Chapter 4

Representing the Movement: SlutWalk Challenges Rape Culture

This is the first of two chapters which explore representations of SlutWalk in both my mainstream news and feminist media samples. Both chapters were organized using the results of a frame analysis, derived with the help of a qualitative content analysis. Frames were established after asking questions such as: What is SlutWalk said to be about?; Whose voices were used? What ‘sparked’ coverage of SlutWalk (e.g. a forthcoming march, or one which had taken place)?; Which, if any, feminist or oppositional discourses or critiques were used either in relation to the movement or rape culture?; and What is the overall level of support for the movement? Although the qualitative content analysis revealed a number of competing frames, this book focuses on the two most popular ones. Chapter 4 analyzes the means through which SlutWalk was constructed as a movement challenging rape culture, while Chapter 5 analyzes how it was constructed as being opposed and/or misguided, often from feminists themselves.

Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this chapter analyzes the ways most articles and posts about the movement drew upon explicitly feminist, and often radical, discourses. These include the notion that victim-blaming/slut-shaming is wrong; that society should blame the rapists, not the victims; that personal appearance does not cause sexual assault; and that rape is about power, violence and control, rather than sex or passion. Although these discourses were present in both my mainstream news and feminist media sample, I argue that the level of sophistication and depth of these discourses varied widely. For example, these discourses were often deployed superficially in the mainstream news media, with little context, explanation or analysis. Although the inclusion of feminist discourses is a significant
and positive development when considering feminism’s long history of marginalization and
de-radicalisation in the mainstream news, I argue that they are not developed enough to truly
challenge the hegemonic and entrenched views on sexual assault and rape culture. My
feminist media sample on the other hand, as was perhaps expected, not only provided much
more detailed accounts and explanations of these feminist discourses, but directly challenged
hegemonic views on sexual assault by highlighting their flaws and fallacies. As a result, I join
other scholars who have questioned the extent to which feminists can rely on such capitalist,
patriarchal institutions to foster radical social and cultural change (see Freeman 2001).
Instead, I point to the ways in which the feminist blogosphere, like radical feminist
magazines, newsletters, and zines before it, unhindered by journalistic conventions or
restraints, is a more effective means of developing counterhegemonic discourses, and raising
consciousness on the reality of rape and sexual assault.

REPRESENTING SLUTWALK

When speaking about my research to colleagues, friends, family and even strangers, one of
the most common questions people ask, particularly if they have never heard of the
movement is, ‘What is SlutWalk about?’ Even though I have spent three years following and
researching this movement, it is still a question I have difficulty answering. Although in
general I would argue it is an anti-rape movement which focuses on shattering a number of
rape myths (causes of rape, victims’ culpability) as addressed in Chapter 3, I have also
recognized that the movement’s message differs from city to city, nation to nation, and
sometimes year to year. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, while reclaiming
the word ‘slut’ was an important part of the movement for some satellite groups in 2011, this
goal was de-emphasized in light of critiques from women of colour. And while most marches
have focused on eradicating rape and sexual assault, the emphasis in places such as India was
on sexual harassment or eve-teasing. While I have argued that this diversity in the movement’s message is healthy, and necessary for the movement to spread internationally and to reflect local issues, I became interested in analysing how the mainstream news and feminist media defined the movement, asking ‘What is SlutWalk about?’ This was answered initially through a frame analysis, and more in-depth through a CDA.

Framing

The way a story constructs – or frames – an event is a widely used concept for academics in a variety of fields, but particularly for social movement scholars (see Ashely & Olson 1998; Barnett 2005; Baylor 1996; Benford & Snow 2002; Costain et al. 1997; Couldry 1999; Creedon 1993; Lind & Salo 2002; Mendes 2011a; Strutt 1994; Rohlinger 2002; Worthington 2008). Frame analysis is a particularly useful tool because the construction of particular frames can help reveal ideologies present (or absent) in a text by asking how is a particular issue constructed? Whose voices are present or absent? Which, if any, feminist discourses or critiques were used either in relation to the movement or rape culture? What are the problems or solutions to the issues at hand? What is the overall narrative on the movement? Cumulatively, these helped me to develop a sense of how SlutWalk was framed.

When analysing the results from my qualitative content analysis, a few key similarities and differences emerge. For example, in both my mainstream news and feminist media samples (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2), the most common frame was that SlutWalk is a movement which challenges rape culture, creates awareness over sexual assault related issues (e.g. conviction rates, its impact on victims, prevention strategies, etc.), and validates the experiences of sexual assault survivors (207 articles or 68 percent of total in mainstream news media; 270 articles or 69 percent of total in feminist media articles). Given that
previous research demonstrates that feminist activism has not always attracted mainstream media support (see Barker-Plummer 2000; Bradley 2003; Douglas 1994; Goddu 1999; Hinds & Stacey 2001; Hollows & Moseley 2006; Lind & Salo 2002; Mills 1997; Mendes 2011a; Molotch 1978; Pingree & Hawkins 1978), these supportive frames is undoubtedly a positive development in the ‘storying’ of feminism.

