

Tara Reade and the Case for a Feminist Rhetoric-Propaganda Studies

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Abstract: Following the circulation of #MeToo in late 2017, calls for accountability drew attention to public figures - including politicians - who had potentially committed acts of sexual violence. This paper joins two currently separated disciplinary focuses, feminist rhetorical studies and propaganda studies, to theorize how US news media handle reports of politicians' sexual misconduct post-#MeToo. In performing what this combined feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies may look like, I approach a publication celebrated for its post-#MeToo investigative work, *The New York Times* (NYT), and analyze the 2020 case of US President Joe Biden and a former junior aide named Tara Reade. I argue that, despite the absence of any definitive evidence "proving" one side over another, the NYT consistently presents the case in ways that serve Biden's interests over Reade's, and works to insulate Biden from public accountability. In presenting this interdisciplinary study, I contribute to ongoing understandings of victim testimony post-#MeToo, while also shifting beyond the particularity of Biden and Reade to consider how a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies might usefully inform how we study mainstream media representations of sexual violence.

Keywords: [#MeToo](#); [propaganda](#); [Joe Biden](#); [news media](#); [frames](#); [recontextualization](#); [victim testimony](#)

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Introduction

In 2006, African American and women's rights activist Tarana Burke used the platform of her organization *Just Be Inc.* to found the "me too" movement, dedicated to "let[ting] women, particularly young women of color ... know that they are not alone" as survivors of sexual abuse (Burke 8). Over a decade later in October 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano incorporated "#MeToo" into a Tweet, the movement began to be recognized by larger US and international publics. From an initial politics of performing solidarity, Me Too¹ grew into a call for accountability, drawing into the spotlight public figures—including politicians—who had committed acts of sexual violence. In a *Washington Post* article titled, "How #MeToo has changed the D.C. power structure - so far," the authors strike a celebratory note about the effects of Me Too on US politics: "Fueled by rage and a surge of women naming those they say sexually harassed or assaulted them, the #MeToo movement has brought the swift downfall of many powerful federal officials over the past year,"

1 In this article, I write "Me Too" sans hashtag to indicate the wider movement began by Burke; I use "#MeToo" when referring to the October 2017 Twitter campaign.

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going on to name nineteen persons as examples (Gerhart and Rindler 9).

In this way, Me Too achieved its goal of establishing sexual violence as a large-scale, systemic issue in the US, one worthy of redress. Yet in terms of its accountability efforts, Me Too's successes have been decidedly uneven. One of the more lurid examples is former US President Donald Trump. Despite a steady stream of women who came forward to recount instances of sexual harassment, assault, rape, and/or pedophilia - not to mention the leaking of the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump discussed grabbing women "by the pussy" in acts of sexual conquest (Fahrenheit). Trump was successfully elected president in 2016, completed his four-year term without repercussion, and as of 2024 was reelected into office. Yet while Trump might be the most widely known example of a US politician who evaded Me Too-era accountability, he is merely one among many, including Brett Kavanaugh, Matt Gaetz, Keith Ellison, Tony Cárdenas, Tom Reed, and Joe Biden.

The fact that post-#MeToo call-outs were only *partially* successful in US politics indicates a need to study how, exactly, political elites engage in strategies of rhetorical evasion. Since public pressure (and implied support or rejection by voting publics) can be influential in fueling accountability, a necessary first step is to consider how sexual violence controversies are mediated in public discussion, and how we are variously encouraged to interpret politicians' and potential victims' accounts. While journalists have successfully achieved acts of public accountability in the Me Too era (for instance, the *New York Times* investigative reports into media mogul Harvey Weinstein, which helped to uncover decades of sexual predation [Kantor and Twohey]), it would be wrong to assume that media institutions act as neutral conduits of information. Even sympathetic handlings of victim testimony often carry the underpinnings of "rape culture," a term naming the deeply patriarchal logics that are upheld as commonsensical depictions of reality (Larson 2021). Such logics, as argued by Stephanie Larson, work to diminish empathy for victims of sexual violence by instead channeling public feeling towards victim doubt, or even more seriously, victim blame, while simultaneously working to contain victims' expressions of having been harmed. In order to account for how rape culture ideology is circulated and taken up by publics, we need to attend to how testimonies of sexual violence are mediated for reading audiences, and the subtle implications these mediations carry.

In an effort to track how venues such as the *New York Times* (hereafter NYT)² present victim testimony to reading publics, I take up a case that was widely reported on in May 2020, but resulted in little concrete change: Tara Reade, who spoke of sexual assault while working as a junior aide in Biden's Senate office in 1993. In approaching this case, it is important to note that I am not interested in proving the veracity of one person's narrative over another. Such an orientation would be problematic, given the frequent weaponization of doubt deployed against victims (Banet-Weiser and Higgins), as well as the inherent difficulty in "proving" an act of sexual violence that may have occurred decades earlier. Instead of supposed truth value, I focus on how, in the absence of any *absolute* evidence (and even with some corroboration of

2 I selected *The New York Times* due to its high circulation numbers in the US, and its alignment with #MeToo, for instance in publishing investigative work on Hollywood producer and serial assaulter Harvey Weinstein.

Reade's account), the NYT presented Reade in ways that discredited her character and offered a rhetorical cover for Biden.

