, it started to work as an alternative media in order not to be censored. If some big company buys it, it will continue to function like any other media or newspaper that has been included in the mainstream media, and we will continue to receive censored news." The interviewees defined the alternative media category and gave definitions that would differentiate it from the mainstream media. Connections with capital and power, the dominance of one point of view, and unreliability were the most important problems that participants had with the mainstream media. These factors were also the most important reasons that pushed them to alternative media organizations.

### **Content of Alternative Media**

Just like the form of alternative media, the content of alternative media constitutes another core theme that emerged in the interviews. While defining alternative media in the discussions, interviewees often compared it with the mainstream media in terms of content. The first of the sub-categories that stands out in terms of content is that alternative media should have a critical content compared to the mainstream media. F6 stated that alternative media's perspective is different from the mainstream, and, of course, it should be more critical, M1 emphasizes the diversity of topics in alternative media in contrast to the dominance of one point of view in the mainstream: "I think that alternative media is more beautiful in terms of diversity of topics. Almost everyone in the mainstream media says the same thing like a parrot. Most of them have the same ownership structure. That's why there's a variety out there, and at least it's more attractive to me because they don't fall into repetition. I have completely shifted to alternative media in following the news."

On the other hand, F1 stated that there is no big difference between the mainstream and alternative media in terms of news and that the important difference is in the perspective between the two:

“The mainstream has little opportunity to be critical due to current ownership structures. That’s why, in general, it’s up to the alternative media. Because of the economic structure they have assumed. And because there is no such thing as a barrier to entry in the industry thanks to digitalization. Since they do not spend a significant amount of capital, they can gather news more easily and create their own audiences. They undertake such a mission reluctantly. Because I read the same news that we get in the mainstream media, for example, in *Gazete Pencere*<sup>2</sup>, but [the alternative media] offers me a different perspective. For example, it makes me question what is in the news with its choice of words. In that sense, I follow them, even though they give the same news. The important thing is that critical point of view in broadcasting the news.”

From another perspective, M3 shares the idea of Atton, who has made significant contributions to the alternative media literature, arguing that alternative media should not be limited to political media and resistance media and should also include cultural forms including art and literature. “I see it as a medium where people interested in specific fields can make their voices heard. It could be music, it could be philosophy, it could be art. I see it as a media where people who are interested in specific fields feel that they belong and can have information related to their own tendencies” (M3).

Only one of the interviewees emphasized the activist feature of alternative media, and stated that it should be the voice of those who cannot find a means of expressing themselves adequately in society. According to F3:

“There should be spaces where minorities can express themselves better and create their own platforms, without too much exposure to censorship, at least not more than the mainstream media. For example, regarding the rights of gay people or women, they should create platforms where they can express their own problems, and create an environment where they can express the problems that are actually experienced and that people in these groups are exposed to, apart from the hate speech directed at them in the mainstream. A media where they can express themselves despite the content in the mainstream. For such communities, alternative media is a positive tool, especially as activist journalism, as it can resonate more widely.”

The majority of interviewees agreed that alternative media should have oppositional content. Censorship is one of the most prominent concepts that emerged when comparing the content of mainstream and alternative media. M4 expressed his views on the content of alternative media as follows:

“I think it should definitely have oppositional content. I think that's what separates it from the mainstream. The situation of the mainstream media right now is very clear.

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<sup>2</sup>A paid subscription based, twelve-page, independent electronic newspaper published daily in pdf format in Turkey.



There are six or seven newspapers, but it is as if there is only one newspaper. One identical voice comes out of all of them. They always have a positive outlook. There is an economic problem, but they reflect it in such a way that everything looks like a bed of roses. I'm not saying that there is no censorship in alternative media. They also censor themselves, but there's more space in print than in broadcast. At least if you share some news that will be censored on social media, it can still reach many people, and they can apply censorship later. At least it reaches people, the masses hear it. But there is more censorship in the mainstream. Since it is blocked by the editors at the very beginning, the rose-tinted aspect is reflected to us directly. I definitely think that alternative media should be critical and oppositional. I don't know how we can reach accurate, real news in another way, it is very difficult."

During the discussions, two interviewees objected that alternative media should have oppositional content. F5 criticized the general use of discriminatory language by the media in Turkey and stated that the ideal alternative media should use an inclusive language, rather than an oppositional one:

"I do not think that alternative media should necessarily be oppositional. I support a type of media where the news and the commentaries are broadcast without using any discriminatory language. No matter how much I am oppositional to the government in my own life, I don't like to read only opposition newspapers; because there is a division among people in the country, those who read Cumhuriyet, Sözcü on one side, and those who read Yeni Şafak and Yeni Akit or those who watch A Haber, on the other<sup>3</sup>. In the middle of it, there is no media inclusive of these two. I think that this is what alternative media should offer, since there is no newspaper that can be there and can give the news as it is without really reflecting the ideologies of both sides. There should be no divisive language, no hate speech" (F5).

M1, on the other hand, stated that alternative media does not need to be a media against the government, and that a media organization that supports the government can of course be called alternative media:

"I think that alternative media should not be just oppositional. I don't think there is such an obligation. There may be an alternative media that supports the ruling side. In a different way, it can be a pro-government channel, or it can present news in a neater format that doesn't use such divisive language. A few examples came to my mind, for example there is a person named Ejder Malik, he founded a news agency called EHA<sup>4</sup>. They broadcast in so many different languages; there is EHA technology, EHA politics, EHA culture and art. I do not know of a big media organization that can spread news to such a wide variety of people. Again, I don't

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<sup>3</sup>Cumhuriyet and Sözcü are daily newspapers identified with their advocacy of secularism and anti-government stance. Yeni Şafak and Yeni Akit are also daily newspapers identified with their hard-line support of the government and are known as conservative, Islamist publications. A Haber is a pro-government TV news channel known for its support to current government, Justice and Development Party.