The second most common frame was that SlutWalk is a misguided movement, whose efforts largely go opposed (68 articles or 23 percent of total in mainstream news media; 92 articles or 23 percent of total for feminist media). This frame will be the focus of Chapter 5. It is worth noting however, that other frames emerged which were specific to either my mainstream news or feminist media samples. For example, in the mainstream news, another, less frequently used frame is that SlutWalk is a movement which demonstrates women’s solidarity, particularly with victims of sexual assault (10 articles or 3 percent of total). A fourth frame emerged saying there was uncertainty over what SlutWalk actually stands for (4 articles or 1 percent of total). In my feminist media sample, frames emerged stating that SlutWalk divides feminists (14 articles or 4 percent of total), and that SlutWalk is a successful global movement (15 articles or 4 percent of total). Due to space constraints however, this book will focus only on the two key frames.

SLUTWALK CHALLENGES RAPE CULTURE AND PROMOTES AWARENESS

It became abundantly clear through my qualitative reading of both mainstream and feminist media articles that SlutWalk was overwhelmingly constructed as a movement which challenges rape culture, and the victim blaming often associated with it. This frame was evident in news headlines such as: ‘Tackling sexual violence’ (2011), ‘Anti-rape campaign coming to city streets’ (Nicholson 2011), ‘Fight rape, join first SlutWalk in G’Town’ (2011),
‘Hundreds march in Toronto SlutWalk to combat sexual violence’ (Posadzki 2012), ‘Rally to counter sexual assault’ (Hope 2011), and ‘Steps toward fighting a culture of blame’ (Wu 2011). It was also evident if feminist media posts titled: ‘Speak out against rape with SlutWalk and Reclaim the Night’ (Pearce 2012), ‘Sluts don't cause rape, rapists do: Why “SlutWalks” are sweeping the world’ (Seltzer & Kelley 2011), and ‘SlutWalk: Changing a “don't get raped” culture to a “don't rape” culture’ (Kraus 2011). This frame was particularly enabled by the fact that PC Sanguinetti – the man who sparked SlutWalk through his advice to women that they could avoid being ‘victimized’ if they didn’t dress ‘like sluts,’ was quoted 157 times in mainstream news (52 percent of all articles) and 72 times in feminist media (18 percent of all posts). Sanguinetti’s quote was often used as the ‘hook’ in the first few paragraphs of a news article/blog.

For example, the feminist blog Feministing introduced the movement as follows:

Sonya Barnett and Heather Jarvis are the co-founders of SlutWalk, an incredibly badass protest organized against victim-blaming that was spurred by comments made by a Toronto law enforcement officer who said that women who don’t want to be assaulted, raped or otherwise “victimized” should avoid dressing “like sluts.” (Adelman 2011, underline original to indicate hyperlink)

Similarly, a news article from Australia’s Canberra Times opened with:
More than 60 SlutWalk protest rallies have been organized around the world in response to Toronto police officer Michael Sanguinetti’s advice to students at a personal safety talk in January.

“I’ve been told I'm not supposed to say this. However, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized,” he said. (Browne 2011)

Scholars have noted how the use of sources is crucial to the construction of media frames (Benford & Snow 2000; Mendes 2011a). This is because journalists frame events when deciding who to interview, what to ask, what angle to take, and how the story will be ordered (Kitzinger 2007, p. 137). These ‘primary definers’ are important to the story because they ‘set the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is’ (Hall et al. 1978, p. 59), and how to respond to it. That SlutWalk was mostly framed around issues of sexual assault, and not say, as a movement which fights for women to ‘dress like sluts,’ (as was the case with some coverage/blogs) is likely aided by the fact that over half of all articles quoted at least one supporter/participant (97 times), organizer (153 times) or banner/placard (145 times) from the event.

These sources were particularly prominent in articles/posts which included the following feminist discourses: personal appearance and clothing do not cause sexual assault; victim-blaming/slut-shaming is wrong; and perpetrators, not victims should be blamed.¹ Although rare in my feminist media sample, I found many instances in my mainstream news sample of discourses stating that women should be free to wear what they want without fear of being (blamed for an) attacked. Conversely, my feminist sample included a range of discourses centering on how rape is an act of power, violence and control, rather than passion and sex, and how ‘slut’ is a word used to control/shame women. As will be discussed below,
these discourses were either absent, or presented in a shallow manner in my mainstream news sample.

**Victim-Blaming/Slut-Shaming Is Wrong**

When analysing the use of feminist discourses in both samples, the most prominent was the message that victim-blaming or slut-shaming was wrong and harmful to women (152 articles or 54 percent of total for news media sample; 125 articles or 32 percent of total for feminist media sample). This discourse was evident in news headlines such as: ‘SlutWalks to rally against shaming of rape victims’ (2011), ‘SlutWalk in Philly and worldwide: Long overdue focus on the blame and shame of women’ (Smullens 2011), ‘SlutWalk SF says no to victim blaming’ (Pinto 2012), ‘“SlutWalk” fight back against stigma surrounding sexual assault and rape victims’ (Mandell 2011), and ‘150 join Ottawa’s SlutWalk to protest “victim-blaming” attitudes’ (Chen 2012). It was also found in feminist media headlines which ran from the serious such as: ‘The un-funny, unfair and un-feminist thing about victim blaming’ (Chloe 2011), ‘It's my fault because I had a drink? How being sexually assaulted introduced me to victim-blaming culture’ (Purcell 2011), ‘How a victim blaming cop inspired SlutWalk’ (Carmon 2011), and ‘Protesters unite against damaging stereotypes of sexual assault survivors’ (Bonnar 2011). Others carried the same message, but with a more playful, ironic or sarcastic tone as evidenced by: ‘What did you expect, wearing trackpants like that?’ (Ideologically Impure 2012); ‘Victim Blaming 101’ (Spankhead 2012a); and ‘When skirts break the law’ (Powell 2011).