In developing methodology to assess this interplay of representations, I utilize an area of literature that, while analytically useful, has not yet been put into conversation with feminist rhetorics: the study of propaganda. While colloquially the word "propaganda" in the US recalls associations with war discourse and cultural movements such as McCarthyism and the Red Scare, current scholarship argues that, as a practice, propaganda is alive and well in contemporary US politics (Oddo 2018). Moreover, this scholarship discusses how the mainstream media sources from which Americans glean information - the same sources that posture as objective presenters of truth - often serve notably propagandic functions that, in turn, insulate political elites from the possible consequences of their actions (Bennett; Herman and Chomsky). Using coverage of Biden-Reade as a test case, this paper argues that feminist rhetorical scholars can gain a helpful orientation towards news media via propaganda studies, leading us to rich interrogations of how news media texts may help to popularize the tenants of rape culture in US society.

I begin this paper with an exploration of propaganda studies and how it can usefully combine with feminist rhetorics. Then, collecting the coverage of the Biden-Reade case as it was published by the NYT, I deploy two propaganda studies-inspired methods (*recontextualization* and *framing*) to attend to the particular case of Biden-Reade. I argue that, far from presenting neutral depictions of actors and events, the NYT presents the controversy in ways that serve Biden's interests over Reade's. Via this analysis, and in arguing for a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies, we shift beyond the particularity of the Biden-Reade case to consider how problematic patterns of representation continue to thrive in post-#MeToo news media.

Propaganda Studies and Feminist Rhetorical Studies

"Propaganda" as it occurs in a specifically US context has long been a topic of intellectual discussion (see for instance Edward Bernays' *Propaganda* book, written in 1928). Edward Bernays serves as an originator of this discussion, using his book - which drew from his influence on the modern Public Relations (PR) industry - to offer an understanding of propaganda as itself a neutral tool, one that could be used for good or ill. Later scholars, however, came to position propaganda as a negative and reality-obscuring force that unfairly bends the will of the masses, an association that continues today (Ellul; Marlin). While rhetoric circles occasionally offered comment (see, for instance, Henderson and Braun), most contemporary propaganda scholarship tends to have roots in communication studies (e.g., Jowett and O'Donnell) and/or critical sociolinguistics (e.g., Van Dijk).

Despite propaganda's long scholastic history, contemporary academics are not always in agreement as to what "counts" as propaganda, and theorizing definitions makes up the bulk of propaganda studies today. In a useful cross-comparison of scholarly definitions, John Oddo (2018) identifies several points of contention: whether or not propaganda's authors can only be institutional; whether or not propaganda requires

deliberate targeting of an audience for “a self-serving purpose” (16); and finally, whether or not propaganda requires a demonstrable intention to mislead or harm its audiences. In comparison to those he surveys, Oddo favors a wider scope as to what should count as propaganda, defining it as “mass-recontextualized and manipulative discourse that promotes the power of the Few while harming the interests of the Many” (36). The “Few,” to approach propaganda from a feminist angle, can and should include powerful men who take sexual advantage of the subjects hierarchically beneath them, as well as the journalists who report on these cases for the public’s general consumption. If such reports conform to (and assist in promoting) rape cultural logics that protect the interests of politicians over those of their potential victims, then journalists’ reports act against the interests of the Many, and should rightfully be understood as propagandic in nature.

Popular understandings of propaganda regularly cast state institutions as the main authors of manipulative misinformation. Media venues, in turn, often present themselves as performing a fact-checking role, one meant to counter this misinformation. However, propaganda studies regularly implicates mainstream media as complicit with (and, in fact, active corroborators of) government propagandic campaigns. As one example, W. Lance Bennett and his collaborators dwell at length on mainstream US reporting in the lead-up to the Iraq War, in which news coverage was so uncritical of the Bush administration, and so willing to reify the administrations’ version of events, that outlets such as the NYT later issued apologies to their readers (23). Yet as Bennett and his colleagues argue, this lack of critical coverage is not unique but rather business-as-usual. This is because the press has an ongoing dependence on government sources, which results in “[j]ournalists’ propensity to fashion the news to the realities of power as defined by the officials they cover” (3). Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, in a similar vein, point to the structural weaknesses of US media companies and how these weaknesses encourage the authoring of propaganda. These include news media’s corporatization and dependence on profits, as well as the large-scale monopolization of media companies, pushing the media sphere towards homogenization of political narratives even as it forces small, independent presses to the periphery (xvii). Potential dissent to overarching political narratives--in this case, arguments against rape culture and the white cisheteropatriarchy it perpetuates--are denied coverage and effectively sidelined.

Some might point to the antagonistic relationship between the recent Trump administration and US mainstream news, and the consequent rise of fact-checking enterprises and an “adversarial press” (Karpf), as proof against US government-media complicity. Yet given the deep structural dependencies that limit the possibilities of *truly* investigative journalism, we cannot dismiss the ways in which media institutions create accounts that rhetorically serve a propagandic purpose.