<sup>4</sup>A pro-government but small scaled news agency.

think TRT, Habertürk and CNNTürk<sup>5</sup> can do what these media do. Maybe it is worse in terms of news content, but I think they are much more influential in terms of being able to mobilize people, in terms of impact.”

### **Sphere of Influence of Alternative Media**

Another sub-theme that came to the fore in the discussions was the field of influence of alternative media. Interviewees frequently stated that they think that alternative media reach a narrower audience compared to the mainstream media, but still have a greater impact. It has been stated that alternative media have the ability to create an agenda by presenting content that is not broadcast in the mainstream media, and that it sometimes influences the mainstream media by bringing such content onto the mainstream’s agenda. F1 said “Alternative media organizations are more independent, have a limited audience but they can stir up society in a moment.” F4 said “Television is of course the most effective media, but the audience that alternative media reaches is a pioneering audience that can affect society. It has a high range of influence. Even if it reaches one person, that one person will tell it to a hundred people and ensure that the truth reaches them”.

M1, on the other hand, describes the influence of EHA, which he defines as a pro-government alternative media, as follows:

“I think that the alternative media of the ruling side really do more business than the big, corporate pro-government channels. I think they are more effective in every sense. I noticed something like this. There was such propaganda on EHA during these military operations<sup>6</sup> that I don’t think TRT could do this, even with billions of dollars. I think it’s even more ineffective. In this respect, I think it is very important” (M1).

Here, it is thought that the dissatisfaction and distrust towards the mainstream media in Turkey is the reason behind the thought that the media, which the interviewees define as alternative media, has a greater influence than the mainstream media. People who seek different perspectives and have a certain attention in terms of media literacy are increasingly turning to digital news sources and social media (Newman, 2021). Especially after 2013, the mainstream media started to keep up with the government’s line, reflecting both commercial interests and legal and financial penalties. This has created an increasingly polarized media atmosphere. In such a media system, some journalists have increasingly resorted to social media in order to share news and information and express critical views (Yeşil and Sözeri, 2017).

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<sup>5</sup>The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) is the national public broadcaster of Turkey; HaberTurk is a corporately owned national news channel and CNNTürk is the localised variant of American channel CNN that broadcasts exclusively for Turkey.

<sup>6</sup>The operations mentioned here was a cross-border military operation that took place between January 2018 and August 2019 and that was conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces and Syrian National Army in the Kurdish Afrin District of northwest Syria, against the People's Protection Units of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

## **Alternative Media and Social Media**

The focus groups discussions revealed that participants follow alternative media mostly through social media. According to M4, alternative media outlets broadcasting on social media platforms can thus create their own communities:

“I think the biggest difference of alternative media is that they use social media more; I can even say that social media is the biggest part of it. There are a lot of news channels on YouTube and Twitter. Even former journalists switch to YouTube because they can't find a job in the mainstream media, because they are unemployed due to the situation of the media. There is a more relaxed, more uncensored environment on social media. They can express themselves more easily. There are more options. A person in every field can open a YouTube channel and create his/her own audience. It can create diversity. It is not dependent on anyone. For example, television has patterns, [social media] goes beyond those patterns. It broadcasts things that cannot be televised because not everyone has to watch it, but certain people do. It doesn't have to set a limit just because that's that way. It creates its own community.”

M2, on the other hand, points to a paradox in the alternative media's broadcasting from social media. While alternative media is generally defined as a non-corporate, small-scale media, he brought forward that social media platforms are also international giant companies and that this situation poses serious risks for alternative media:

“YouTube and Twitter are perhaps the states of the digital world. The paradox that puzzles me is that alternative media is generally produced and used by critical people or people who cannot be heard in conventional media, but since its sphere of influence is wider, its reach increases over time. There are also some problems in the digital environment. For example, YouTube was banned in Turkey for almost two years. One day, for example, YouTube may say that they would not publish something, and it then becomes very important how alternative media will find a path [to their audience]. Alternative media right now, we say, is different from corporate media, but YouTube, through what it broadcasts, is a giant company, bigger than any corporate media company that we are criticizing. I do not think that alternative media can continue its broadcasting independently of these social media giants because they do not have the means of production.”

During the focus group, when the participants were asked about the alternative media sources they were following, it was noticed that the interviewees evaluated a wide range of media as alternative media. Participants stated that the “web sites of Cumhuriyet and Sözcü newspapers” (F2); “Halk TV, Fox TV and Onedio” (M1), “BBC Turkish” especially on health, technology and science (M4); “Sputnik on foreign news” (F5), “Deutsche Welle Turkish” (F3) are media organizations that they follow. They mostly follow these media on social media, especially on Youtube and on Instagram. According to the Digital News Report of 2021, prepared by the Reuters Institute, the publications of these international organizations in Turkey are followed with increasing interest on social media.

According to the report, these organizations are so popular because they publish stories about youth poverty and fundamental rights that have been largely ignored in traditional media (Newman, 2021). Another reason may be that some experienced journalists, who used to be in the mainstream media, broadcast on these platforms.

