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Journalism, advocacy and the social construction of consensus

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Abstract

Scholarship examining media coverage of social problems largely examines coverage of contentious issues. In this study, I contribute to our understanding of journalist practices by examining coverage of an issue over which there is a US consensus: female genital cutting (FGC). With an analysis of newspaper coverage supplemented by interviews and primary documents, I find that, in contrast to existing literature that shows that reporters must refrain from issue advocacy, when consensus is widespread reporters can and do collaborate with advocates, harmonize with opinion writers, and use their physical presence and access to newsprint to pressure the state. Journalists, however, do not simply respond to consensus. Instead, I find that they can actively construct consensus by offering unique frames that depoliticize advocacy. These findings contribute to our understanding of media coverage of social problems by illustrating how consensus is both shaped by and shapes journalist practices.

Keywords

activism, female genital cutting, female genital mutilation, journalism, journalist practices, media, social movements, social problems

An extensive literature on media coverage of contentious movements has shown that, even when sympathetic to issue advocates, professional and institutional constraints often inhibit coverage that facilitates mobilization (Epstein, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Schudson, 1991; Soloski, 1989; Sparrow, 1999). Instead, coverage tends to shape activist messages in ways that reflect dominant interests (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin,

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1980; Molotch, 1979). A focus on contention, however, has allowed the study of divisive movements to overdetermine our theoretical models of journalism by obscuring the possibilities for journalist advocacy under conditions of consensus and the role of journalists themselves in constructing that consensus (Downey, 2006; McAdam et al., 2005). In this paper I explore these possibilities with an examination of media coverage of female genital cutting (FGC), a set of practices that involve trimming or removal of the labia, clitoris, and prepuce and, sometimes, closing the anterior vulva (WHO, 2008). Despite contentious global politics, FGCs are nearly universally condemned in the West. Widely divergent interests groups oppose the practices, including doctors (American Medical Association, 1995; American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998), politicians (US Codes Annotated, 1996), intergovernmental agencies (WHO, 2008; WHO/UNICEF/UNFPA, 1997), and feminists (Equality Now, n.d.; VDay, n.d.). FGCs are, then, an excellent case for thinking about journalism and social consensus.

I examine media coverage of FGCs at two critical discourse moments: its initiation in 1992/3 and its peak in 1996. First, I show that journalists contributed to building consensus. Media actors put FGCs on the agenda and used framing to depoliticize opposition. Second, I show that consensus, once built, opened up options for media actors that would otherwise have been largely foreclosed. Mobilizing the frames they popularized during the initiation of US newspaper coverage, journalists and columnists worked with advocates in support of a woman seeking asylum to escape genital cutting. The writing of reporters, columnists and editors harmonized, either by accident or design, and their physical presence at key moments further blurred the distinction between issue advocacy and journalism.

I show that, because of a focus on highly politicized social problems, we have not fully appreciated the degree to which journalists can act much like activists. Journalists, further, do not inherit consensus issues fully formed. Instead, by manipulating the social construction of issues through framing, they can actively build the consensus they may later mobilize.

Consensus, contention and journalist practices

Hallin (1986) has gone the furthest in theorizing the relationship between reporting and consensus. Using his study of media coverage of the Vietnam War, he explains that some issues reside within a 'sphere of legitimate controversy' and others within a 'sphere of consensus'. These spheres, he argues, call for 'two entirely different kinds of journalism' (1986: 150). Controversy requires objectivity; professional norms require non-advocacy (Soloski, 1989; Tuchman, 1972), while institutional constraints and news routines often defuse mobilization (Epstein, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Schudson, 1991; Sparrow, 1999). In contrast, issues with the sphere of consensus do not require a neutral moderator. Instead, they 'find widespread support for their goals and little or no organized opposition', in part because advocates call for education and empathy instead of structural change (McCarthy and Wolfson, 1992: 273–4; see also Lofland, 1989). Like pediatric AIDS and world hunger, consensus issues are ones that most everyone – including politicians and corporations – can safely support. Accordingly, they may allow for a different kind of reporting.

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Indeed, Hallin found that, before the Vietnam War became controversial, reporters wrote decidedly pro-American material. Other scholars also document reporter nationalism (Carruthers, 2000; Hackett and Zhao, 1994). When the conditions are right, then, reporters have been known to set an agenda (McCombs, 1997), develop close relationships with issue advocates (Ryan et al., 2005), mobilize global populations (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Olesen, 2007), and even engage in familiar social movement tactics (Boyle and Hoeschen, 2001).

Consensus, of course, is an accomplishment. Abortion, for example, is contentious in the US because of a supposed conflict between the rights of women and fetuses; it is less contentious in Germany where fetuses are protected, in part, by protecting mothers (Ferree et al., 2002). Consensus is facilitated, too, when the social problem is believed to be restricted to foreign places. American condemnation of dowry murder in India, for example, only emerges alongside a denial that spousal murder is a similar social problem in the US (Narayan, 1997). Elsewhere I have shown that the trivialization of feminist claims on behalf of American women coexists with strong feminist condemnation of genital cutting in Africa (Wade, 2009).