One such purpose, I argue, is to protect politicians who engage in sexually violent acts from public repercussion. Sexual violence has of course had a long and painful history in the US, especially in considering marginalized populations such as enslaved women (see Jennings). Such histories cannot be divorced from the US political sphere, and in fact are *constitutive* of that sphere. We only need remember the existence of Sally Hemings, the woman enslaved, imprisoned, raped, and impregnated by Declaration of In-

dependence writer Thomas Jefferson (see Brown), to recognize sexual exploitation's foundational nature in US politics. This sort of violence finds expression today when politicians use their positions of power to take sexual advantage of those over whom they exert some sort of control.

Despite the long history of sexual violence in US politics, the socially-accepted norms of how such violence ought to be discussed have shifted in recent decades. At one time, sexual violence was considered a "private" matter that should not be brought up in the "public" venue of politics, and thus privileged men's discretion over possible accountability. Now, however, sexual violence is at least identified as a newsworthy concern and is thus open to the possibility of public discussion or even condemnation. The Me Too movement in its various expressions can be seen as a reinforcement of this trend, with an increased emphasis on holding powerful men to account, as well as cultivating solidarity among women who have faced sexual violence (though this solidarity is not unproblematic - see Allison Phipps' work for a discussion of what amounts to white women's cooptation of Me Too).

These expressions of sexual violence in the US, and the cultural responses to that violence such as Me Too, have been taken up for interrogation by feminist scholars across the rhetoric and communication disciplines. Stephanie Larson, for instance, considers the power of #MeToo in terms of the classic rhetorical trope of *megethos*, or the way that aggregation can generate force. That is, Larson argues, the sheer number of women who tweeted "#MeToo" offer readers a visceral sense of how widespread the problem of sexual abuse truly *was* (2018). In research that studies victim subjectivities, Mary Schuster explores the various rhetorical constraints that victims must face continuing into the post-#MeToo era. For instance, Schuster notes that "maintaining the identity of a victim often involves achieving credibility through corroboration of her story," such that when corroboration is not possible, the victim's experience is deemed unprovable and ultimately delegitimized (2).

Some of the feminist research into sexual violence has attended specifically to how that violence is constituted in media representations. Several scholars, for instance, have examined coverage about the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings prior to Thomas's appointment to the US Supreme Court. Despite the hearing's failure to hold Thomas accountable for his sexual harassment of Hill, Amy Black and Jamie Allen have argued that the Thomas-Hill hearing focused public discussion onto sexual harassment for the first time in the US, recasting it more concretely as an issue needing redress. Leigh Gilmore, meanwhile, takes a more negative view of the hearings, arguing that they are emblematic of "legally permissible and intertwining forms of racism and sexism" across both US media and politics (28).

Other feminist scholars have attended to the media industry itself and its various methods of expressing antifeminist ideology. Rebecca DiBennardo offers a useful cross-study of a particular print venue, *The Los Angeles Times*, to compare patterns within sexual abuse reports that involved children versus adult women. In the *LA Times*, DiBennardo posits, "Narratives about adult victims ... fram[e] them as responsible for their victimization and minimiz[e] their importance relative to child victims" (1). In a similar use of news frames

as an analytic, Paula McDonald and Sara Charlesworth explore how such frames tend to present “sexual harassment as an individualized problem of inappropriate employee behavior” rather than something systemic (95). Janet Bing and Lucien Lombardo, meanwhile, work to name and outline the frames by which media sources explain cases of sexual harassment to reading publics. Particularly helpful is their identification of an “initiator frame,” which occurs when a text “focuses on the behavior of the alleged perpetrator rather than on the damage to the alleged victim, redefining the reported behavior as something *other* than harassment” (299, emphasis mine). Feminist research in rhetoric and communication, then, has already identified various problematic orientations to victims of sexual violence that are reproduced in US media.

When we survey both the extant literature on propaganda and the extant literature on sexual violence, perhaps the most significant gap we find is the lack of interdisciplinary dialogue taking place. Research on propaganda offers insights into how power is regulated via institutional unities of government and media, with media-consuming populations coerced into beliefs that serve the status quo. Feminist work in rhetorical studies, meanwhile, takes up examinations of political/cultural beliefs - the inherent superiority of (white, upper-class, cishet, abled) men - and how this logic is constituted in popular representations. Combining these similar, but separated, conversations allows us to investigate sexual violence as a systemic issue of control, one in which media campaigns have the ability to insulate men in power. Additionally, when feminist research *does* take up sexual abuse as done by US politicians, attention tends to be drawn towards politicians (such as Clarence Thomas, Brett Kavanaugh, and Donald Trump) who are more clearly identifiable as misogynists. In attending to the cooperative imbrications of government and media in maintaining rape cultural power relations, we need to expand our purview to politicians who mainstream media outlets treat more favorably. In this paper, I will examine the case of Joe Biden, whom during 2020 was often implied to be the hero that could save the US public from then-President Donald Trump.

In order to conduct this analysis, I next explain the combination of two approaches inspired by propaganda studies that, when taken together with theory drawn from feminist rhetorics, inform what we might call a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies: *recontextualizations* and *frames*.