Another alternative media source specifically mentioned by the interviewees is the journalist Cüneyt Özdemir's Youtube channel<sup>7</sup>. His broadcasts on YouTube were mentioned by many participants, and it was stated that Cüneyt Özdemir's broadcasts "really reflect alternative media" (F6). Interviewees also defined 140Journos and the news verification site teyit.org as alternative media organizations. Identifying such a variety of media, including corporate ones, may seem paradoxical because alternative media is generally defined as non-corporate, non-hierarchical and non-profit media. But producing critical content, against the dominant structure or bringing up issues that are ignored by the mainstream media without having the formal features of alternative media could be sufficient to be considered as alternative media (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2015). Users of alternative media, similar to the researchers of alternative media, have different features in mind for identifying a media as "alternative" and like the researchers in the field they don't have a common way to define alternative media.

## Conclusions

The starting point of this empirical research was to understand what alternative media means for its users, which John Downing considers to be a major deficiency in alternative media studies. This research was carried out with a qualitative focus group interview method, since it is thought that this was appropriate for establishing direct contact with the subject group, addressing theoretical questions about alternative media, and having direct interaction to understand alternative media users. One of the main purposes was to determine the parallels and oppositions between researchers' and users' definitions of alternative media. It should be remembered that the findings of this research should not be considered to cover all alternative media users or all journalism students; the findings are limited to the selected micro sample, and the time and place where the interviews took place.

The first conclusion of the research is that, just like researchers working in the field, users of alternative media cannot completely agree on a definition of alternative media. However, in the interviews, it can be said that the content of alternative media outweighs its form in terms of being the element that makes it alternative. Participants, although they raise issues such as being small-scale, not acting with commercial motivations, being independent from capital, having a horizontally organized structure and having a form that allows interaction with users, do not attach as much importance to these issues as some researchers in the

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<sup>7</sup>Cüneyt Özdemir is a Turkish journalist who besides his career on mainstream media (CNNTürk) has a YouTube channel with more than 1.3 million subscribers where he broadcasts about world agenda.

field. Participants were able to evaluate a commercial organization or an institutional structure as alternative media solely because it has oppositional or critical content, or brings up issues that are not brought up in the traditional media. The point that all participants agree on is that alternative media should be a media that broadcasts on the internet, mostly using social media platforms.

Another result of the research is that participants describe alternative media in relation to their dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. At this point, content comes to the fore. Participants brought up issues such as how alternative media should attach importance to diversity in content, should use inclusive language rather than a discriminating one, should offer a different perspective from the mainstream media, and should represent under-represented segments, unlike the mainstream media. Although most participants agreed that alternative media should produce critical or oppositional content, one of the participants stated that there can be alternative media platforms that are pro-government, provided that they remain independent from capital. Participants were of the opinion that due to the form of alternative media, they can produce relatively independent content and that they are less affected by censorship compared to the mainstream media.

Contrary to some researchers in the field of alternative media, such as Rodriguez (2001), the participants did not think of alternative media as a kind of citizen or community media, and even expressed the opinion that it gives more confidence if it is carried out by professional journalists. Similarly, only a single opinion was expressed about the necessity of alternative media to have an activist aspect (like Downing, 2003), while the other participants did not dwell on this quality. The interviewees brought up the subject of the influence of alternative media and underlined that the alternative media is more effective than the mainstream media in mobilizing society, has the potential to create its own community, whose borders are determined not by the media bosses, but by the users who follow it. The potential to mobilize society is in line with the views of theorists who think that alternative media can prioritize social transformation (Downing, 2001; Hamilton, 2001; Atton, 2002; Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010).

Another result of the research is that the use of social media by alternative media platforms is positively evaluated in terms of increasing their sphere of influence, facilitating access and reaching more people. However, one of the issues that came up in the discussion is that these platforms are themselves corporate structures and their survival is strongly dependent to these profit oriented companies. For alternative media organizations that criticize media structures that act with corporate and commercial motivations; being able to do “free” broadcasts through social media platforms, which constitute larger and more commercial structures than many media conglomerates, was called a paradoxical situation by some interviewees, and this situation was evaluated as an existential threat for alternative media.

This study focused on how interviewees highlighted various aspects of the concept of alternative media, and how these aspects differed among interviewees and in relation to leading academic theories. The contribution that this research presents in the context of alternative media studies is the possibility of comparing users’ and theorists’ ways of making sense of alternative media. It should be

repeated that the representativeness of this study is limited not only to the micro sample participating in the focus group interviews, but also to the time and place where it took place. In order to gain a deeper understanding of alternative media users, conducting comparative studies with many different samples, supporting them with in-depth interviews and discourse analysis, and diversifying the method with a series of surveys with broad participation will be significant steps forward.

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## **The Readability of Political Party Manifestos of the 2016 General Elections in Ghana**

*By William Kodom Gyasi\**

The objective of the study was to determine the readability of the manifestos that three political parties, namely National Democratic Congress (NDC), New Patriotic Party (NPP) and Convention People's Party (CPP), in Ghana used in the 2016 general elections. These parties were chosen because they were the only ones in Ghana with parliamentary representation at the time of the study. The readability indexes used were the Coleman-Liau Index and the Gunning Fog Index. 12 random sections of each manifesto were selected for analysis. Then, texts of no less than 300 words were sampled from each section. The readability formulas used were available on the internet. The statistics show that all three manifestos were written at difficulty levels that were quite above the reading abilities of the average Ghanaian voter. Further, it was found that the manifestos did not differ significantly from each other, statistically speaking.