Especially when issues are new to their readers, journalists may have significant freedom to construct an issue as they like: actively making framing decisions, selecting sources and presenting the issue as controversial or not. In at least some cases, then, journalists may play a role in creating the consensus that also conditions their reporting.

Controversy and female genital cutting

For most of US history, FGCs were off the agenda entirely. If considered, they were deemed a private matter outside the purview of global, and certainly US politics (Boyle, 2002). It was never inevitable, then, that the US would adopt an anti-FGC platform. And, even once eradication of FGCs became part of the transnational agenda, the framing of the practices proved to be sensitive to the cultural, historical, and political context.

Feminist activist Fran Hosken is generally credited with initiating the contemporary anti-FGC agenda. In 1979, she coined the term ‘female genital mutilation’, arguing that the practices were oppressive to women. She and other feminists pressured the United Nations (UN) to address FGCs. The UN was sympathetic, but considered the women’s oppression frame to be politically risky. Instead, they adopted a frame they believed to be more ‘objective’, the physical harm frame (Boyle, 2002; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Unexpectedly, by the early 1990s it became clear that the physical harm frame had, in some places, prompted medicalization instead of abandonment (Boyle, 2002). Responding to this development, as well as an intervening mainstreaming of transnational feminism, the UN agreed to adopt a feminist frame after all.

The transnational anti-FGC movement successfully pressured foreign leaders to criminalize the practices, but anti-FGC efforts are still controversial (Boyle, 2002). Critics of the western-led opposition argue that it is racist and culturally imperialist (James and Robertson, 2002; Nnaemeka, 2005). Others defend (forms of) genital cutting (Ahmadu, 2000; Njambi, 2004). Meanwhile, communities that practice cutting resist intervention; today it is estimated that 3 million girls undergo cutting each year (WHO, 2008).

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Figure 1. Number of news articles, op-eds, and reviews per year that include terms for FGCs, 1985–2004

To conclude, US media coverage of FGCs began in the early 1990s, in the midst of heated transnational debates over whether, how and why FGCs should be eradicated. Yet, in the US, an anti-FGC consensus was quickly established (Boyle and Hoeschen, 2001). I examine the role of journalists in building that consensus and ask whether this allowed for a different kind of journalism.

Methods

I collected newspaper coverage of FGCs by the *Boston Globe* (*BG*), the *Houston Chronicle* (*HC*), the *Los Angeles Times* (*LAT*), the *New York Times* (*NYT*), the *San Francisco Chronicle* (*SFC*), the *Washington Post* (*WP*), and *USA Today* (*USAT*) between 1985 (when full text archives became widely available) and 2004. These newspapers were chosen from the 15 newspapers with the highest US circulation. Others were excluded because they were regionally redundant or unavailable in full text. I drew a 75 percent sample of all news articles, op-eds (columns and editorials), and book, art and entertainment reviews (hereafter: reviews) that included the phrase 'female genital mutilation', 'female circumcision' or 'female genital cutting' for a total of 537 documents. Figure 1 shows their distribution over time.

The data reveal two critical discourse moments – the rise of coverage of FGCs in 1992/3 and its peak in 1996 – during which sudden and heightened attention was drawn to FGCs. Critical discourse moments are known to extend to interested constituencies an opportunity to introduce issues and shape perceptions, leaving a lasting mark on public understanding and policy (Chilton, 1987). Studying these moments helps us see how and why issues get constructed as they do. Accordingly, I focus my analysis on these moments. To better understand the dynamics of each, I supplement the partial sample revolving around both with the remaining coverage in my sample of newspapers (so as to enable analysis of the population of documents published by my sample of

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newspapers), but retain only those that address FGCs in-depth (i.e. at least half of the document is about the practices).

As I move from one critical discourse moment to the next, I confess to making a less-than-graceful methodological shift. My analysis of 1992/3 consists primarily of quantitative content analysis of newspaper documents. In contrast, my analysis of 1996 is qualitative and extends beyond the newspapers to include primary documents, published essays and interviews. The transition is unconventional, but it strengthens the theoretical impact of the paper by offering a richer description of the range of strategies media actors use to support social causes. I continue to discuss the rationale for this transition, and the details of the methodological approach to each critical discourse moment, in the remainder of this section.

The initiation of US newspaper coverage, 1992 and 1993

Media coverage of FGCs begins in 1992 with 13 reviews. In six unrelated reviews, the practices are simply mentioned in passing. The remaining seven are all of Alice Walker's novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). Because Walker's novel plays such a pivotal role in initiating this discourse (Boyle, 2002; James and Robertson, 2002), my analysis of the first critical discourse moment begins with these reviews ($n = 7$) and includes all news articles ($n = 9$) and op-eds ($n = 6$) that address the practices in-depth in 1992 and 1993.

To understand how FGCs were presented to US newspaper readers, I measure the sources that journalists include and the framing that they and these informants offer (following Ferree et al., 2002). I focus on diagnostic frames that indicate to readers what kind of problem FGCs are, but not prognostic or motivational frames that identify solutions and encourage action (Benford and Snow, 2000). I do so because diagnosis is the first step in informing an otherwise naïve public and, prior to 1992, FGCs were largely unknown to Americans. Focusing on diagnosis, then, is parsimonious and makes methodological sense for this first critical discourse moment.

