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"You shouldn't have to get that approved": Journalists as research participants and feminist research methods interventions

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In this short piece, I discuss the ethnographic methods employed for the data collection portion of my dissertation on sexual violence news coverage in Canada, as well as the ethical and methodological questions I considered when designing this research plan. I bring them into conversation with feminist research on collaborative approaches and digital research ethics as well as journalism studies to discuss how my project intervenes in these fields. I argue that a collaborative research approach highlights the enduring role of objectivity and distance in journalism, not only with regard to how journalists evaluate and navigate their own authority, but also the authority of researchers with whom they come into contact. Further, the approach allows for insight in sexual violence news coverage and the methods of journalists themselves: as I argue, the negotiations, adversarial nature of some interactions, and conversations around sharing transcripts and other methods of collaborative research are valuable *both* to academics researching (with) journalists and journalists writing on/with/against sexual violence survivors.

In designing the research methods for this section of the research, I was in conversation with a number of scholars who explore anti-oppressive methods of scholarship. While this research is not participatory action research—participants were not consulted about the research

questions or research design in advance—I endeavoured to invite participants to view themselves as co-producing knowledge with me during our conversations. While academic research and journalism have different approaches, ethics, and expectations from both practitioners and those with whom they interact, there are significant overlaps when it comes to academic and journalistic methods, particularly around ethical questions of distance, objectivity, and truth. Moreover, I have learned a great deal from my supervisor Dr. T.L. Cowan's work on ethical (collaborative) research, drawing both from the Ph.D.-level methods course taught by Cowan at the Faculty of Information as well as, in particular, her co-authored article with Jas Rault on the "labour of being studied" (2014). In the article, Cowan and Rault challenge the ways that feminist collaborative research—in their case, a trans, feminist, and queer digital space for artists, researchers, etc.—relies on the volunteer labour of participants, who are asked to digitize material, be interviewed, and otherwise participant in research projects "for their own good" (p. 473). Journalists and researchers have seen fit to justify free labour—from themselves and others—in the same way. Scholarship on the cultural industries has critiqued these justifications as self-exploitation, or the phenomenon "whereby workers become so enamoured with their jobs that they push themselves to the limits of their physical and emotional endurance" (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, p. 7). Scholarship on journalism labour and entrepreneurial journalism in particular has stressed that journalists, encouraged to see themselves as brands, engage in self-exploitation by engaging in self-disciplining, setting high personal expectations of productivity, and opting in to 24/7 work days (Harte, Turner & Williams, 2016; Neilson, 2021; Petre, 2021). I argue that working for free or otherwise engaging in labour practices that are unjustly compensated is *both* (self-)exploitation and a mechanism of survival in an exploitative working environment: throughout our interviews, journalists expressed both an enduring passion

for the job *and* frustrations with working conditions, expectations of continuous productivity, and precarious contracts and low pay. Cowan and Rault's insightful challenge to the economies and logics of academic research has pushed and continues to push both my own thinking and practice in ethical research and in what ethical journalism might look like. Asking how being studied—or being interviewed for a news story—is work helps to open up the same avenues for recognizing and challenging exploitation as asking how *journalism* is work (and not simply a passion project). As critical labour scholars have argued, "do what you love" has been a powerful mantra that obscures labour, class inequality, and exploitation under the veil that passion and personal satisfaction are the true compensation (Tokumitsu, 2014; Duffy, 2017; Jaffe, 2021). Cowan and Rault stress that free labour *both* should be compensated and often takes place because it is work that people love and feel needs to happen, and which they feel wouldn't happen otherwise.

"You shouldn't have to get this approved": Collaborative feminist methods and research economies

To complement the vast scholarship on sexual violence and journalism that focuses on the text of a story, I spoken with journalists to develop a material grounding in labour conditions and political economy for the critical discourse analysis that also makes up my dissertation. I recruited journalists through a number of venues. Initially, I sent emails to journalistic organizations, but this was overwhelmingly unsuccessful. Instead, I recruited the majority of this study's participants by contacting journalists directly who had covered or investigated instances of sexual violence or harassment for Canadian outlets. I also employed a purposive snowball

sampling method (Babbie, 2007, p. 184) and asked participants to recommend other journalists to interview. These interviews took place over the course of several months, beginning in November 2021 and ending in March 2022. As this was during the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded, after which I reviewed and edited the automatically-generated transcripts. Out of the 12 journalists interviewed, four journalists are racialized and eight are white, eight are women (two women of colour), one is non-binary, and three are men. Four at the time of the interview were freelance (of these, two have ongoing relationships with outlets but are functionally freelance) while the rest were full-time employees of journalism outlets or, in the case of one of the participants, are in the process of founding their own outlet. Since the interviews took place, one journalist I spoke with was laid off and at time of writing is now freelance.