*Keywords:* readability, readability formulas, manifestos, political parties, linguistic complexity

### **Introduction**

The reintroduction of democratic governance and a multi-party electoral system in Ghana began in 1992. Since then, the Ghanaian political scene has seen a multitude of parties established. Many have stagnated in growth, grown practically dormant, or otherwise merged with more dominant political parties. Some historians argue that the importance of Ghana's political parties is due to the stability of their traditions through the West African nation's tumultuous political history (Morrison, 2004). The parties have proven to be widely accepted conduits for expressing and bringing together the variety of aspirations of the citizenry in a competitive electoral system (Morrison, 2004).

The present political setting in Ghana is dominated by two traditions, represented by two large parties with wide acceptance and broad bases (Pinkey, 1997). These are the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and Convention People's Party (CPP). The National Democratic Congress is characterised by populism and a commitment to a market economy. As a carry-over from its traditional roots, the NDC appears to be positioned to appeal to rural folks and is less elitist. The New Patriotic Party is characterised by liberal governance and a market economy. The NPP is also largely dominated by an intellectual, business, and professional elite class. It traditionally caters to the educated and urbanites (Morrison, 2004). Currently, there are only three political parties in Ghana with representation in Parliament: the NPP, the NDC, and another

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long-pedigreed party, the Convention People's Party (CPP). The CPP, like the NDC, has a largely populist leaning.

From 1992 till now, publishing a manifesto in each election is a customary activity that parties are widely expected to undertake. The presentation of manifestos to the electorate is usually an emblematic act that heralds the campaign's most competitive chapter. As such, it guarantees some media attention for the party and its ideas. To build lasting ties with the electorate, political elites have incentive to explain to voters their policy objectives, what they have been doing, and what they have achieved (Lin and Osnabrugge, 2018). Manifestos are popular conduits for transmitting such information to voters. It is likely that the absence of a manifesto presentation might lead to snide remarks in the press and a missed opportunity to motivate the party rank-and-file for the campaign.

It is conceivable that the aforementioned characteristics of Ghana's political parties would have some influence on their individual writing styles in their manifestos (Decadri and Boussalis, 2019). More specifically, I expect that the traditionally elitist parties would design written communication to suit the abilities of the educated elite among the Ghanaian voting public. On the other hand, I envisage that the populist political movements would adapt their written political communication to the abilities of those with limited reading proficiency. If these assumptions hold true, then they should affect the types of audiences that these documents would appeal to. Also, such an approach to political communication would seem to establish or further solidify an elitist-versus-populist hegemony in the Ghanaian political landscape. The purpose of this study was to assess the readability levels of the manifestos that three political parties with representation in Ghana's parliament used in the 2016 general elections. The first specific aim is to determine the readability levels of the NDC, the NPP, and the CPP manifestos. Second, the study seeks to determine the significant differences in readability among the three manifestos.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the readability levels of the NDC, the NPP, and the CPP manifestos?
2. What statistically significant differences in readability are there among the three manifestos?

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Place of Manifestos in Democracies**

The idea of democracy as a universal commitment is an essential distinguishing feature of twentieth-century thought. Across the globe, it appears

that democracy has generally attained normative status as the right way to govern and to be governed. Sen (1999) argued that democracy was not simply defined by majority rule. Sen (1999) asserted that the demands of democracy transcended voting and high regard for electoral outcomes to the protection of freedoms and a guarantee of free discussion, and unrestricted distribution of news and fair comment. The implication of Sen's assertion is that an electoral process would be fundamentally flawed if it did not allow for different corporate and individual actors presenting their arguments, or for the voting public enjoying unfettered access to information and free consideration of competing ideologies and policy statements. The idealistic concept of democracy is based on the idea that it is from the people that all powers of the government are derived; all persons can and should engage in the democratic process (Creppell, 1989). In the foregoing definition of democracy, there is no room for social, economic, and educational barriers to democratic engagement. However, if democracy goes beyond just the ballot box, then this ideal notion of democracy does not always pertain even in the most advanced democracies. This is because, according to Creppell (1989), many people hold the ability to read and write, or to be functionally literate, to be a clear and crucial requirement for a genuinely empowered democratic public<sup>1</sup>. I tend to agree with such sentiment. This is because, while there are yet many modes for communicating political content, written text continues to be a consistent and widespread medium for the dissemination of political thought. Therefore, it is important to empower the voting public by affording them basic education, at least. However, until such a time as the entire population of a state may achieve what might be described as optimal rate of literacy, there will be the need to adapt written political communication to the generally low levels of literacy among the general population.

Political competition in democracies is usually organised around political party systems. Political parties are the interface between society and politics; parties are the means by which citizens are connected to the state. Parties are therefore central actors on the political stage of any democratic state (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2009). Political parties serve as the couriers of information between society and political decision makers, linking citizen's aspirations and preferences to public policy (Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). It would seem obvious then, that if political parties failed in their role as carriers of information the linkage between society and the state could be jeopardized. There are a variety of ways in which political parties may communicate their assessment of the environment within which they exist and what they prescribe to be the best way to improve that environment. Among these ways, electoral manifestos appear to have become the most popular (Dolezal et al., 2012). It appears that party after party without fail produce these documents every election cycle. This is largely due to the fact that party democracy emphasises parties' proposed policy programmes as the bases for their canvassing for support, their rhetorical battles, voters' choices, party alliance building, and government policy (Eder et al., 2017). At the start of an electioneering process, a party composes an outline of policy positions, preferences, and developmental objectives. This proposition is offered to the voting public. If the

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<sup>1</sup>For a fuller discussion of the history of literacy and suffrage, see Creppell (1989).

offer gains sufficient support, the party may be given the opportunity to take over government, whereupon it will start to execute the promises in the manifesto. In a subsequent election, the promises and objectives in the manifesto become the basis upon which the electorate will evaluate the party's performance (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2009). Therefore, parties charge into elections under the banners of their manifestos. Through manifestos political parties communicate their policy positions and priorities (Eder et al., 2017; Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2009).