I allowed codes to emerge from documents, revising and recoding until the coding stabilized. I identified 12 categories of speakers and three sets of diagnostic frames: tradition, social justice, and health.

The tradition frames appear through words like 'tradition', 'culture', and 'custom'; descriptions of the practices as 'ancient'; and arguments that they continue because of social pressure. If the tradition is identified as religious, I coded the sentence as containing a *religious tradition* frame. Otherwise, I coded it as a *cultural tradition* frame.

Three social justice frames emerged: women's oppression, human rights violation and child abuse. In the *women's oppression* frame FGCs represent gendered subordination. This includes language identifying FGCs as 'violence against women', 'gender discrimination' or otherwise contributing to the control of women. The *human rights violation* frame identifies FGCs as an affront to humanity and, therefore, of concern to all people (not just feminists). When speakers referred to 'rights' or 'human rights', described the practices as 'inhumane' or used similar language, I applied this frame. The *child abuse frame* identifies FGCs as victimizing children. This includes descriptions of FGCs as 'child abuse' and calls to protect children.

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Health frames emphasize physical and psychological harm. The *psychological harm* frame includes claims that FGCs cause mental or emotional 'trauma' or 'scars'. The *physical harm* frame includes descriptions of health consequences, including death.

Each sentence was also coded with the speaker. The sentence was assigned to the author of the document unless attributed to another source: *anti-FGC activists*, *health professionals*, emic-origin proponents and opponents of FGCs from practicing communities (hereafter *proponents* and *opponents*), *lawyers/judges*, *academics*, *politicians*, and Alice *Walker*. If the author specifies that a speaker is in more than one category (e.g. a feminist doctor), that speaker is coded as both.

The peak, 1996

Figure 1 reveals that newspaper coverage of FGCs peaks in 1996, marking a second critical discourse moment. As I did with the first critical discourse moment, I coded the speakers included and frames presented in newspaper documents during 1996. However, analysis revealed that there was significantly less diagnostic framing of FGCs in this period (only 12 percent of sentences, compared with 47 percent in 1992/3). This suggests that the media were playing a less definitional role at this time.

Instead of reporting about FGCs per se, it was revealed, media coverage was concerned with the future of a Togolese woman, Fauziya Kassindja, who was seeking asylum in the US. Indeed, more than half of the media attention revolves around this case (36 out of 54) and three-quarters of newspaper documents (n = 27) address the case in depth in the months preceding and immediately after the asylum decision.

Because I am interested in advocacy, instead of continuing to examine diagnostic framing efforts, I document the trajectory of media attention to the practices, how journalists worked with other actors, and how coverage affected the asylum decision. My analysis begins with the news articles (n = 17), columns (n = 7) and editorials (n = 3) about Kassindja and her case. To supplement the newspapers' accounts, however, I draw information from legal documents (n = 6), first-hand published accounts of the case (Kassindja and Bashir, 1998; Martin, 2005; Musalo, 1998, 2001; Piot, 2007); academic analyses (Gunning, 1999; Njambi, 2004: 288; Walley, 1997); and materials from two activist organizations, Equality Now (n = 3) and the Feminist Majority Foundation (n = 5).

I also solicited interviews with figures who were identified in newspaper accounts, asking for referrals from those who granted me an interview. I completed seven interviews with members of Kassindja's legal team, media actors and others involved in the case (because my sources are high-profile, I offer no additional details as to their identities). Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured. Details of the interview schedules varied according to the role of the source, but included questions designed to elicit the facts of the case (both on and off the record); interviewees' personal beliefs about FGCs, asylum law and the media; the (perceived) strategies of activists, lawyers and journalists; and influences on the outcome of the case. When I draw on their contributions, I indicate this with the abbreviation 'Int.' and a number to differentiate sources.

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With these data, I look at how reporters, columnists and editors worked with activists, politicians and her legal team to ensure that Kassindja would be granted asylum. But, first, to the beginning of newspaper coverage and to the building of an anti-FGC consensus.

Results

The initiation of US newspaper coverage, 1992/3

Long after transnational anti-FGC efforts began, Americans remained largely unaware of genital cutting practices in other countries. Their introduction to the practices can be credited to Alice Walker and her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (hereafter: *Possessing*), which was widely reviewed in US newspapers, including all of those in my sample.

The construction of an anti-FGC consensus began with the framing of the practices in these reviews. The two left-hand columns in Table 1 compare the framing of FGCs by Walker and reviewers. Walker predominantly uses four frames: cultural tradition, women's oppression, and psychological and physical harm (23, 28, 15 and 28 percent of sentences respectively). Detailing the devastating effects, she identifies the practices as culture-specific, but also a manifestation of worldwide patriarchy. Comparing FGCs to cosmetic surgery in the US, she argues that they are 'part of the global problem of men trying to control [women]' (*USAT*, 18 June 1992) and a result of 'patriarchal institutions' (*SFC*, 21 June 1992). Walker encourages readers to feel feminist outrage towards communities that perpetuate genital cutting, but she intends for that outrage to apply to patriarchy more generally, and to US patriarchy specifically.