Discourses which insist that women are not to blame for their sexual assault are not only very important in alleviating the guilt that many feel (see for example Lisak 1994; Taylor 2014; Weiss 2010), re-directing blame to perpetrators, but for reflecting one of the
most common messages from various SlutWalk satellite groups. For example, one of the movement’s taglines which has been used across a variety of satellite groups is: ‘SlutWalk: The Radical Notion That No One Deserves To Be Raped’ (see for examples SlutWalk Birmingham 2011; SlutWalk London 2012; SlutWalk Orlando 2012). While this in itself is evidence of the movement’s stance against victim blaming, further explanation is often provided. SlutWalk Toronto for example makes it clear that the movement was sparked in response to an ‘environment in which it’s okay to blame the victim,’ and that the movement continued ‘because survivors of sexual violence deserve our support, not our scrutiny’ (2014). Similarly, SlutWalk Seattle (2014) explained on its Facebook site:

On January 24th, 2011, a Toronto police officer gave some advice that is all too common: “Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.” From an 11-year-old in Texas being blamed for being gang-raped to a teenager in Seattle not being able to file rape charges because witnesses “portrayed the act as consensual,” this line of thought pervades our culture.

The idea that women invite sexual assault by looking like they enjoy sex, or that men’s urges become so uncontrollable at the sight of a little extra skin that they can’t hold themselves back from raping is ludicrous…Saying that survivors could have protected themselves by not looking like “sluts” implies that the survivors are at fault and creates a culture in which the heinous crime of sexual assault is seen as no big deal. (SlutWalk Seattle 2014)
Because this discourse was so prominent in various SlutWalk satellite groups’ Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and websites, it is perhaps of little surprise that it was also reflected in mainstream news accounts of the movement, such as the one below from the *Toronto Star*:

Lenore Lukasik-Foss, the director of the Sexual Assault Centre Hamilton and Area, asked participants to “unlearn” the lies about sexualized violence.

“I know you know this but victim-blaming and slut-shaming have got to stop,” she said as the crowd erupted in cheers.

“They silence women and men survivors of sexualized violence...The lies we are told about rape help create a community where survivors do not get the help and justice they need and deserve.” (‘Slutwalk hits the streets of Hamilton’ 2011, p. A8)

Similarly, the *Hobart Mercury* quoted a local organizer saying: ‘It doesn't matter who you are, where you’re from, or what you’re wearing, victims are not to blame for sexual assault’ (Hope 2011, p. 15). These discourses were also found in my feminist media sample. In her post on *Rabble.ca*, Harsha Walia (2011) wrote about her conflicting feelings about participating in SlutWalk in light of questions about the exclusion of women of colour from the movement. In the end however, she decided to march ‘for the simple reason that ‘I am committed to ending victim-blaming’ (Walia 2011).

**Discursive Strategies Used to Challenge Victim-Blaming**
My research demonstrates that there were a number of discursive strategies used to challenge victim-blaming or slut-shaming attitudes. This included highlighting the ubiquitous nature of rape and sexual assault, noting that ‘people get sexually assaulted regardless of what they wear, that most sexual assault occurs between people who know each other, and that dressing “like a slut” is not an invitation to rape’ (Carmon 2011). It also included laying out rape myths and then ‘busting’ them, as seen by a blogger on come again? (2011):

Rape myth:
If you dress like a slut, you'll get raped. Just by being out in town “dressed like a slut” (which is what, exactly? high heels? tight skirt? showing cleavage? spangles? a combination of the above?), you set yourself up as a target for rape.
Myth busted:
a) This is called victim blaming, and it is bullshit.
b) It doesn’t matter what you wear if a man decides he will rape you.
c) Most women are raped in places they felt safe by men they thought they could trust. So there is no real correlation between being out on the town (while dressed like a slut) and being a rape survivor. (come again? 2011)

Here, the blogger not only questioned what dressing like a ‘slut’ actually entailed, but attempted to ‘bust’ it through directly challenging the notion that such women make themselves a ‘target of rape,’ calling such views ‘bullshit.’ Instead of focusing on survivors’ clothing, the blogger noted that women get raped because men decide to rape them.
Not all discourses around victim-blaming were challenged or ‘busted’ in such a straightforward way. Some, such as *The F Bomb’s* Evelyn T. challenged victim-blaming through more narrative forms:

Victim blaming needs to stop. And I mean all types of victim blaming, especially the subtle kinds that are far too abundant for my liking, and easy to miss. Although the SlutWalks have received some controversy for the word “slut” from non-feminists and feminists alike, I believe the message they are trying to get across is good: no matter what you wear, or do, nothing can make you to blame for being raped. (T. 2011)

While the shift from blaming survivors to perpetrators was seen as a worthy goal in and of itself, others recognized the ways that it was necessary to end the legitimization of violence against women. As the feminist blogger Miranda (2011b) explained:

When we engage victim-blaming attitudes, we make it harder for victims of sexual assault to come forward and report a serious violent crime, we become complicit in the unwillingness of authorities like Constable Sanguinetti to help victims and pursue allegations with the gravity they deserve, and we make the world a safer place for rapists. (see also Miranda 2011a; ‘SlutWalk Vancouver’ 2011)
Rather than merely stating that victim-blaming or slut shaming is ‘wrong’ or ‘harmful,’ such posts are important because they demonstrate the material consequences of such beliefs. For one, they prevent women from coming forward to report crimes committed against them, either because they believe they are to blame, or because they recognize they won’t get justice. And second, such beliefs create inertia amongst authorities to take seriously, investigate, charge or prosecute perpetrators.