### **Why Parties Publish Manifestos**

There is evidence that only few voters actually read party manifestos (Eder et al., 2017). Still, manifestos continue to enjoy popularity as the definitive declarations of what parties stand for. They are the primary instigators of comment in the mass media; they provide the basis for interrogating party candidates; and, they drive conversations regarding the election. According to Eder et al. (2017), there are, at least, three reasons why parties are committed to writing and publishing manifestos.

#### *Compendium of Valid Party Positions*

A manifesto provides a thorough summary of a party's political stance on a broad range of issues. Such a summary is useful to sophisticated voters who may, on the basis of such a document, deduce for themselves which political parties offer policies that come closest to their aspirations. It is also a useful document for the mass media, who can use the document as basis for their reporting. On the party front, manifestos provide grassroots activists and organisers with a reference frame for disseminating and discussing party policy propositions among the electorate.

#### *Streamlining a Political Campaign*

Political parties are not restricted to the use of manifestos to express their policy positions. In some lands, parties may also publish documents that define their fundamental values and identities. They may also publish documents that declare their respective parties' positions on specific issues. The former type of document may be described as party programmes; the latter types can be described as action programmes (Dolezal et al., 2012). These types of documents differ from manifestos in how specific they are on issues, in how comprehensive they are, and in their longevity. Manifestos are generally shorter-lived and more comprehensive compared to party programmes. However, action programmes are generally more specific and focused than are manifestos (Dolezal et al., 2012). All these other documents are important. Yet, the manifesto hold supremacy over all these other publications, at least, in the context of an election. This is because the manifesto, according to (Klingemann et al., 2006, p. 16), is "unique in being the only authoritative party policy statement approved by an official convention or congress". The manifesto is essentially the party's contract with voters (Ray,

2007). Equally importantly, the manifesto is the one organizing document that allows divergent interests and opinions within a party to present a united front to the voting public. The manifesto therefore provides the constraints to which all the different actors in the party must conform in order to present a coherent and reliable front (De Winter and Baudewyns, 2015; Eder et al., 2015; Selb and Lutz, 2015).

### *Campaign Material*

During elections, a party gives away all manner of textual materials and other memorabilia that are designed to establish the presence and promises of the party in the minds of voters. Printed Copies of the manifesto, or a condensed version of it, often known as the “manifesto highlights” would make a handy give-away that allows the propagation of the party’s campaign message.

### **Linguistic Complexity of Political Communication**

There are published works in European politics that seem to link language complexity to political party ideology. Specifically, it appears that there is a link between populist ideologies and simple language. Decadri and Boussalis (2019) briefly mentioned works that have reported on populist political parties and candidates who have been noted for simple communication styles in recent years (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007; Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). Taking a cue from Decadri and Boussalis (2019), I reviewed a handful recent works on the complexity of political communication. An example is Bischof and Senninger’s (2018) research in which they studied the language of party manifestos in Austria and Germany for the period 1945-2013. In this study, the authors found support for the notion that populist parties tended to present their political messages in less complex language. Interestingly, the study also found that respondents were better able to party’s ideologies when the information was presented in simpler language. Also conducted recently, the work by Kayam (2018) showed that Donald Trump’s speeches were designed to be comprehensible to nine- to eleven-year-old, or fourth to fifth-graders. Kayam (2018) multiple indexes in the study: Flesch–Kincaid, Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG), and Gunning-Fog. Kayam posited that Donald Trump may be using simple language a rhetorical strategy to gain popularity. Understandably, readability of political texts has interested researchers for some time and continues to do so.

In June 1977, Doris E. S. Zingman concluded a thesis at the State University of New Jersey in which she studied the readability of mass political literature. The stated objective of the study was to determine the reading level required to understand those texts. Specifically, she used the Flesch Reading Ease Index and the Fry Graph to test samples of text from three newspapers and three magazines during election season. She found that the election materials in the two sources were too difficult to be useful for informing the public. We find it peculiar that these tests were not conducted on literature published by political parties.

In a study published in 2011, Reilly and Richey (2011) hypothesized that lower readability of ballot questions would result in higher roll-off as voters would decline to answer questions they did not understand. The authors subjected 1,211 state-level ballot questions from 1997 to 2007 to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level readability test. Employing hierarchical linear regression models of state-level data, the authors found that increased complexity led to more roll-off, even after controlling for confounding variables. Reilly and Richey (2011) concluded that readability had a definite influence on direct democracy. The implication is that complex language in political communication could hinder the ordinary citizen's participation in the democratic process.

The internet can be a useful medium for disseminating political information. Among the variety of online formats available are blogs. Bigi (2013) studied the readability of articles on a blog that had been converted from a personal one discussing political content to a political blog written by a politician. The articles were from January 2005 to May 2012. Using the Microsoft spelling and grammar function, the Gunning Fog Index, and Gulpease Index, Bigi (2013) concluded that readability of communications tended to deteriorate when the blog became political and more institutional. This finding is interesting and suggests that genre of a sampled text would have some influence on its readability.