Recontextualizations and Frames as Feminist Methodology

In his book *The Discourse of Propaganda*, Oddo makes the argument that propaganda can be usefully approached via the analytic of “intertextuality.” Intertextuality, as a theory often used in discourse analysis, attends to the fact that no single text or event exists in isolation but is part of a larger, contextual web, linked in a process of what theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin refer to as “dialogicality.” As such, intertextuality attends to how we draw upon former texts in order to understand new ones, putting such texts into “dialogue” with one another (Bakhtin). This becomes significant to a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies in that, when it comes to propaganda, “the desired response is not just acknowledgment but *repetition*” (Oddo 22, emphasis mine). Propagandic ideas gain their power via circulation. As such, media that is serving a propagandic purpose repeats certain logics (for instance, that of rape culture) across many texts, until those

logics become a normalized standard for reading audiences.

Embedded within intertextuality is the study of recontextualizations. *Recontextualization* speaks to how rhetors constitute representations of previous texts within new (con)textual moments. Oddo, drawing upon a quote from Bakhtin, argues that recontextualization “can be best thought of as a rhetorical ‘tool for re-conceptualiz[ing] and re-accenting’ prior discourse” (Oddo 130). “Recontextualization” therefore draws our attention to two complementary foci: *which* texts an author decides to call upon, and *how* the author constructs those texts within a new text. The first focus requires researchers to attend to references of previous texts or events, and how these previous texts/events are made present or absent.³ The second focus requires us to attend to what is included or excluded at a micro-scale, and what sort of epistemic certainty we are encouraged to place in included texts. As an example of varying certainty, we could consider the difference between “She *said*” versus “She *claimed*” as a way to introduce a victim’s testimony, and how this word choice affects how reading audiences will make their own interpretations of that testimony and how trustworthy it is.

Relevant to discussions of news media, and to recontextualizations more particularly, are *frames*. Frames are an analytical tool used across the communication disciplines, including rhetoric and discourse analysis, and often serve as a way to assess a reader’s cognitive processing of texts. Paul Chilton, for instance, describes frames as “structures related to the conceptualization of situation types and their expression in language” (51). Essentially, frames are mental apparatuses that help us to make sense of our daily lived experiences, apparatuses that in turn are cued by the language we use. As George Lakoff explains, “All of our knowledge makes use of frames, and every word is defined through the frames it neurally activates,” such that certain words call up corresponding networks of meaning (72). We might consider the terms “sexual misconduct” and “sexual assault,” which could technically each be used to describe an incident of sexual violence. However, the change of phrasing would imply wildly different interpretations of that incident, and thus different frames for understanding, with “misconduct” being relatively vague and institutional, and “assault” connoting a sense of danger and harm to a physical subject. To draw a parallel to feminist rhetorics and in particular the work of Sara Ahmed, words can have a “sticky” quality to them in which meanings and affects attach over time (Ahmed) - in this case, “misconduct” and “assault” each have different sets of associated meanings. Selective word-use can thus encourage certain orientations towards the subjects involved, certain “frames of mind,” even in the absence of explicit discussion.

The literature on propaganda posits that the more a particular word is repeated, the more a frame is reinforced, and the more it becomes normalized in public media, “strengthen[ing] the circuits for [a word’s] ideology in a hearer’s brain” (Lakoff 72). If a news outlet consistently uses “sexual misconduct” over other alternatives to describe an event of sexual violence, this offers readers a dominant way of thinking about the

3 Say, for instance, a victim did an interview with a news outlet. A study of recontextualizations might ask: Do other outlets quote from the interview? *What* do they quote? Or are a victim’s words made relatively absent from subsequent coverage?

event, one that (in lacking an acknowledgment of harm) serves the ideological interests of rape culture. This in turn works to diminish future alternatives. This is because, as Lakoff argues, alternative wordings that do not match dominant frames are unlikely to gain traction in public thought (73); to rephrase in Ahmed's words, they do not "stick." Of course, no scholar who studies ideologically-sticky framing-words would go as far as to say that language *controls* thought. However, as feminist rhetoricians know, language certainly *manipulates* thought, operating with different degrees of stickiness, guiding users towards considering a given subject in one way rather than another. Given that such manipulation is one of the defining features of propaganda, attending to a text's selective use of frames becomes a way to understand a text's functioning *as* propaganda... and in this case, an antifeminist propaganda, one that reinforces a white cisheteropatriarchal orientation to potential victims.

Because of its focus on the power of individual words and phrases, the study of both recontextualizations and frames can be usefully combined with feminist rhetorical analysis that takes a close-reading approach. Together, this offers us a methodology that can be used towards a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies. Below, I offer an example of what such an approach might look like in analyzing the case of Joe Biden and Tara Reade.

Tara Reade in the *New York Times*

2019 marked the beginning of the US Democratic primary campaign as a range of candidates, including Joe Biden, marketed themselves as viable alternatives to then-President Donald Trump. With campaign season came intense media scrutiny of the candidates. Reports began to appear in which several women (mostly anonymous) described Biden as engaging in "uncomfortable" actions, kissing and touching them without their consent and in ways they found personally demeaning (Flores). Upon seeing these other reports, Tara Reade, a woman who had worked for Biden in 1993 as a junior aide, decided to come forward and report her own experiences with Biden's "uncomfortable touching" in her local paper (The Union). Then in March 2020, Reade added to her initial account, speaking about an incident in 1993 that she qualified as more serious. As Reade recounts in a podcast interview, "He had me up against a wall... and, um, I was wearing a skirt... and his hands were on me, underneath my clothes. And... he penetrated me, with his fingers" (Halper). The NYT, as well as other media venues, began to incorporate Reade's story into their coverage of the ongoing election, particularly in April and May 2020.