All participants were given the choice to be named or anonymous—in the end, five journalists chose to be anonymous—and the transcript of the interview was shared with participants following the interview. Since my faculty does not provide funding to compensate participants and leaves it to students (and faculty members) to acquire external funding for that purpose, I had initially chosen to not compensate journalists, a choice made simpler, in my mind, by the fact that it is common practice among journalists to not compensate their own interviewees. However, following a conversation with an Indigenous journalist who asked whether the labour of being researched would be compensated, and following my acceptance of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant, I revised my Research Ethics Board protocol to pay research participants who are precariously employed and/or part of overresearched communities.[1] I offered participants who qualified $50 dollars for the interview

[1] I use Eve Tuck's (2009) term "overresearched," which she uses to characterize the ways that, in her analysis, "Native communities and/or urban communities" are "overresearched but underseen" as

and $50 for reviewing the transcript, with the rationale that this was fair compensation for around 2 hours of work. However, not all qualifying journalists accepted payment, and in the end, out of 12 participants, three accepted. The interactions that emerged from a more open and flexible payment structure—one where not everyone was offered compensation, and one where I was open in stating that the money came from me and not the university—were equally fascinating and would not, I feel, have occurred if I had simply offered everyone $100 right away. Two participants refused payment when they learned that I was offering them compensation from my own funds, and/or felt the money would be better spent on another participant who was more financially unstable. Having a research method that was more open and allowed participants to offer feedback and negotiate made clear the ways that many of the participants were deeply cognizant of the power relations and imbalances inherent to interviewing (both journalistic and academic).

Journalists as Research Participants

That said, I argue that feminist collaborative methods face new challenges when combined with research participants who both see themselves as *experts in interviewing* and *have been taught to highly prize independence*. While a great deal of research on journalism involves interviewing journalists, and while there is research discussing journalistic methods in conducting interviews (in addition to texts and guides written by and for journalists themselves), little research exists on interviewing journalists themselves, a process that presents unique

research flattens these communities into easy dichotomies of victims and perpetrators, as damaged and in need of saving (p. 412). I find the concept of "overresearched" productive in the context of my research to characterize the ways that people of colour are often studied in the course of research on diversity without being involved in the development of the research project, and/or without being materially compensated.

questions. While journalistic independence has many valences, one of the core tenets of mainstream journalism is the notion that journalists are independent from external pressures, whether that be from political powers, extensive editorial oversight, or from their own sources. Though Henrik Örnebring and Carl Karlsson (2022) stress that journalistic independence is hardly so straightforward—as they write, managers of news organizations are expected to be independent while also fulfilling the goals of the owner (p. 5)—they cite the Code of Ethics, formulated by the Society for Professional Journalists (2014), which states that journalists should "refuse gifts, favours, fees, free travel and special treatment." Journalists are also typically taught to not share interview transcripts with sources lest sources be empowered to tamper with the integrity of the story, as is stated in the Canadian Association of Journalists' Code Ethics Guidelines (2011), under Independence. As I both offered payment (to some) and shared transcripts with all journalists I interviewed, my own research methods added nuance to traditional journalistic codes of conduct, which operate from the assumption that to share with a source is to invite bias (and equally, that *not* sharing is a demonstration of neutrality) (Steiner, 2021).

My interview participants' reactions to my research methods are highly evocative of both the way that journalists are taught to approach their own work, *and* their own self-conception. In the end, the majority of my participants reviewed the transcript. Some came back with comments or clarifications, or redacted identifying information. However, two senior journalists (a man and a woman) in particular expressed doubt at the idea of transcripts being reviewed, with one sending an email informing me: "you shouldn't have to get this approved." Along with the politics of power and identity—both journalists who sought to correct me are white and older than I am—these interactions highlight the entanglement of journalistic methods with

conceptions of expertise and independence that also shape sexual violence reporting itself. Journalists signal authority and independence not only through technological means but also through methods that, when observed through a feminist lens, are often fundamentally uncollaborative and traditionally rely on ensuring that interviewees say more than they intend (Karlsson, 2011; Carlson, 2017; Richardson, 2020; Hewa, 2021). This ethos is best captured by Örnebring and Karlsson's (2022) characterization of the mainstream ideal of journalistic independence from sources as one in which there is (metaphorically) "a huge set of drawers in the newsrooms, where journalists can go, open the drawers, take out the sources they need, and then neatly put them back, without any ruse of the sources escaping and taking control of the newsmaking process" (p. 156). Indeed, taking a collaborative method that, from my perspective, was inviting journalists into the process of knowledge production that is research, appeared to some of the journalists I interviewed as a sign of inexperience, as though I was asking them for "help," and that one would only ask for help if one didn't know what to do.