There is also an insightful study of the complexity of US presidential rhetoric and its relationship with the tendency for unilateral proclamations and actions (Olds, 2015). This study was set against the background of works which claimed that remarks by the presidency could influence public opinion (Wood, 2007), were calculated to resonate with the public (Tulis, 1987), and that the stylistic choice in such proclamations could be deliberately designed to be "anti-intellectual" (Lim, 2008). The author used the Flesch Readability formula to examine the weekly public addresses by the president for the period between February 1993 and May 2015. The monthly averages of readability scores were computed. Using a regression model, this time series study found that the simplicity of presidential rhetoric could be predictive of unilateral action on the part of the president. We hold this study to be important because it points to a predictive relationship between the difficulty level of political rhetoric and tendencies, or actual behaviour of political actors.

Decadri and Boussalis (2019), based on a review of published anecdotal claims, hypothesized that populist ideology was negatively related to the complexity of a Member of Parliament's oral presentations. They further hypothesized that when a politician switched from a populist to a mainstream political group, the politician's language would see an increase in complexity. Decadri and Boussalis (2019) used the Gulpease Index in their study because of its suitability to the Italian language. The authors concluded that the complexity of political language was affected by populist ideology, electoral strategy and party membership. They further concluded that populist communication could be inherently simple linguistically, and offered that such a characteristic could possibly be exploited by populist political bodies to outperform their mainstream opponents.

An interesting recent study shows that politicians may simplify their language when they perceived that their constituents had lower linguistic abilities. Lin and Osnabrugge (2018) used the Flesch Reading formula to assess the readability levels of Germany's Member of Parliament speeches. The authors collected data on characteristics (such as immigrant status) of constituents. Lin and Osnabrugge (2018) expected that German MPs would be sensitive to the socio-economic contexts of the people they represented. The texts sampled, covering the period from 2002 to 2009 consisted of 79,000 floor speeches made by a total number of 750 MPs. The study revealed that MPs tended to make their speeches simpler when their constituents were relatively poor, less educated, and were from an immigrant background. These findings are relevant to studies of political representation and communication strategies (Lin and Osnabrugge, 2018).

A synthesis of the foregoing works indicates that political literature, when difficult to read, could affect full voter participation in the democratic process. The literature also shows that political ideology could be positively related to the complexity of language politicians use in their communications; populist ideologies tended to be related to simpler language. Moreover, linguistic complexity could be predictive of political intent and actual behaviour. Nevertheless, political actors could, if they so desired, tune the complexity of their language to the language abilities of their constituents. On the basis of these studies, I can expect the more populist NDC and CPP to have more readable manifestos (that is, less language complexity) than the generally elitist NPP. However, based on the findings of Lin and Osnabrugge (2018), it could be that the NPP wrote their manifesto to be sensitive to the general literacy levels of Ghanaians.

It is interesting to note, though, that researchers could hardly find a good number of works that had studied the readability of manifestos in particular. Perhaps this is a testament to the claims that apart from research into how party claims in manifestos translate into programmes and policies post-election, there has been little work on all other aspects of manifestos (Dolezal et al., 2012; Eder et al., 2017; Switek, 2016).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Borrowing from Decadri and Boussalis (2019), I support this work on the populist ideological framework. Our definition of populist is based on Mudde's (2004) characterization of the phenomenon. After a critique of two widely used interpretations of populism, both derogatory and eliciting rather strong response, Mudde offers a characterization that the author believes is better suited to empirical and academic consideration. Traditionally, widely used interpretations are centered on the two divides: the elite and the common people. Offering a more academic characterization of the phenomenon, Mudde (2004) theorises that populism is a "thin-centered" ideology. According to Mudde's definition,

"populism [is] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the... (general will) of the people." (543)

We posit, in line with Bischof and Senninger (2018), that populists have ideological and electoral reasons to use simpler language in their communication. If populist parties desire to fully commit to an identity as parties for the people, these parties would need to adapt to the “simplicity” of their target electorate (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2007). According to Drămnescu (2014), populists use straightforward rhetoric as a political ploy to present themselves and their political propositions as belonging to the people. From this perspective, I expected that the manifesto of the generally populist NDC and NPP would be more readable (that is, less linguistically complex) than that of the elitist NPP.

### **Study Methodology**

This was a non-experimental, descriptive research. Non-experimental surveys do not control for or manipulate variables, but test these variables using statistical methods (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Descriptive research provides a picture of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs (Tavakoli, 2012). The study was descriptive in that it sought to provide a picture of the readability and of the manifestos as is. The readability scores manifestos were compared. However, making such comparison is still within the definition of descriptive research (Tavakoli, 2012). A descriptive, non-experimental study design was appropriate because the objective was purely to observe and record data on readability of the manifestos, to describe readability of the texts according to the recorded data, and to compare the difficulty levels of the documents. It was not the objective of the researchers to manipulate the manifestos or otherwise apply some treatment to them and to test the effect of such treatment. The data collected was of a quantitative nature, that is, the readability scores as they were generated by an online calculator. Therefore, this study is quantitative.

### **Sampling Technique**

Simple random sampling was used to select 12 sections from each manifesto for testing. Simple random sampling is a technique in which all possible subsets of the population have equal chance of being sampled. Simple random sampling produces samples whose statistics are unbiased estimates of the population parameters (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Each section of a manifesto was assigned a code. For each manifesto, these codes were entered into MS Excel in order in which the units occur in the document. Each code was assigned a random number using the RAND function. The random numbers were then sorted from smallest to largest thereby effectively randomizing the codes. The first 12 sections were selected for readability analysis.