Reviewers, too, primarily use the cultural tradition, women's oppression, and psychological and physical harm frames (in 46, 20, 33 and 31 percent of sentences respectively), but they do not echo Walker's observations about the US. Instead, they emphasize culture, using the frame twice as often as Walker. They describe practitioners as 'uncivilized' and 'lured by the past', and FGCs as 'ancient tradition' and 'abusive practices of folklore' (*BG*, 6 July 1992; *HC*, 21 June 1992; *NYT*, 24 July 1992; *SFC*, 21 June 1992).

One function of the book review pages is to draw attention to noteworthy new fiction. Accordingly, it is no surprise that *Possessing* was reviewed by all of the newspapers in my sample; read in both popular and academic circles, Walker is a renowned poet, novelist and essayist who won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Color Purple*. Many feminist issues, however, even those discussed in widely reviewed books, remain ensconced in the 'entertainment' part of the newspaper. Reporters have no imperative to attend to issues that capture the imagination of novelists and bibliophiles, nor are the issues in book reviews automatically considered 'news' (Campbell, 2004). Figure 1, however, shows that FGCs became news on the heels of these reviews. Indeed, reporters and their editors chose to amplify instead of ignore Walker's impassioned case against FGCs. More than simply putting FGCs on the agenda, they also re-framed the basis of Walker's opposition to the practices to one that does not require readers to question US culture.

Table 2 shows the number of documents and the number and percentage of sentences with framing attributed to various sources in news articles. Health professionals were the

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Table 1. Number and percent of sentences with framing attributed to media actors and sources that include each frame

Frame	Book reviews		News articles				Op-eds
	Walker *n* (%)	Reviewers *n* (%)	Reporters *n* (%)	Med. auth. *n* (%)	Activists *n* (%)	Proponents *n* (%)	*n* (%)
Tradition frames							
Cultural tradition	11 (23)	40 (46)	32 (34)	8 (36)	7 (30)	9 (41)	27 (40)
Religious tradition	—	—	2 (2)	—	—	2 (9)	—
Social justice frames							
Child abuse	3 (6)	2 (<1)	1 (1)	—	6 (26)	—	—
Human rights violation	—	1 (<1)	2 (2)	—	—	—	12 (18)
Women's oppression	13 (28)	17 (20)	14 (15)	2 (9)	2 (8)	—	13 (19)
Harm frames							
Psychological harm	7 (15)	29 (33)	—	—	—	—	2 (3)
Physical harm	13 (28)	27 (31)	49 (53)	16 (73)	9 (39)	—	15 (22)
# of sent. w/ framing:	47	87	93	22	23	21	68
# of documents:	6	7	9	8	5	5	6

Note: *N*s and percentages do not necessarily sum because sentences could include more than one frame.

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Table 2. Number of news articles including and number and percent of all sentences with frames attributed to each speaker

Selected Speakers	Articles *n*	Sentences *n* (%)
Academics	3	6 (6)
Anti-FGC activists	5	23 (22)
Emic-origin opponents	1	19 (18)
Emic-origin proponents	5	21 (20)
Health professionals	8	23 (22)
Lawyers/judges	4	10 (10)
Politicians	3	5 (5)
# of docs.:	9	
# of sent. w/ framing:		106

Note: *N*s and percentages do not necessarily sum because some speakers were given a dual-identity.

most frequent framers (eight documents and 22 percent of sentences). Anti-FGC activists and proponents were also frequently included (both found in five documents and in 20 and 22 percent of sentences respectively). Emic-origin opponents of FGCs also appear to be frequent framers, but this is because one reporter included them extensively in just one article.

Table 1 compares reporter framing with the framing of Walker, reviewers, and the most frequently included sources. The psychological harm frame, common in the book reviews, drops out in the news coverage. The physical harm and the cultural tradition frames, however, remain in the top three for all speakers, with the exception of proponents who avoid the physical harm frame.

All anti-FGC speakers, then, agree that FGCs are a physically harmful cultural practice. However, they disagree on the nature of the injustice, using different social justice frames. Actively framing FGCs, reporters affirm Walker's women's (sexual) oppression frame (15 percent of sentences). With infibulation, wrote one reporter, girls are 'made ready for the world':

> No clitoris, no desire. No opening, no risk of shame visited on her family. No dishonor to the clan. Theoretically, when she was ready for the ceremony of an arranged marriage, she would be reopened – though, of course, without ever attaining a full capacity for sexual pleasure. (*WP*, 22 Nov. 1992)

Others emphasized that FGCs are designed to 'control the sexual impulses of women', 'suppress sexual appetite, [and] to ensure monogamous behavior' (*HC*, 13 May 1993; *LAT*, 6 June 1993); another writes that FGCs are part of societies in which girls and women are '[c]onfined by culture and tradition to the lowest rungs of the social ladder' (*LAT*, 19 June 1993).