Although few articles actually explain why victims are routinely blamed for their assault, or how it benefits men, I argue they are still potentially liberating, particularly for the women (and men) living with the guilt and shame of their experiences, with no systems of support. For them, the idea that the assault was not their fault is radical, with the potential to relieve them of the guilt and culpability they felt over their attack. It is this transformation which is necessary to take ones’ previously, private experiences and something ‘designed to isolate and shame us into silence, into a strategy of consciousness raising’ (Penny 2013). And as scholars have noted, consciousness-raising has been a crucial element in feminist activism for decades and has material consequences on women’s lives (Bevacqua 2001; Bryson 2003; Maddison 2013b; Penny 2013; Shaw 2011a). Unfortunately however, as we will see below, few articles went further to suggest that society needs to now start re-focusing culpability on the rapists.

Blame the Rapists Not the Victims

Another less used, but still important feminist discourse found in both my mainstream news (17 articles or 6 percent of total) and feminist media (71 articles or 18 percent of total) sample is the idea that the focus and blame for rape should lie with the perpetrator, not the victim. Although it was often implied that rapists should be blamed for engaging in sexual
assault in discourses stating that victim-blaming is wrong, or that victims are not at fault for their assault, I was surprised that so few news articles and to a lesser extent, blogs, focused explicitly on this message. Typical examples include a piece by Shira Tarrant (2011) for Ms. Magazine when she declared: ‘We need to change our culture to one that asks not, “What was the victim wearing?” but, “Why is he raping?”’ Similarly, blogger Maggie (2012) wrote on Where Is Your Line?: ‘Let’s shift the blame where it belongs: to the perpetrator, not where it usually lingers, with the survivor.’ One article posted on the BBC’s website similarly noted how SlutWalk was ‘about putting the blame back where it belongs, on the rapist rather than the victim’ (‘Slutwalk march takes place in Bristol’ 2011).

What was particularly noticeable about the use of the discourse saying rapists, rather than survivors should be blamed, is the passion behind such utterances. Here, it was common to see the use of italics, capital letters or bold to emphasize the importance of the message. A blog on SlutWalk London’s Tumblr site insisted that: ‘We believe that rape is always the fault of the rapist, never the survivor. And until that attitude is held globally, we will continue to speak up’ (SlutWalk London 2012, bold original). Humour, sarcasm and irony were also common features used to support this discourse. Although a fierce critic of SlutWalk, blogger Meghan Murphy satirised current tactics used to ‘prevent’ violence against women and emphasized the need to focus on changing men’s behaviour:

Hey! Here’s a newfangled idea! How about we, FOR ONCE, put the onus on the violent men. How about we even go so far as to blame men for the violent acts they commit rather than blaming the victim for “dealing with” violent men in the “wrong way.” How about, instead of learning how to be nicer to johns, so as to avoid being attacked by them, we teach johns that they won’t get away with being violent? What’s
that? Criminalize the johns? Oh no. That’s crazy-talk. All women need is more “skills.” Skills will stop male violence, right? (Murphy 2012b, underlined text original to indicate hyperlink)

Bloggers’ frustration at how society continues to ignore men’s autonomy in perpetuating violence against women is also evident in the following blog.

And apparently people still haven’t gotten the memo that rapists are actually to blame for rape, not drunk women, or being out at 1am or 3am or 6am, and or short skirts. Funny that, because it seems like it would be fairly easy to comprehend. I feel like reiterating the point: rapists are to blame for rape, nothing else…If that’s still to [sic] difficult to accept, think about this: take all those things – a short skirt, alcohol, a poorly-lit street late at night- and add them together. Drunken woman+miniskirt+alleyway =/= rape. You might think that sounds like the perfect equation for rape, but you’d be wrong because there’s one crucial element missing: A RAPIST. Without a rapist in the equation – this equation or any equation- there won’t [sic] be a rape. It seems like such a simple idea to grasp, and yet we’re still swimming against the tide of a victim-blaming rape culture, desperately trying to get people to understand. (Lady News 2011a)

Although it might seem commonsensical, I agree with the bloggers above who highlight the importance of bringing rapists into discussions of sexual assault, rather than implicitly assigning them blame. Feminists have long critiqued the use of language in media reports of
sexual assault, noting for example of men are ‘absent’ from coverage (Clark 1992). As Clark writes: ‘Naming is a powerful ideological tool’ (p. 209), and by not placing the blame on rapists, where it belongs, perpetrators continue to avoid blame, which is then transferred to someone else (most often the victim). Therefore, while it is important to emphasize the ways that survivors are never at fault for their assault, I argue the discourse needs to go further and explicitly lay blame with the rapist.