### **Readability Indexes**

The Gunning Fog Index and Coleman-Liau Indexes were used in the study. The calculators were found online at <https://www.utility-online.org>.



### **Text Selection and Cleaning**

From each selected section, text samples of size  $x > 300$  words were sampled. The 300-word constraint was because of the requirements for analysis using the Coleman-Liau Index. The sampled texts were individually pasted into MS Word and cleaned by means of the following steps

1. Bullets and numbers were removed; lists were collapsed into prose.
2. Misspellings resulting from optical character recognition failures were corrected.
3. Headings were removed.
4. Stems preceding lists were removed or made to become part of first list items. This step resulted in some sentences assuming imperative forms. However, such changes were not deemed to significantly affect overall sentence characteristics of the text.

These cleaning procedures were performed based on the fact that bulleted lists, tables, equations and headings were not among the materials used to develop the formulas (Schriver, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

The readability scores were recorded and organised in Microsoft Excel. However, all data analysis was done in IBM SPSS® Statistics. Simple descriptive statistics were run in order to organise and summarise the characteristics of the sampled texts (Tavakoli, 2012). The information generated included Mean and Standard Deviation. This information is presented in tables in a subsequent section.

In order to make a choice between the two broad inferential statistics categories, I run the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality. Parametric tests of significance require that the distribution of the sample be normal or near normal. This requirement is especially important where, as in this work, the researcher has to work with small sample sizes (Tavakoli, 2012). The Shapiro-Wilk test was chosen because it is suitable for sample sizes less than 2000. Another requirement of parametric tests is the symmetry of the distributions, or the homogeneity of variance, among the various groups under study. I run Levene's test of homogeneity of variance.

Thirdly, I run a number of Analysis of Variance procedures, both parametric and non-parametric, to test the statistical significance of differences, if any, among the readability scores of the textbooks. The use of both categories of inferential statistics was for confirmation purposes. Some authors (e.g., Cramer and Howitt, 2004) recommend that both parametric and non-parametric analyses be done to ensure that findings and conclusions are not affected by outliers.

## Results and Discussion

The study was designed to assess the readability levels of the 2016 manifestos of the three political parties with parliamentary representation. The readability analysis was done with the Coleman-Liau and Gunning Fog Indexes. Inferential statistics were used to assess the differences, if any, between the three political documents.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for CPP, NDC, and NPP Manifestos

		N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Skewness		Kurtosis	
							Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
CPP	Word Count	12	311	413	351.33	28.42	0.674	0.637	0.754	1.232
	Sentence Count	12	11	18	13.50	2.153	0.656	0.637	0.195	1.232
	Coleman-Liau	12	12.60	17.43	14.54	1.33	0.711	0.637	0.569	1.232
	Gunning Fog	12	16.23	23.35	18.82	2.23	0.738	0.637	-0.216	1.232
NDC	Word Count	12	327	419	358.92	28.10	1.019	0.637	0.257	1.232
	Sentence Count	12	13	21	16.92	2.58	-0.158	0.637	-1.359	1.232
	Coleman-Liau	12	11.54	17.79	14.38	1.72	0.537	0.637	0.410	1.232
	Gunning Fog	12	13.74	20.39	16.65	2.19	0.411	0.637	-0.818	1.232
NPP	Word Count	12	303	394	359.50	32.56	-0.490	0.637	-1.344	1.232
	Sentence Count	12	9	20	14.25	3.52	0.217	0.637	-0.916	1.232
	Coleman-Liau	12	10.66	16.74	14.06	1.58	-0.537	0.637	1.017	1.232
	Gunning Fog	12	14.96	22.94	18.47	3.02	0.263	0.637	-1.621	1.232

From Table 1, it would take a person in grade 15 in the US educational system to understand the CPP manifesto, according to the Coleman-Liau Readability Index. This means that it would require a person in junior year or level 300 of university in Ghana to be able to read and understand the CPP manifesto.

Judging by this fact, the CPP manifesto is too difficult to read (Mean= 14.5, SD= 1.3) for the greater proportion of the Ghanaian voter population. It would take someone with 19 years of formal education to be able to understand the CPP manifesto on the first read. A fog index of 12 requires the reading level of a US high school senior, that is, someone who is about 18 years old. A Gunning Fog Index score of 17 requires a university graduate to read and understand the text under consideration. A score of 19 is very difficult for the average adult even in Ghana. The CPP manifesto is too difficult to read (Mean=18.8, SD= 2.2). For an arguably populist party by tradition, it appears that the Convention People's Party may not have written their 2016 manifesto to be readable by the most people in Ghana. From the perspective that populists have ideological and electoral reasons to use simpler language in their communication (Bischof and Senninger, 2018), this finding about the readability of the CPP's manifesto is contrary to our expectations. Moreover, the finding counters the suggestion by Kayam (2018) that the use of simple language might be a populist party's communication strategy to garner political support. It appears that such is true as well for the other perceived populist political party whose manifesto is included in this study.