Reporters, then, offer a feminist frame for opposing FGCs, but their most frequent sources do not. Proponents, as we might expect, do not use any of the social justice arguments against FGCs, relying on a stated commitment to cultural tradition. Health professionals largely eschew social justice framing in favor of the physical harm frame

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(73 percent of sentences); they are most likely to refer to 'infections and complications' and use the UN-endorsed phrase 'harmful traditional practices' (*LAT*, 13 May 1993; *NYT*, 17 Jan. 1993). The other frequently included source, activists, prefer the child abuse frame (26 percent of sentences); mostly affiliated with development and child-focused organizations instead of feminism, they say that cutting 'kills the spirit of the child' and argue that 'the government has a duty to protect all children from torture' (*LAT*, 6 June 1993; *LAT*, 18 Feb. 1993). This data shows that reporters did not simply moderate a framing contest. Instead, following Walker's lead, they actively framed FGCs as women's oppression, putting the practices on the agenda as a feminist issue despite their sources' reluctance to do so.

At the same time, however, reporters joined reviewers in defusing the potentially controversial invocation of feminism by bringing the women's oppression frame strongly into dialogue with the cultural tradition frame. Like reviewers, reporters put greater emphasis on the cultural tradition frame than Walker (34 percent and 23 percent respectively) and less emphasis on the women's oppression frame (15 percent and 28 percent respectively). This is illustrated also by the titles of the news articles. Only one includes a feminist framing: 'Women and power' (*LAT*, 29 June 1993). More often they reference culture: 'Crime or custom?', 'Ancient traditions vs. the law', 'Ethnic gulf in French court', and 'Essential rite of passage or "ultimate child abuse"?' (*NYT*, 17 Jan. 1993; *NYT*, 22 Nov. 1993; *LAT*, 18 Feb. 1993; *LAT*, 6 June 1993).

Unlike Walker, reviewers and reporters, then, do not articulate a global sisterhood argument that asks US women to identify with women elsewhere. Instead, reporters describe a cultural obsession 'over there' with controlling women's sexuality and they actively discourage comparisons between what happens 'here' with what happens 'there':

> They call it 'female circumcision', although it is nothing like the benign procedure commonly performed on male babies worldwide … ranging from excision of the clitoris to full obliteration of the vulva … [it is] a quasi-religious ritual nearly as old as civilization. (*WP*, 22 Nov. 1992)

Globalizing and trivializing male circumcision, this reporter, like others, makes opposition to FGCs safe and uncontroversial. Reviewers and reporters, then, facilitated reader consensus on FGCs by allowing patriarchy to be cast as a cultural phenomenon specific to FGC-practicing communities. While questioning US genital cutting is highly controversial, condemning 'Africa' as patriarchal is not. Though Walker has been criticized for just this (Nwankwo, 2005; Walley, 1997), in early newspaper coverage it is the reviewers and reporters who make this move.

Building on the reporters' unique framing, Table 1 shows that columnists further de-emphasize the role of patriarchy, arguing that the perpetrator of this injustice is not men at all, but culture. For example, A.M. Rosenthal, Pulitzer Prize-winning syndicated columnist, and executive editor emeritus of the *New York Times*, mobilizes his substantial prestige to argue that FGCs persist because of an irrational cultural belief so intense that even its victims are believers. He says: 'The chief instrument of enforcement is not the knife or razor. It is the belief drilled into women that their genitalia and their sexual

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desires are inherently disgusting' (*NYT*, 12 Nov. 1993). Elsewhere Rosenthal writes that the practice 'is rooted in superstitious contempt of women so deep that its victims, their mothers and daughters pay homage to the knife that mutilates them' (*NYT*, 27 July 1993). William Raspberry, also a high-profile syndicated columnist, discusses 'the willing complicity of women' and says that the 'mutilation is carried out by female against female' (*WP*, 8 Nov. 1993). The emphasis on women's complicity suggests that all members of the culture, women as well as men, are to blame.

The idea that both men and women perpetuate the practices facilitates the introduction of a new frame by columnists: the human rights violation frame (18 percent of sentences). Rosenthal calls the practices 'the most widespread abuse of human rights and the human body in the world' and a 'mass violation of humanity' (*NYT*, 29 Dec. 1992, 27 July 1993); Raspberry calls it 'as much a human rights violation as is the torture of prisoners' (*WP*, 8 Nov. 1993). The human rights violation frame suggests that FGCs are of concern to everyone, not just women. Raspberry makes this explicit, arguing that FGCs are 'a human rights issue worthy of the concerted opposition of women everywhere'. Adding, 'And men.' Columnists, then, transform what was once an issue of women's well-being into a human rights violation equivalent to slavery and torture (*NYT*, 24 Dec. 1993).

Having established FGCs as a foreign human rights tragedy, each of the columnists calls on the US to provide economic support or endorse economic sanctions in the interest of eradication. Mann, for example, says that we must use 'whatever leverage we have … to eliminate barbaric rites' (*WP*, 9 Dec. 1992); Rosenthal suggests that we 'cut grants and loans' (*NYT*, 12 Nov. 1993). Both Rosenthal and Raspberry argue in favor of aggressive intervention, even in the face of resistance. Rosenthal (*NYT*, 24 Dec. 1993), for example, says:

> nobody has the right to post 'keep out' signs against fighting female genital mutilation. And no person, organization or government has the right in decency to obey them.

Being accused of 'cultural superiority', Raspberry (*WP*, 8 Nov. 1993) argues, is 'a risk I'm willing to take'.