Sources as Collaborators

Collaborative research methods highlighted the ways that collaborating *with* survivors or interviewees more broadly appears to many mainstream journalists as a breach of ethics. Not all journalists, including ones I interviewed, felt the same, and many journalists had found ways of managing survivors' desire for control over their stories with methods with which they, as journalists, were comfortable. It is crucial to stress that *journalism*, as a profession and as a practice, has been and largely remains committed to an adversarial relationship with interviewees and approach to storytelling. Many, though not all, of the journalists with whom I conducted research interviews spoke of struggling to balance journalistic "objectivity"—or at least, a "trust no one" attitude, with a desire for justice for survivors. This conflict is perhaps best illustrated by

Toronto Star journalist Kevin Donovan's discussion of sources in *Secret Life: The Jian Ghomeshi Investigation*, about his and journalist Jesse Brown's investigation of sexual assault and harassment allegations against former CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi. In the book's preface, Donovan notes that he had included the experiences of women who had appeared in the original *Toronto Star*'s article about Ghomeshi but had asked to not appear in the book because they felt they would be re-abused and that their voices and stories were being used for Donovan's own benefit (i.e. to sell copies of the book). In response, Donovan (2016) cites other women who had come forward with allegations against Ghomeshi and were willing to be quoted in the book, and argues that journalists "must do their best to be objective; [they] cannot be in partnership with sources" (p. 11). These tensions highlight both the diversity of approaches by individual journalists, and particularly the shift that is taking place as younger journalists, less tied to both institutions and institutional norms, take up the practice, as well as how alive the question of how to approach sources remains within journalism. These tensions are brought to light by my research interview with an anonymous freelance journalist, who, when asked how they approach survivors as sources, responded: "I don't know any journalists who use informed consent, not really. Because my response has always been, if you were to actually ask for informed consent from everyone and explain exactly what it is you're asking and the potential consequences, no one will ever do an interview with you again." Indeed, their response and ambivalence towards journalism's *utility* for survivors—the question of whether journalism can do good for survivors—mirrors both feminist critiques of journalism raised throughout my dissertation as well as other interviews I conducted. Indeed, as the anonymous journalist's comments highlight, being reported on brings risks, much as being researched may bring one into the spotlight in unwanted ways (Marzullo et al., 2018; Robertson, 2016). Perhaps informed consent *can't happen*

because being seen in the way that journalism so often demands—without verifying transcripts or reviewing a story, with one's name and identity online forever—are incredible risks to ask of vulnerable people. As Cowan and Rault (2018) note, "capitalist university and platform metrics of maximum exposure and impact" are the underpinning logics of university projects, in much the same way that, as I explore, journalism is driven by the logics of exposure and "chasing eyeballs."

The same anonymous journalist quoted above goes on to say that they have never been trained on consent or permission, nor has any journalist they know been trained in a formal way. Rather, journalists *try* and follow their own sense of what is correct, from not harassing a potential source to "not working, probably, on the timeline that your newsroom might expect you to" and working more slowly to accommodate the needs of interviewees. In short, journalistic practice for them—in contract, perhaps, to Donovan's and other older, more established journalists' stricter sense of objectivity and distance—is, as the anonymous journalist phrased it, "about making them feel as comfortable [as possible]. I can't make them feel safe, I can't do anything along those lines. But I can not add danger." These two wildly different approaches to journalistic coverage of sexual violence capture the tensions inherent to the practice as well as the different—and *opposed*—ethics journalists face towards survivors-as-sources and towards broader notions of objectivity or truth that continue to reign in the profession.

Journalistic practices that are largely effective when applied to people in power risk re-traumatizing victims, from not sharing details of a story or quotes before publication to asking detailed questions about a story or seeking a statement from an alleged abuser without informing the survivor first, although many journalists recognize this and speak of changing practices in the newsroom or in their own individual practice. Ethics guidelines for interviewing trauma victims

typically stress that they take more time and the approach, as well as the questions, should be considered carefully (Dart Center for Trauma & Journalism, 2013). Yet while some journalists have more control over whom they quote and how, many journalists' ability to control how an interview takes place is, as I explore in chapter 2 of my dissertation, limited by their working conditions and the demands of their editors, outlets, publishers, and own ingrained sense of how much time they have. The speed of publication and a one-size-fits-all-approach have been exacerbated by the digital media landscape and exploitative labour practices under capitalism. As I argue, journalists' capacity to "not add danger" when covering sexual violence is shaped not only by ethical assumptions baked into journalistic practice, but also the material conditions in which journalists operate and work.