**Personal Appearance Does Not Cause Sexual Assault**

Given that the SlutWalk movement emerged in response to the views expressed by Toronto PC Michael Sanguinetti, that women who dress like ‘sluts’ invite sexual assault, it is unsurprising that a feminist counter-discourse emerged precisely challenging this myth. Discourses stating that personal appearance and clothing do not cause rape were commonly found in both news texts (118 articles or 42 percent of total) and feminist posts (103 articles or 26 percent of total). In fact, given that Sanguinetti was directly quoted in 157 news articles (55 percent of the total), I would argue it is surprising that this discourse was not more prevalent in the mainstream news. Since at least the 1970s, when feminists across the world began to theorize rape as a tool used to maintain women’s subordination, they began to identify a number of ‘rape myths’ which are used to legitimate sexual assault by constructing it as natural, normal, and in some circumstances, inevitable (Berrington & Jones 2002; Carter 1998; Meyers 2006). For example, a common myth is that women ‘invite’ rape by wearing certain clothing which men interpret as a sign of their sexual availability and consent. A common and related myth is that women ‘provoke’ rape by wearing clothing which sexually excites men to the point that they lose control and commit rape. In both cases, women will be
blamed for the assault either for arousing men to the point where they ‘lose control,’ or sending out ‘confusing’ signals.

Although I do not believe that there is a single piece of clothing women can wear which is capable of sexually arousing a man to the point where he can no longer control himself and he commits rape, I do recognize that some men might choose to rape a woman to control, punish, degrade or humiliate her as a result of her clothes, personal appearance, choice of friends/partners/lovers, or other behaviours such as drinking alcohol or staying out late at night. However, it is important to distinguish here that while perpetrators might argue the woman ‘provoked’ the assault, such cases only further support the argument that rape is a crime of power, violence, control or domination, not lust or sex.

In recognition of the widespread myth that clothes cause rape, SlutWalks around the globe have sought to challenge discourses constructing clothes as a key – or even contributing cause of rape. This is evidenced by numerous placards at walks including ‘My Clothes Are Not My Consent,’ ‘My Dress is Not An Invitation,’ ‘This Skirt Doesn’t Cause Rape: Rapists Do,’ ‘It’s A Dress Not A Yes’ and ‘I was raped when I was 4. I didn’t know that footsies were slutty’ (see Seltzer & Kelley 2011; Tarrant 2011). Furthermore, the idea that clothes don’t cause rape is a key feminist discourse found in both my mainstream news and feminist media samples, although they range from the simplistic to more sophisticated analyses. For example, many news articles, which are subject to restrictions in terms of style, length, and background information, presented a rather superficial relaying of this discourse, as evident below:

“Sexual assault has nothing to do with how you are dressed, where you are, how much you've had to drink, where you are at night, what gender you are, what age
you are, your abilities, anything,” said [SlutWalk] Saskatoon organizer Leah Horlick.

(Hamilton 2011)

Similarly, one news report from New Zealand’s *Sunday Star-Times* explained:

> Auckland organizer Angela Smith, 22, a self-described feminist, says advice on how to dress does nothing to protect people.

> “Statistically, how you dress doesn't increase your chances of being raped.”

> She and fellow organizer Amato, 27, say they both heard the advice given as conventional wisdom as they were growing up. (‘Slutwalk protest targets dress slur’ 2011, p. 3)

Even well-known feminists such as Jessica Valenti provided a somewhat simplistic explanation in a *Washington Post* interview:

> I tell folks who talk about rape in this way that clothing has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not women get attacked. There is no research showing a link between clothing and sexual assault. I also think it’s telling that you very rarely (if ever) hear this argument about clothing directed at male victims of rape. (Rogers 2011)
These superficial discourses were also evident in my feminist media sample. Posting on the feminist blog Bad Reputation, Sarah Ross (2011) wrote: ‘Personal stories [are] told by all kinds of people, but all pointing to the same conclusion. Rape happens to people regardless of what they are wearing. Rapists, not those who are raped, and certainly not the clothes of those who are raped, are to blame.’ Although these articles reproduce one of SlutWalk’s key and original discourses, that clothes do not cause rape, I question the extent to which they are capable of challenging the patriarchal ideologies at the root of such ‘common sense’ understandings of sexual assault, as they lack critical assessment of what actually does cause rape.

A slightly more sophisticated challenge to this rape myth, relayed in many articles and blog posts, attempts to dismantle the view that rape is about sex by pointing out how modestly dressed women, the elderly, the ‘unattractive,’ and the young get raped. As The Guardian columnist Suzanne Moore asked:

But if rape is understood as a confusion about outfits, then the solution is that we all wear burqas. No woman in a burqa is ever abused, is she? But the thinking behind the get-up is similar. Sexual desire, or nine tenths of it, somehow resides in the female. This does not explain why some men rape babies. Or elderly women. In war, rape is increasing used as a weapon of mass destruction. Dying, mutilated women are raped in front of their children. I hardly think this is to do with “stripper shoes” and miniskirts. (Moore 2011a)
Similarly, writing on SlutWalk Singapore’s blog, Anu Selva-Thomson (2011) noted that: ‘Rapists don’t hang around void decks or car parks assessing women and their clothing before attacking. They don’t ponder the merits of zippers versus button-fly and wish women would all just wear Velcro.’ Instead, while noting that women in tracksuits, burkas and nuns get raped, she asks ‘how do we account for provocative clothing as a reason in these cases? We can’t’ (Selva-Thomson 2011).