To investigate the overall coverage of the Biden-Reade case in the NYT, I collected articles using search features available via ProQuest. Initially, I searched the name "Tara Reade" in articles published in 2020, while excluding more explicitly opinion-based article genres such as opinion editorials and letters to the editor. I did this because I was interested in analyzing the "hard news" texts that the NYT presented as neutral and objective retellings of Reade's story. This initial search resulted in 35 articles. Focusing only on Reade's name was, however, not ideal, as this excluded articles that withheld her name even while discussing her experience (for instance, "the woman who accused Biden..."). For that reason, I searched the terms "Joe

Biden” and “sexual” (to capture such phrases as “sexual assault,” “sexual misconduct,” etc.) while again limiting the search to hard-news articles published in 2020. This resulted in a total of 76 articles.

Combining these two sets of articles (which frequently overlapped with one another) offered a small enough collection to allow for close reading and attention to detail, yet still contained enough texts to identify larger-scale patterns of representation across the NYT’s coverage. While not enough to launch a critique of the entire US political media system, this case study was meant to provide a starting point for investigating what a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies might entail analytically. In attending particularly to recontextualizations and to the frames deployed by NYT writers, I sought to examine the potentially propagandic effects of media reporting on sexual violence, how readers are encouraged to interpret such cases, and how, if present, the implicated logics of rape culture may work to reify US politicians’ power in the years following #MeToo.

The first and most immediate element of how the NYT decided to report Reade’s story, at least initially, is how they describe the assault itself in graphic detail by paraphrasing Reade’s own words. In an April 12 2020 article, the authors render the incident in the following way: “[Reade] told The New York Times that in 1993, Mr. Biden pinned [Reade] to a wall in a Senate building, reached under her clothing and penetrated her with his fingers” (Lerer & Ember). This visceral description of violation is fully accredited to Reade (she “told” the NYT), which creates a kind of distance; this is not a statement necessarily agreed to by the authors, but one they are merely relaying to their readers. Even so, the grammatical structure of the sentence positions Biden as an active perpetrator, doing something to Reade as an affected object, and thus figures Biden as a responsible party. The sexually abusive nature of the act is emphasized via the verb and prepositional phrase, “penetrated... with his fingers,” as “penetrate” carries a strong sexual connotation that, in the absence of consent, becomes a viscerally unpleasant word to read.

The same description of assault reappears in other articles with roughly the same word choice preserved (e.g., Russonello and Astor), repeating and reinforcing this recontextualized version of Reade’s story. Yet in some articles, a subtle replacement occurs that works to hide the presence of Biden’s body in the event. In an article from May 2020, the prepositional phrase “with his fingers” is disappeared and replaced with the adverb “digitally”: “... pushing her up against a wall in a Senate building and penetrating her digitally” (Glueck et. al.). While “digitally” can be understood as the adverbial transformation of “digit” (i.e., finger), in the era of the Internet, this word is far more often used to refer to online or technological contexts. “Digitally” itself is less likely to cue associations with “finger.” In this way, “digitally” not only lacks the physical or spatial detail of the original prepositional phrase, but abstracts away the presence of Biden’s body and its effect on others (i.e., Reade).

As coverage of Biden-Reade runs into May 2020, details of Reade’s experience continue to blur, such as one article that recontextualizes the incident as Reade “accusing [Biden] of sexually assaulting her in a Senate hallway in 1993” (Bennet & Lerer). In this sentence, it is not the act itself, or the felt harm done to

Reade, that carries implied importance. Rather, the sentence structure privileges the accusation itself, and, via prepositional phrases, *where* and *when* the potential assault happened, as the details of primary importance. Regardless of whether the assault happened or not, such renderings disappear the potential act's visceral, bodily qualities, which frequently are the sorts of details that serve to connect a reader to a victim's experience in an empathy-generating way (Larson). Instead, Biden's potential actions are relocated to a prepositional phrase ("of assaulting her..."), implied to be *supplemental* information to the real action of the sentence, Reade "accusing."

It is worth dwelling on the verb "accusing," its noun "accusation," and the versions of this word that appear throughout many of the articles as "accuser"/ "accused." In his discussion of serial predator Bill Cosby, Jackson Katz notes at length the problem in referring to potential sexual violence victims as "accusers":

"She -- or he -- is no longer the sympathetic victim to whom something horrible was done. She is now the one who is doing something to [the perpetrator] -- she's accusing him. It is her actions -- not his -- that become the object of critical scrutiny. And he is transformed into the victim -- of her accusation. Thus the use of the word 'accuser' effectively shifts public support from the alleged victim to the alleged perpetrator."