More than simply recommending aggressive policies, columnists argue that US inaction is shameful. Rosenthal censures the US, saying that it has 'fail[ed]' (*NYT*, 12 Nov. 1993; *NYT*, 27 July 1993). He suggests that this might be the result of prejudice (*NYT*, 12 Nov. 1993): 'The lack of action in the West', he says, 'must come from bias and disdain … against women and blacks …' Inaction, further, makes the US culpable. '[T]wo worlds have failed them', Rosenthal (*NYT*, 27 July 1993) scolds, 'their own and the world beyond'. For these columnists, choosing not to engage in aggressive anti-FGC efforts is a sign of misguided attention to cultural sensitivity, indecency, and quite possibly racist and sexist. Ultimately, they argue, non-intervention would be a failure of US moral leadership, equivalent to turning a blind eye to slave labor and political torture (*NYT*, 24 Dec. 1993).

In sum, with the publication of *Possessing*, reviewers brought FGCs to American attention. Together with Walker, they framed FGCs as a harmful cultural tradition oppressing women. The 'entertainment' portion of newspapers is not considered a main

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source of 'news', therefore it is somewhat surprising that reporters responded to Walker's efforts as they did. Nevertheless, with the support of editors, they lifted FGCs into the news section, newly placing an issue on the agenda that had been essentially ignored by the US media for decades. More than making them news, however, reporters also emphasized a frame that their sources did not. They endorsed the women's oppression frame (even as their sources articulated other bases for opposition), but helped aim outrage carefully at cultures that practice FGCs by emphasizing the cultural tradition frame. Columnists endorsed the reporters' framing and universalized the problem as a human rights violation equivalent to the worst practices in history. No longer 'merely' a feminist issue, they could then call on the US to take action, forceful and penalizing if necessary. Just as the intersection of the women's oppression and cultural tradition frames made US patriarchy invisible, the human rights frame intersected with the emphasis on culture to make FGCs about a battle between societies that respect human rights and societies that do not. This was a far cry from Walker's framing of FGCs as just one manifestation of a worldwide patriarchy.

The peak, 1996

At the age of 17, Kassindja (spelled 'Kasinga' in legal documents and media coverage) fled Togo to avoid forced marriage and genital cutting and requested asylum in the US. Following standard procedure, she was detained awaiting trial. In prison for 16 months, she endured a riot, became ill, and reported maltreatment and inadequate medical care.

Kassindja's first immigration lawyer gave her case to a law student, Layli Miller Bashir. Bashir was inexperienced in the courtroom and faced an unsympathetic judge, one called 'hostile and abusive' and 'very bad' by my informants (Int. 2, 3). They lost. Undeterred, she convinced an experienced asylum lawyer, Karen Musalo, to assign the case to American University law students. The peak in US news discourse about FGCs is focused on their appeal.

Judy Mann wrote the first column about Kassindja. Mann, also the first to write about FGCs in 1993, had kept the issue on the agenda, writing eight columns about the practices. She also had an ongoing relationship with Equality Now, an activist organization that Bashir had contacted to help attract attention to Kassindja's case. Informed and encouraged by Equality Now, Mann's column was carefully crafted, with Musalo's help, to win sympathy for Kassindja (Int. 3, 6, 7). In the next few months, three more columnists – including Ellen Goodman and Rosenthal, who had written 2 and 14 columns about FGCs since 1992 respectively – also wrote supportive columns in collaboration with Musalo. 'We were fortunate enough to have people willing to be the voice for [Kassindja's] story', said one informant, 'so if you go back and you read Judy Mann and Linda Burstyn and … Rosenthal, you know, it's … this very excellent powerful writing telling her story' (Int. 1).

These columns, however, sparked little interest in the case. Instead, the media attention to Kassindja's appeal was escalated by a news article. The article led to intense press coverage, a public outcry and, ultimately, asylum for Kassindja. Without this article, explained another informant, the case would 'not have been what it was' (Int. 3)

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The article, by Celia Dugger, appeared above the fold on the front page of the *New York Times* (15 April 1996). This was a development actively courted by Kassindja's legal team. One informant explained their approach: 'Your battles in the court are adjunct to your battles of public opinion … so the strategy was how do we get the facts of this very compelling case out to the broader public and get them interested …' (Int. 4)

Like the columnists before her, Dugger collaborated with Equality Now and Kassindja's lawyers. Quoting her liberally and including a photograph of her in prison, scholars argue that she paints a sympathetic, even heart-wrenching portrait, alongside which the conditions of her detention in the US seem extreme and unnecessarily cruel. About the article, Walley (1997: 421) writes:

> Rhetorically, the article suggests the ironic parallels between the alleged fetters of 'tribal customs' and actual fetters in a Pennsylvania prison.… Dugger challenges the assumption of 'freedom' in the United States by suggesting parallels with the (unquestioned) oppression of 'tradition' in African countries.

Indeed, Dugger actively contrasts Kassindja's belief that she would find 'justice' in the US with her experience. The first two paragraphs address these points:

> Fauziya Kasinga says she fled her homeland of Togo at age 17 to avoid the tribal rite of female genital mutilation and an arranged marriage as the fourth wife of a man nearly three times her age … she felt sure that she would find sanctuary in a country that 'believed in justice'.
>
> Instead she has passed her 18th and 19th birthdays behind bars … she describes being shackled in chains at times, denied sanitary napkins and put in an isolation cell.