While the logic presented in such articles at least provides evidence that rape is not always about clothing, it leaves unchallenged the notion that in some cases it is, and that while most men can control themselves when they see a scantily clad woman, ‘slutty’ outfits remain a ‘trigger’ for others. As a result, discourses such as this solve only part of the problem by rendering certain victims as more ‘innocent’ than others (see also McNicol 2012). Yet, while I applaud them for promoting feminist beliefs, these articles do nothing to challenge the virgin/vamp dichotomy in which ‘sluts,’ sex workers, or those who were drunk, flirted with or knew the perpetrator, or were out late at night, are blamed for their assault. So, while a step in the right direction, the use of feminist discourse saying clothes doesn’t cause rape is not enough on its own to challenge patriarchal ideologies. Instead, it must be used in combination with discourses constructing rape as an act of power, violence, domination and control (not just sex, lust or passion).

Rape is About Violence, Power and Control

In 1975, American feminist Susan Brownmiller’s ground-breaking book Against Our Will was one of the first to theorize rape, not as a crime of uncontrolled passion, sex or lust, but one of violence, power, domination and control. For readers unfamiliar with this theory, I understand and remember how radical and even unbelievable it may seem at first. After all,
the hegemonic discourse on rape in both popular and political culture is that it is a crime of passion and sex, carried out by ‘deviant’ strangers, rather than your average father/brother/friend/husband/boyfriend/acquaintance (see Benedict 1992; Cater 1998; Clark 1992; Soothill & Walby 1991). In this understanding of rape, men become so overcome by their sexual urges that they (often unwittingly) commit rape as a result. While it is easier to contest the idea that clothes are the root cause rape by identifying how people are raped while wearing all manner of clothing, and pointing out that not every beautiful or provocatively dress woman is raped, it is much harder to convince people that rape is not primarily about sexual desire and gratification. And while it would be foolish to claim that sex or sexual gratification has nothing to do with rape, researchers who have interviewed convicted rapists argue that it is instead a ‘perk’ or an ‘added bonus’ rather than the driving force (Scully & Morolla 1985, p. 254). Instead, rape serves a multitude of purposes, and is a weapon of violence which, depending on the context, can be used to degrade, punish or humiliate victims (or her male relatives or community), assert power and privilege, or maintain dominance and control (see also Groth 2001 [1979]; Scully & Marolla 1985).

*Rape in Times of Conflict*

When thinking about motivates individuals to rape, it would be naïve to assume it always serves the same purpose. For example, during times of war, rape is a weapon which has historically been used to de-moralise, humiliate, and instil fear in one’s enemies, as well as a means of genocide and ethnic cleansing (Wood 2006). As a result of increased research into sexual violence in conflict, rape has been re-conceptualized from being an inevitable by-product of war, where men, deprived of women’s company rape to fulfil sexual needs, to being recognized as a ‘planned and targeted policy’ (Buss 2009, p. 146) meant to demoralize...
and destroy individuals and communities (UN Human Rights 2014). Although scholars note
that rape is not used as a weapon in all wars (Wood 2006), the effects can be devastating. For
example, after experiencing a 13-year civil war, a 2005-2006 survey of Liberia women found
that 92 percent had been subject to sexual violence, including rape. Such staggering statistics
cannot be accounted for by men’s insatiable lust, but as evidence of the ways rape was
systematically carried out during the conflict.

Revenge Rape

Although not a new concept (see Black 1983; Scully & Morolla 1985), the use of rape as a
tool of revenge or punishment has recently attracted media attention. For example, in July
2014, a 14-year-old girl in Jharkhand, India was raped as a means of ‘punishing’ her brother,
who had in turn been accused of assaulting the perpetrator’s wife (‘Arrest over “revenge”
rape in Jharkhand’ 2014). In January that year, a 20-year-old woman in West Bengal was
gang raped by order of a village council for falling in love with a man from a different
community (‘Woman gang raped on orders of a “kangaroo court”’ 2014). In the first
circumstance, rape was used as a method of revenge and punishment for the victim’s family,
but in the latter, it was a method to punish her. Sometimes women are raped in the name of
‘collective liability’ (Black 1983) in which the victim is being held responsible for ‘crimes’
committed by other members of a particular category (e.g. women). For example, in their
research on 114 convicted rapists in the US, Scully & Morolloa (1985) noted how several
rapists admitted using rape as a means of getting revenge on someone else (normally a
partner or girlfriend). Rapists often admitted to visualising that they were raping their partner
in these circumstances.
Date Rape

Even in cases such as date rape, which is seemingly motivated by sex, the experience is more about men’s perceived entitlement and access to women’s bodies than it is about sexual gratification. While perhaps initially motivated by sex, the act is transformed to an assertion of power at the point where the woman says ‘no’ but the man proceeds anyways. When the perpetrator decides that the fulfilment of their needs, desires and fantasies becomes more important than the victim’s bodily autonomy, it is no longer a case of ‘unbridled’ sexual desire, but an act of power, domination and control. The prevalence of date rape in many societies can be explained by cultural values, in which men’s entitlement to women’s bodies is so engrained that rape becomes a suitable method of conquest when women say no (Scully & Morolla 1985). What is truly scary is the ways many men’s sense of entitlement in such scenarios runs so deep, they are unable to recognize their actions as ‘rape’ and instead believe they are merely asserting their right to sexually access women’s bodies (Scully & Morolla 1985). As we witnessed in 2014, this sense of entitlement drove 22-year-old Elliot Rodger to murder six people and injure 13 more before killing himself. Just before the attack, Rodger posted a You Tube video in which he expressed his desire to punish women for rejecting him, and sexually active men for having access to women’s bodies. As he said: ‘I don’t know why you girls aren’t attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it’ (Valenti 2014a).