We might return to Bing and Lombardo's terminology of "initiator frame" to describe the shift that Katz identifies. Defining Reade as an "accuser" cues the reader away from a victim frame, with its "primary emphasis on the degree of harm or injury from the harassing behavior on the alleged victim," to one that instead privileges the potential *perpetrator's* point of view (297). Grammatically speaking, these variations of "accuse" also position Reade as an active doer of something (an allegation) and Biden as a passive recipient. Invoking this particular frame distances the possibility of Biden as an active doer of harm himself. Nearly all the articles in the NYT corpus reflect this language by introducing Reade as the woman who "accused Joe Biden of sexual assault" (Rutenberg et. al.). This recontextualization of Reade works to highlight the accusation itself as the "newsworthy" story, rather than the possibility of Biden being a sexual assaulter. This "accuser" frame may be occasionally dropped, for instance in phrases such as, "The former aide... told the New York Times..." (Lerer and Ember, 12 April 2020), which centers on Reade's perspective as a former employee who is now "telling" her story. However, the returns to Reade-as-victim are temporary, whereas Reade-as-accuser is frequently introduced at the starts of articles and thus functions as an establishing frame, shaping how we understand the entire series of events to be later described.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the NYT coverage on Biden-Reade is what is implied to matter in these recontextualized accounts, and how these included contexts impact our perception of Reade as an untrustworthy source. The NYT engages in hyper-scrutiny of every aspect of Reade's life so that we might better "understand" her later testimony. The most direct example of this is an article titled, "Tara Reade's Tumultuous Journey to the 2020 Campaign" (Rutenberg et. al.). The NYT published this article on the front of their print edition as well as online, with the online version including an audio narration and featuring over 1000

comments, illustrating both its wide circulation and its perceived importance at the time. The title suggests that Reade primarily matters for her effect on the 2020 election. However, the subsequent byline demonstrates just how closely every aspect of Reade's life is appraised, not in her own words but the words of others: "To better understand Ms. Reade, who accused Joe Biden of sexual assault, The Times interviewed nearly 100 friends, relatives, co-workers and neighbors, and reviewed court records and her writings." The collective work of this report (which covers everything from her childhood to her coming-out about the assault) presents Reade as a charismatic but ultimately suspicious woman. The authors cast doubt on, among other things, the education she lists on her resume, her work as an expert witness in court cases, and past financial disagreements with landlords and friends. Moreover, this untrustworthiness is linked to her previous narrations of sexual violence: "... there are the former friends [of Reade's] who describe how she spun her way into their confidence with her story of abuse and perseverance, only to leave them feeling disappointed and duped" (n.p.). The reader is left to draw parallels between these supposedly false abuse stories and Reade's testimony about Biden, and how she may have manipulatively "spun" the story. This serves to question Reade's motive in coming forward and the reader's potential sympathetic reaction to Reade, a reaction that must be guarded against unless one be similarly "duped." In this way, the NYT presents a Reade who is sticky with her own past, rendering every word that comes from her mouth inherently questionable.

The multitude of personal details recounted by the NYT also individuates Reade in a way that separates her from the larger Me Too movement, making her an easier mark for personal attacks. As feminist scholars have noted, isolation of particular victims serves to present instances of sexual violence as explainable via individual failings rather than a widespread issue of inequality (McDonald and Charlesworth). Because of Reade's morally gray character (as "proven" in the NYT's investigative biography), emphasizing Reade as a unique individual helps to shift focus onto how her testimony is *individually* questionable, rather than part of a systemic pattern; it is a propaganda that obscures the nature of societal inequality. We find this in how Reade's account of Biden is most often discussed in the singular, despite the existence of other women (such as former Nevada lawmaker Lucy Flores) who previously came forward to speak of Biden's exploitative behavior.

Separating Reade from Me Too also takes the form of explicitly distancing her from key Me Too figures. This is done by quoting women activists in their continued support of Biden (Bennett and Lerer; Lerer and Ember, 29 April 2020), as well as a particular article that focuses on Reade's rejection by "a leading #MeToo lawyer" (Lerer et. al.). This article recounts how Reade was initially taken on by Douglas Wigdor, the same attorney that brought successful litigation against perpetrators such as Bill O'Reilly and Harvey Weinstein. However, "only two weeks" after Wigdor began to represent Reade, he dropped her as a client. The article does include quotes from Wigdor insisting that he believed Reade's story and that the matter of her truthfulness was not the reason behind his leaving. However, the authors choose to recontextualize Wigdor's departure alongside Reade's "questionable" education and legal credentials, discussion of which takes up the bulk of the article; it seems significant that the article's online URL has the tag "tara-reade-credentials," implying that Reade is the true subject under judgment here. In personifying Me Too justice through the figure

of Wigdor, and in highlighting his supposed rejection of Reade's "credentials," the article serves to section Reade off from "legitimate" Me Too cases.

Questioning whether or not someone truly counts as a victim (or whether, instead, they are supposedly fabricating the harm for personal gain) has long been identified by feminist scholars as a way to delegitimize and ultimately dismiss victims of sexual violence (Gilmore; Larson; Schuster). While, ethically speaking, events in Reade's life beyond the potential assault should not dismiss the possibility that she was harmed, the NYT's coverage of her story works towards this conclusion. From the perspective of a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies, this practice sets a disciplining precedent for other sexual violence survivors. Few people, after all, are comfortable with a public excavation of their personal lives if they come forward to report a traumatic sexual experience. The possibility of facing a media treatment similar to Reade's can become a reason *not* to speak out against powerful political figures; Reade said as much herself in a later interview (Kelly). Write-ups that engage in disciplining their potential victim subjects can thus serve as a protective cover for politicians.