Dugger begins the article by explaining that Kassindja was 'sure' that she would find 'justice'. 'Instead', she writes, she finds herself mistreated 'behind bars'. The comparison was also a threat: if the US did not offer Kassindja asylum, the hierarchical binary on which its superiority rested would collapse. In other words, the coverage 'fictionalized and fetishized Africa as the West's Other' at the same time that it threatened to dissolve that distinction (Gunning, 1999; Njambi, 2004: 288; Piot, 2007: 157; Walley, 1997). The poor treatment of a woman fleeing FGCs contrasted sharply with the belief that America protects human rights.

Dugger's article galvanized both the public and media actors (Int. 2, 5, 6; Kassindja and Bashir, 1998; Musalo, 1998). Remembering, Musalo (2001) wrote:

> Ms. Kasinga had become a cause celebre, and the denial of her case became a rallying cry for women's rights and human rights activists. They asked how the United States, which prides itself as a leader on human rights issues, could deny protection to a woman fleeing such serious violations of her fundamental human rights.

Journalists began contacting Musalo directly. Seven days later a *New York Times* editorial condemned Kassindja's 'harsh treatment' by the US government. Then a second article by Dugger and an article in the *Washington Post* pressed for Kassindja's release. They both deplore the conditions of her detention.

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Kassindja received hundreds of letters. Equality Now set up a toll-free number, receiving 370 calls the first day, and organized a letter-writing campaign. Her legal team was contacted by hundreds of people, including celebrities, publishers, movie producers, and members of the domestic and foreign press. There was talk of staging a protest at the prison (Int. 4; Kassindja and Bashir, 1998). Meanwhile, Kassindja's lawyers used the media coverage to pressure governmental officials.

Ten days after Dugger's first article, Kassindja was released. Four days later her legal team held a press conference at the National Press Club. Journalists responded to both events with enthusiasm. 'Hordes of reporters and photographers awaited' outside the prison when she stepped out the front door (Int. 6; Musalo, 1998: 359). The press conference, attended by about 150 journalists, was the largest Equality Now had ever sponsored (Kassindja and Bashir, 1998). Between the conference and Kassindja's hearing three days later, Kassindja was featured sympathetically on *CNN Worldview*, *World News Tonight*, *Nightline* and National Public Radio. Meanwhile, social movement organizations – including Equality Now, the Feminist Majority Foundation and Amnesty International – released updates and mobilized the public. Both Hillary Clinton and Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder, who had sponsored a federal law against FGCs, contacted the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) (Int. 1). The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published follow-up articles; editors at the *Los Angeles Times* published an editorial that calls FGCs 'brutal', 'horrific' and 'worse than death'; and the *New York Times* printed a second editorial opinion calling the practices 'barbaric'. The coverage continued to threaten America's reputation as a moral exemplar. In one article, for example, Kassindja explains: 'I thought the United States was a place of justice.… Instead of receiving protection I was punished by being put in jail.… They made us feel like we are not human beings' (*WP*, 30 April 1996).

In a surprise move, the BIA agreed to hear oral arguments in the case, something that Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) attorney David Martin (2005: 11) explains 'happens only a handful of times each year, out of the tens of thousands of cases the BIA decides'. Interest in Kassindja's hearing was so overwhelming that public attendance was limited (Int. 1, 3). This, Martin (2005: 11) claims, was 'unprecedented'. The room filled with activists, politicians and media (Int. 3, 6; Kassindja and Bashir, 1998). Reporters from both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, among others, were in attendance. Ted Koppel brought a film crew. More members of the media and the public waited outside alongside a 'bank' of television cameras (Int. 1; Martin, 2005: 10). After the hearing, Kassindja's lawyers spoke to the press. The next evening, Koppel devoted the entire episode of *Nightline* to her case (Martin, 2005).

The Board had initially planned to remand the case back to the original judge who had denied Kassindja asylum (Kassindja and Bashir, 1998; Martin, 2005). An interviewee explained:

> they actually drafted a decision rejecting Fauziya … they regularly just reject appeals, but then when she got a ton of attention … they said 'we're gonna look at this one really carefully, this is getting a lot of media attention.' (Int. 1)

A second informant confirmed the reversal:

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> somebody inside the BIA … had seen a draft and told me that what the BIA was going to do was punt the issue, send it back to the immigration judge again … to look at the credibility issue … (Int. 3)

Public sentiment was so favorable, however, and media scrutiny so intense, that the Board 'reversed its earlier detention decision' and, on 13 June, announced a ruling in her favor (Martin, 2005: 12). This ruling was almost certainly due to the media attention:

> It took that [pro-Kassindja political] climate for the Board to do the right thing … by the time the case was argued … the public climate in favor of granting was so strong that … the decision you got in Kassindja after the publicity broke was not the decision that you would have gotten. (Int. 2)

As another informant put it: 'it was all of that media coverage … it was, you know, the INS just got the willies …' (Int. 5). Because of the media scrutiny, anti-FGCs consensus and sympathetic portrayals of Kassindja, then, both a no-decision and a non-decision on asylum were simply politically untenable.