So, the view that rape, while of course involving sex, is instead driven by the need to punish, control, or dominate women (and sometimes male relatives or their community) is truly radical. This understanding of rape challenges the common sense construction of masculinity and male sexuality in which men are innately sexual beings who are biologically wired to (subconsciously and aggressively if need be) seek sex in certain circumstances (e.g. when turned on or ‘provoked’ by certain modes of behaviour or dress) (Scully & Morolla 1985). In recent years, the construction of rape as a crime of passion and sex has been
particularly difficult to challenge, as scholars have identified a resurgence of discourses perpetuating gender essentialism claiming that men and women are driven by ‘psychological and physiological urges ingrained in the era of ‘cavemen’ (see Hasinoff 2009, p. 267). Because these ‘urges’ are supposedly based on science and biology, discourses stating that men cannot help but rape in certain circumstances are particularly difficult to challenge.3

In fact, only 16 mainstream news articles (5 percent of total) and 26 feminist media posts (7 percent of total) explicitly talked about the ways rape was not a crime of passion and sex, but of power, violence or control. Therefore, although these discourses were not prominent in either sample, they are worth addressing because they hold the potential for challenging the one rape myth upon which I believe the others are based. After all, if rape is understood as a crime of violence, power, domination, humiliation, punishment and control, it is easier to move discussions away from how women ‘provoked’ rape, to why men rape in the first place. Only then can strategies be implemented to ideally prevent rape, but realistically, to hold rapists accountable, end victim-blaming and provide more comprehensive support for survivors.

Varying Levels of Analysis

Similar to discourses which state personal appearance do not cause rape, there were varying levels of depth to discourses constructing rape as a crime of power and control. For example, this discourse was quickly glossed over in Britain’s conservative Mail on Sunday, when columnist Liz Jones (2011) quoted a 15-year-old participant at SlutWalk London (donning a ‘short red dress’) who said: ‘I dress how I like, but it’s [rape] not about how you dress, it’s about power.’ No further information or follow up discussion was included before Jones moved the discussion on. Although less common, the simplistic relaying of this discourse
was also found in feminist media posts. For example, one entry on the Canadian blogging site *Rabble.ca* noted that PC Sanguinetti’s comments:

> [O]utraged the students who know that rape is a crime of violence and power and it has nothing to do with how anyone dresses. Women of all ages, of all shapes, sizes and colours, blondes, redheads, women with grey hair, women tall and short, women with physical or mental disabilities – all can be targeted for rape. (Fraser 2011)

Although the simplistic relaying of this discourse was present in both samples, in general my feminist texts elaborated on this discourse. Writing on the SlutWalk Singapore blog, writer Laïcité (2011) argued that: ‘Rape has more to do with how the perpetrator views women than about sex.’ She went on to note that if it were simply a matter of sexual attraction, ‘a man would take “no” for an answer.’ Yet, instead, she explained:

> But to ignore a victim’s sovereignty over her own body suggests that the perpetrator has issues of power and control and is probably unable to respect women as equal human beings with a right to choose their attire and a right to not be touched without consent. What a woman wears is merely a convenient excuse to disguise the desire to dehumanize and possess a victim and to violate her bodily integrity against her will. (Laïcité 2011)
Worth noting is that many of the more nuanced analyses of rape as a tool of violence, power and control were promoted by women of colour, who demonstrated an understanding of how sexual assault has long been used to maintain control over black women’s bodies and lives. Referring back to the time of slavery, the Black Women’s Blueprint (2011) detailed the ways sexual assault has been used as a ‘radical weapon of oppression’ particularly against women of colour, whose bodies have historically been viewed as ‘sexualized objects of property.’ Similarly, writing on the popular blog Racialicious, blogger Andrea noted how sexual violence was not just a tool used to maintain the status quo, but a tool of ‘ensuring white status quo’ (Andrea 2011). These discourses were not solely reproduced by women of colour. White feminist blogger Meghan Murphy also recognized that ‘All women are vulnerable to violence at the hands of men, but marginalized women are particularly likely to be victimized and men who are violent against marginalized women are more likely to get away with it’ (Murphy 2012a).

Although feminists really began to theorize the ways rape has been an effective tool used to maintain male dominance over women since the 1970s, scholars note that women have been intimidated by the threat of male violence for millennia (Brownmiller 1975; Clark 1992). Both Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Kate Clark (1992) have talked about the ways that the (threat of) violence has long been an effective way to keep women submissive and in a state of fear. And although I agree that rape has been used as a means of power and control over women, it does not explain why women have accepted responsibility for their assault. This is where Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony applies. Unlike Karl Marx who argued that the ruling class maintained control through merely ‘brainwashing’ sections of society, Gramsci stated that ruling groups maintain power and control through accommodating views from subordinate or marginalized groups. In the case of sexual assault, discourses emerged stating that while rape exists, women can avoid it if they follow certain
guidelines or rules (e.g. dress conservatively, don’t drink alcohol, remain virginal, do not go out late at night, do not go out on your own, etc). In fact, Jessica Valenti (2007) popularized the term ‘rape schedule’ to talk about the ways women schedule their lives around the avoidance of rape:

Because of their constant fear of rape (conscious or not), women do things throughout the day to protect themselves. Whether it’s carrying our keys in our hands as we walk home, locking our car doors as soon as we get in, or not walking down certain streets, we take precautions. While taking precautions is certainly not a bad idea, the fact that certain things women do are so ingrained into our daily routines is truly disturbing. It’s essentially like living in a prison – all the time. We can’t assume that we’re safe anywhere: not on the streets, not in our homes. And we’re so used to feeling unsafe that we don’t even see that there’s something seriously fucked up about it. (Valenti 2007, p. 63; see also Herman 1978)

As Valenti pointed out, these ideologies have become so entrenched that women aren’t fully aware of the ways we police not only ourselves, but other women through slut-shaming and victim-blaming. In the meantime, as women busy themselves by organising their lives around not getting raped, questions revolving around why men rape in the first place are ignored or overlooked. This is truly problematic and indicates the desperate need for widespread consciousness-raising, something I hope this book contributes to.