From Table 1, NDC section of scores, it would take a person in Grade 14 of the US education system to read and understand the NDC Manifesto. The NDC manifesto is too difficult for the average US adult to read according to the Coleman-Liau Index (Mean= 14.4, SD= 1.7). Grade 14 is the approximate equivalent of level 200 or sophomore year in a Ghanaian university. It would take approximately 17 years of formal education for a person to be able to understand the NDC manifesto on the first read. A score of 17 means that the text is suitable for someone with a university degree. The NDC manifesto is too difficult to read according to the Gunning Fog Index (Mean= 16.6, SD= 2.2). For a party that is largely touted as populist (Morrison, 2004), it would be expected that the NDC would create a more readable manifesto. From the populist ideological perspective, it was counter-intuitive that the NDC's foremost political campaign text in the 2016 general elections was written at a difficulty level that was suited to sophisticated readers (Drămnescu, 2014). A difficult text could not fittingly be presented as belonging to the people. It is also interesting that the NDC as a party that presents itself as belonging to the people did not endeavour to bring their language down to the level of the ordinary, non-intellectual voter. It would appear that unlike the German MPs in Lin and Osnabrugge's (2018) study, the NDC party frontliners may not be sensitive to the reading abilities of the ordinary voter public.

From table 1, according to the Coleman-Liau Index, the NPP manifesto can be read and understood by a person with 14<sup>th</sup> Grade level of formal education in the US. With a Mean score of 14.1 (SD=1.6), the text is too difficult for the average US adult. Grade 14 is equivalent to sophomore year or level 200 in university in Ghana. The text was therefore too difficult for the ordinary voting Ghanaian. It would take 18 years of formal education in the US for a person to be able to understand the NPP manifesto on the first reading, according to the Gunning Fog Index. With a mean score of 18.4 (SD= 3.0), the NPP manifesto is fit for only university graduates. It is too difficult for the average American adult to read. In Ghana, 18 years of formal mainstream education would be equivalent to the second year in a Master's programme. It means that, according to the Gunning Fog Index, the NPP manifesto was extremely difficult for the ordinary voting Ghanaian. However, this is hardly unexpected of a party that is traditionally elitist (Morrison, 2004). However, since there is some advantage to be gained by using simple language in political communication, the NPP party could benefit from making the language of their manifesto less institutional (Bigi, 2013).

### **Comparative Study of Three Manifestos**

This section of the study presents statistical comparison of the readability scores of the three manifestos. The objective is to establish statistically significant differences, if any, among the scores. From the populist ideological viewpoint, the CPP and NDC should have manifestos written at a readability level that is statistically different from the readability score of the NPP manifesto, which is likely crafted with highly educated voters in mind.

In order to decide on the type of inferential statistical tests to run to determine differences, there was the need to evaluate normality of distribution, and

homogeneity of variances. The results for these tests are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2. Tests for Normality

	Group	Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.
<b>COLEman</b>	CPP	0.958	12	0.754
	NDC	0.958	12	0.749
	NPP	0.965	12	0.853
<b>GUN_FOG</b>	CPP	0.936	12	0.442
	NDC	0.942	12	0.525
	NPP	0.873	12	0.072

At 0.05 confidence interval, all sample scores, on both indices, had normal distributions according to the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality (Table 2). This indicates, for each of the indices, that the classic parametric ANOVA procedure would be appropriate to compare the means of the three manifestos.

Table 3. Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
<b>COLEman</b>	0.125	2	33	0.883
<b>GUN_FOG</b>	1.433	2	33	0.253

Variances are homogenous. A parametric analysis of variance is indicated (Table 3). Table 4 presents the analyses of variances between the mean readability scores from the three manifestos across the two indexes used.

Table 4. Analyses of Variance

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Coleman-Liau</b>	Between Groups	1.484	2	0.742	0.307	0.737
	Within Groups	79.692	33	2.415		
	Total	81.176	35			
<b>Gunning Fog</b>	Between Groups	32.595	2	16.297	2.585	.091
	Within Groups	208.073	33	6.305		
	Total	240.667	35			

There were no statistically significant differences among mean scores from the Coleman-Liau Index for 3 manifestos ( $p=0.737$ ,  $\alpha=0.05$ ). This implies that, statistically speaking, the 3 manifestos had just about the same readability.

There were no statistically significant differences among mean scores from the Gunning Fog Index for the three manifestos ( $p=0.091$ ,  $\alpha=0.05$ ). Statistically speaking, the implication is that the three manifestos did not differ in how difficult they were to read.

More robust tests of the equality of means, as well as a non-parametric test of the equality of means, confirmed the results already presented.

The implication of these findings is that, statistically speaking, the manifestos of the two populist parties, the Convention People's Party and the National Democratic Congress, were as difficult to read as the manifesto of the more elitist New Patriotic Party.

### Conclusion

The objective of the study was to determine the readability of the manifestos that three political parties in Ghana which were used in the 2016 general elections. These parties were chosen because they were the only ones in Ghana with parliamentary representation at the time of the study. The readability indexes used were the Coleman-Liau Index and the Gunning Fog Index. 12 random sections of each manifesto were selected for analysis. Then, texts of no less than 300 words were sampled from each section. The readability formulas used were available on the internet. The statistics show that all three manifestos were written at difficulty levels that were quite above the reading abilities of the Ghanaian voter. Further, it was found that the manifestos did not differ significantly from each other, statistically speaking.

The current study is recommending that the writers of manifestos should consider revising the writing style to make the manifestos meet the standard reading scores recommended for public documents so that electorates of varied educational backgrounds could find the manifestos readable. Every form of communication to ensure electorates have access to adequate information about parties' policies and programmes that warrant their campaign for political power should be made clear and simple to the electorates. In writing, the plain language policy recommends the documents be composed as readable as possible. Hence, this study recommends that there is a great need for the parties to write readable manifestos to appeal to the wider electorates of Ghana.

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