Some of my informants, like the one who thinks the INS got the 'willies', believed that the Board was disinclined to give Kassindja asylum and only did so because of the public pressure. One alleged that the court simply did not 'care' about Kassindja's story: 'I'm not sure that [the court cared about] any of those compelling or sympathetic facts.… The public did, though' (Int. 2).

Two of my informants, however, believed that the media attention simply provided a counter-pressure to the ongoing anti-immigrant sentiment that contextualizes all INS decisions. One informant, for example, speculated:

> There may very well have been people within immigration who actually wanted to take a more reasonable position and felt that there was a political constraint, and once the media … and the public outcry was so favorable … they felt there was space to take that reasonable position. (Int. 1)

Public pressure, then, may not have *forced* the BIA to grant Kassindja asylum. Instead, it may have *allowed* them to do so. Suggesting as much, the attorney for the INS was quoted praising the decision: 'The INS is pleased that the board recognized that female genital mutilation can be the basis for asylum' (*LAT*, 15 June 1996).

To summarize, Kassindja was granted asylum specifically because journalists engaged in advocacy. High-profile journalists wrote about her case and advocated on her behalf. Reporters emphasized Kassindja's treatment by the US to suggest that, if asylum was not granted, the US would be culpable for her mutilation and morally indistinguishable from Togo. Columnists and editors, echoing earlier columns, pressured the government into releasing Kassindja and giving her asylum. Media actors worked closely with Equality Now and Kassindja's lawyers, often collaborating on language and framing, to mobilize the general public to protest Kassindja's detention and deportation. Their physical presence – at her release, the press conference, and her hearing – put the BIA on notice, very much like the presence of activists. Ultimately, their efforts created both pressure on the BIA to grant Kassindja asylum, and an opportunity to do so. All of this was possible

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because of the consensus that many of them had personally contributing to building in the early years of US newspaper coverage of FGCs.

Conclusion

With this examination of media involvement in public discourse about FGCs at two critical discourse moments, I offer two contributions to the sociological literature on media practices. First, an analysis of the initiation of newspaper coverage of FGCs revealed the role of reporters in building consensus. Journalists and journalism scholars alike tend to dismiss book review pages as merely entertainment (Campbell, 2004). Including reviews as data in this study, however, revealed that authors and book reviewers can play an important role in politicizing issues if reporters and their editors proactively respond to those reviews. Indeed, instead of leaving FGCs off the agenda, as they had for decades, reporters and editors made FGCs news. Then, despite professional norms that encourage reporters to refrain from active framing and the contemporaneous global controversies about FGCs, journalists framed the practices in a way that made outrage uncomplicated for Americans. Taking Walker's women's oppression frame, but neglecting her insistence that FGCs are an example of the oppression of women *worldwide*, reporters attributed them to foreign patriarchy. In op-eds, columnists and editors introduced the human rights violation frame, further entrenching the idea that conflict over FGCs represented conflict between societies that respect human rights and societies that do not. With these moves, reporters and columnists harnessed their considerable authority and access to industry-leading newsprint to turn FGCs into a primarily *cultural* problem. Once framed as such, journalists could cover FGCs without suggesting that the US, too, was patriarchal (as Walker did), that anti-FGC activism was culturally imperialist (as anti-FGC activists aligned with practicing communities argued), or that we, too, practiced ethically questionable forms of genital cutting (as many activists would have liked).

Second, I have shown that, under conditions of consensus, reporters can act much like activists. Once an anti-FGC consensus was hegemonic, journalists could mobilize it to engage in advocacy. Indeed, an analysis of the peak of newspaper coverage of FGCs revealed a set of media practices that, because of a focus on contention, is largely missing from the extant literature. Reporters actively collaborated with Kassindja's lawyers and anti-FGC activists; they wrote compelling and sympathetic stories together. Columnists and editors drew upon this reporting to accuse the US of an injustice comparable to that which Kassindja faced in Togo. And the bodies of reporters actually joined those of activists at Kassindja's release, press conference and hearing, calling into question any easy categorical separation between activism and journalism.

In sum, media actors build consensus and, once they do, they can work with activists to advocate for public policies. Without consensus, reporter advocacy would have seemed inappropriate. Under the right discursive conditions, however, condemning FGCs and defending its victims was simply good journalism. These findings suggest that even reporters at high-prestige newspapers, who are most bound by expectations of neutrality, can engage in issue advocacy. Driven by a focus on contention (Downey, 2006; McAdam et al., 2005), the assumption that journalism and activism are at odds has obscured some similarities between journalist routines and activist repertoires (Tarrow, 1998).

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Given that the right discursive conditions for journalists are shaped, in part, by journalists themselves, it would be a mistake to suggest that they are subject to a climate of opinion over which they have no control. By choosing frames that facilitate consensus, journalists can engage in advocacy and still make claims to objectivity. Journalists, of course, do not have complete freedom to create an impression of consensus or contention. Journalist construction of consensus is constrained if an issue carries a long history of adversarial politics or has powerful advocates who disagree. But when an issue is being newly constructed as a social problem relevant to a heretofore uninformed constituency, and if challengers are relatively weak, journalists can play an important role in constructing a social problem as either a contentious social movement or a consensus-based cause.

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