Another recontextualized feature to appear across many of the articles (Bennett and Lerer; Glueck et. al.; Lerer and Ember) are prolonged descriptions of then-President Trump's *own* history with sexual violence allegations. In the Lerer and Ember April 29, 2020 article, we see the authors break away from the immediate situation to embed the following:

[Trump] has been accused of sexual assault and misconduct by more than a dozen women, who have described behavior that went far beyond the allegation against Mr. Biden. [Trump] has repeatedly denigrated women over their appearance and intellect. The 'Access Hollywood' tape, in which he boasted about grabbing women's genitals, was released just weeks before his victory in the 2016 election.

The relevance-to-Trump developed here matches many of the articles in the collection, with most articles actively recontextualizing Reade's account according to the Trump-versus-Biden logics of the 2020 election.⁴ Such detailed paragraphs of Trump's purported violence--and how this violence goes "far beyond the allegation against Mr. Biden," a phrase repeated in other articles as well--provides readers with a political comparison, positioning Trump, proportionally speaking, as the *real* threat to women. This in turn provides an explicit political incentive to distrust Reade's account and instead continue to support Biden.

In direct contrast to Trump's atrocious record with women's rights, and how NYT journalists detail this at length in articles that technically do not involve him, authors of the Biden-Reade coverage also

4 A cursory search on *ProQuest* for NYT articles written in 2020 that included "Donald Trump" and "sexual" found 131 articles, compared to Biden's 76. While the NYT discusses some of his dozens of victims in the singular, most of these articles tend to present the victims in aggregate (e.g., "more than a dozen women..."), and/or highlight the *Access Hollywood* tapes above all else. In contrast to Reade, who was acknowledged but then discredited, Trump's potential victims tended to not be mentioned at *all* (a finding, also, of Schneider and Hannem).

frequently cite evidence of Biden's positive history of supporting women's rights. Several articles mention how Biden "championed the Violence Against Women Act," and helped "ma[ke] progress on fighting campus sexual assault" (Bennett and Lerer). In short, Biden, albeit still guilty of "uncomfortable touching," is presented as an ally whose possible misogyny is relatively benign and paternal, at least in comparison to Trump. What remains absent in these Trump/Biden recontextualizations is Reade's account of the assault itself. Despite the fixation on Reade's story, attention is paid primarily to the physical assault and the resulting "accusation"; no NYT journalists describe how the incident may have caused Reade trauma, and only rarely (see Smith as an exception) do writers quote from Reade directly, instead preferring paraphrases over which they can exert more rhetorical control. As a consequence, both Reade's voice and the figuration of her assault recede into the background, paling in comparison to the true matter at hand for readers with feminist inclinations: defeating Trump and removing him from the White House.⁵ Given the widespread patterns in word choice and recontextualizations that together advance Reade as inherently questionable and Biden as inherently favorable, it is worth noting that some NYT articles do attempt a more critical orientation. One article dated to late May 2020 critiques how mainstream media handled the Biden-Reade controversy as a whole, titled, "Why Won't TV News Book Tara Reade?" (Smith). This article compares Reade's case to another (that of Juanita Broaddrick's potentially being raped by Bill Clinton in 1978) which was also denied TV coverage, and in this historical connectivity begins to gesture at the systemic, anti-victim nature of political news media. Smith's article is also one of the few to directly quote Reade, amplifying her own words and voice rather than merely appropriating her account. Smith strikes an overall sympathetic tone, arguing that, whatever her individual credibility, Reade deserves at least to be heard on mainstream news venues. In the article's byline - "The stakes are high for the media in the case of a sexual assault allegation against Joe Biden" - Smith even suggests the shared "stakes" (and thus the propagandic complicities) between news media and US politics. While this article was somewhat buried in the print edition (appearing on page A22), it enjoyed both audio narration and a high level of reader engagement, with 1451 online comments recorded at the time of research.

However, in writing this article, Smith chooses to direct his critique *outwards*, not at the NYT's own print coverage. This gives the implicit suggestion that the NYT, by publishing Smith, is above the faults discussed in the article. Throughout its intense coverage of the Biden-Reade controversy, after all, the NYT *also* did not publish an interview with Tara Reade or otherwise privilege her voice in their retellings of her testimony. Instead, nine days after publishing Smith's article, the NYT chose to narrate the intricacies of Reade's life primarily through the eyes of others, in ways that roundly challenged her character and thus her status as a legitimate victim (Rutenberg et. al.).

5 What makes this a particularly complex situation is that there is some truth to such a stance. Trump normalized degradation of women in public discussion, had dozens of victims of his own, and put into power others who worked to shrink the rights that women had earned in hard-fought battles, such as how his Supreme Court appointees helping to overturn the federal right to abortions protected in *Roe v Wade*. Trump represented a very real threat to women's rights in 2020. However, this *still* does not offer a legitimate reason to neglect Reade's story, and the propagandic logic that we must tolerate "lesser" sexual violence in order to protect our rights is an insidious one that deserves to be unpacked.

As it stands, despite posturing as a Me Too ally, the NYT buried Reade's story of sexual violence once this story had outlived its rhetorical use. 29 out of 35 articles mentioning Reade's name are dated to April or May 2020; after this, Reade drops from the coverage entirely until four months later in September. In September, a small handful of six articles appear; yet these only mention Reade in passing, for instance in musing about whether or not Trump would invite Reade to sit in on one of the October presidential debates (Karni and Haberman). Again, the emphasis is not on Reade, but on her potential effect on the election--and once the election itself is done, so is the use value of Reade's testimony.

After the election's conclusion, even in articles in which a mention of Reade *would* make contextual sense, her name fails to appear. If one searches the term "Joe Biden sexual assault" on the NYT site, one finds such articles as, "Biden Overhauls Military Justice Code, Seeking to Curb Sexual Assault" (Shear). In this article, Biden is presented as a trail-blazing hero in matters of supporting sexual violence victims: "By signing a far-reaching executive order, Mr. Biden ushered in the most significant changes to the modern military legal system since it was created in 1950. The order follows two decades of pressure from lawmakers and advocates of sexual assault victims..." The assumption that such a write-up communicates is that Biden has listened directly to "advocates of sexual assault victims" and, based on their advice, overhauled an outdated military system in a victim-supportive way. Absent from the article is any reference to Reade, or to the other women who described Biden's uncomfortable touching and kissing; from this article alone, a reader could be forgiven for assuming that Biden was an unproblematic ally, rather than someone who potentially committed sexual assault himself. Whereas every detail in Reade's life is accounted for in how we should consider her narrative of assault, Biden's own sexual assault controversy is simply made not to matter.

Discussion

In this paper, I have used the NYT's Biden-Reade coverage as an opportunity to combine methodology and theory from both propaganda studies and feminist rhetorics, analyzing how sexual violence is handled in political news media. In the process, I theorized that a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies can assist us in uncovering when news media advance rape cultural propaganda, which, in the absence of definitive evidence, works to protect politicians "accused" of some form of sexual violence. Taking up the NYT's coverage of Reade during the 2020 US presidential election, I applied an analytical focus inspired from propaganda studies that focused on recontextualizations and frames, attending to how others' words are (selectively) used, and what cues for understanding readers are encouraged to take. This allowed me to track how acts of sexual violence are represented and, frequently, delegitimized in the grander scheme of a propagandic politics-as-usual.

In my analysis, I show how the NYT articles and their handling of the Biden-Reade case together work to dismiss Reade as a victim worthy of being believed. Presenting Reade in an "accuser" frame with her own dubious history, recontextualized for the reader's judgment, implies Biden as the true victim that needs protection in the 2020 election against Trump. As feminist scholars regularly point out, the term "victim"

is often associated with helplessness and a lack of agency (Stringer). Yet in a victim frame, there is at least attention on the harm that may have been done, and a seeking to rectify that harm on the potential victim's behalf. The possibility of this sort of recognition was systematically denied to Reade in favor of Biden. Such Biden-supportive coverage was written in the absence of any "true" evidence, and in a way that served to insulate a career politician with an elite status within the US Democratic party. Even after the election, with the "threat" of Trump successfully removed, Reade's account remains absent from public discussion and poised to fade into obscurity.

In this way, the NYT coverage of Reade served an ultimately propagandic purpose of obscuring, silencing and standard-setting. Moreover, as rape cultural propaganda, it proved successful in prompting publics to reject Reade's testimony. Even in early 2020 (when the Biden-Reade story was still "fresh"), there were signs that the majority of the US public had already decided to dismiss her out of hand. Giovanni Russonello and Maggie Astor describe a 2020 election poll that came out shortly after Reade went public, which concluded that Biden's "lead over President Trump [was] growing nationwide even though most voters [were] aware of a sexual assault allegation against [Biden]." Moreover, even though 86% of voters polled were aware of Reade's account, only 37% "believed it was probably true" (Russonello and Astor). This is despite the absence of evidence that could definitively prove that Biden was innocent, and the existence of at least *some* corroborative accounts that supported Reade (see Saul and Lerer). Again, it is worth reiterating that this study did not approach the Biden-Reade case in order to declare innocence or guilt. Instead, I draw significance from the fact that, while neither side could be definitively proven right or wrong, media reports nevertheless gave Biden the upper hand by attracting readers' sympathy to him. The popularization of Me Too three years prior and its injunction to *believe women* simply was not enough to counter entrenchments of political power and their propagandic imbrications with news media.

The results of this case study demonstrate the potential use of a feminist rhetoric-propaganda studies for those interested in feminist rhetorics, and fuels inspiration for next steps. We can, for instance, continue to explore representations among a more diverse range of media, across international contexts and accounting for a broader range of political figures. This is necessary as a means to test propagandic inclinations beyond the particularity of Biden and Trump; after all, journalists may have felt a personal stake in promoting Biden. Not only did Trump normalize vile expressions of racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, and classism in public discourse, he regularly attacked the press as "fake news," going as far as to identify journalists as "the enemy of the people" (Swan et. al.). Insofar as such statements question the very freedom of the press, many journalists took themselves to be under threat, and consequently adopted an "adversarial" relationship to Trump (Tanquary). In contrast, Biden was far less antagonistic to traditional journalistic standards. This begs the question: Is rape cultural propaganda most often utilized to promote journalists' preferred politicians, or can we find evidence of its use across a broader context? How else might rape culture be deployed for propagandic purposes? If nothing else, we need a combined feminist rhetorics-propaganda studies to more closely examine how potential victims' accounts are handled by news media in order to hold not just politicians, but also the media venues who report on them, to a far higher standard.

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