SlutWalk and Postfeminist Sentiments of Choice and Empowerment in the News
For several years, feminist scholars have become aware of and critiqued the ways feminist messages have been influenced and co-opted by neoliberal rhetoric. According to Gill & Scharff (2011), neoliberalism is an ideology governing Western social and cultural values which emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s when US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to power. The neoliberal values prioritized under these administrations have become dominant in many parts of the world and have influenced other ideologies, including feminism, resulting in what scholars have identified as a ‘postfeminist’ culture and sensibility (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009; Mendes 2012; Douglas 2010). Unlike other political theories (such as radical feminism) which stress collective activism and social responsibility, the current postfeminist sensibility has been criticized for promoting individualism and rejecting any notion that structural inequalities exist (Negra 2008). In our postfeminist culture, women’s equality is seen as having already been achieved and feminism is thus constructed as dead, irrelevant, redundant or passé (Gill 2007; Douglas 2010; McRobbie 2009; Mendes 2012; Tasker & Negra 2007). Instead, when issues surrounding women’s empowerment arise, postfeminist tropes stipulate that it is best achieved through self-gratifying choices (often demonstrated through purchasing power or self-subjectification), rather than collective, political action (Douglas 2010; Gill 2007). At the same time, the consequences or politics of women’s ‘choices’ remain irrelevant or ignored (Mendes 2012).

Because postfeminism has been a central theme of feminist analysis in recent years (see for examples Genz & Brabon 2009; Gill 2007; Gill & Scharff 2011; Gwynne 2013; Gwynne & Muller 2013; Harzewski 2011; McRobbie 2009; Mendes 2012; Negra 2008; Tasker & Negra 2007) I felt it was important to discuss the use of postfeminist discourses in this study. Although only 10 mainstream news articles (3 percent of total) framed SlutWalk as a movement about women’s empowerment, postfeminist discourses of choice and (sexual)
empowerment were identified in a number of other mainstream news articles (feminist media posts will be discussed separately below). These articles drew upon both feminist and postfeminist discourses. According to Darmon (2014), who has also examined news of SlutWalk, postfeminist discourses are those which ‘strip away the political element of the protest, leaving behind a very stark postfeminist take on the protest, its name and its value’ (p. 703). These postfeminist discourses were evident in headlines such as: ‘It’s all about the clothes’ (Vasudev 2011), ‘Being a slut, to my mind, was mostly fun - wearing and doing what you liked’ (Moore 2011a), and ‘I plan to wear a sari at the SlutWalk’ (Rii 2012). These, and other articles like it, tended to focus on the march’s provocative name, women’s rights to dress and sleep with whomever they choose, and the empowerment derived from these choices.

While freedom and choice are important foundations for (neo)liberal feminism (Genz & Brabon 2009; Jaggar 1983), such values have been scrutinized by a number of feminist scholars for deflecting attention away from collective political action, towards individual self-management, consumption and (sexual) empowerment (see Gill & Scharff 2011). Instead of disrupting the link between attire and likeliness of sexual assault, such articles promoted the idea that SlutWalk was merely about women’s right to dress how they want (see also Darmon 2014). This was evident in the following BBC news article:

One protester told our correspondent: “Every girl has the right to wear whatever she wants, to do whatever she wants to do with her body. It’s our lives, our decisions, unless it’s harming you, you have no right to say anything.” (‘India “Slutwalk” sex harassment protest in Delhi’ 2011)
Similarly, one Muslim woman quoted in the UK’s *Observer* noted: ‘I chose to wear my hijab, and I find this piece of cloth really liberating because people don’t really judge me by what I look like. I absolutely believe a woman has a right to wear whatever she wants. I do not want the police, the state, anybody else, to tell me as a woman what I can and can’t wear’ (McVeigh 2011, p. 24). Such articles promote neoliberal rhetoric which states that individual freedoms and choices are justified, so long as they do not harm or interfere with freedoms and choices of others (Jaggar 1983). Furthermore, and more problematic in my opinion, is that these articles ignore SlutWalk’s attempts to collectively challenge rape culture, and instead focus on individuals’ right to dress as they please. At no point through my explorations of dozens of SlutWalk Facebook pages or websites have I come across any information which stipulates that this is the movement’s main purpose.

Feminist discourses of choice and empowerment on the other hand situated SlutWalk within wider feminist political goals of ending slut-shaming and victim-blaming. Examples of feminist discourses which addressed choice and empowerment include: ‘Stop Telling Women What to Wear’ (Schutte 2011), ‘Scantily-clad “SlutWalk” women march on New York after police tell them to “cover up” to avoid rape’ (Arthurs 2011), and ‘SlutWalk protest targets dress slur’ (2011). While these articles often referred to women’s clothing and appearance, it was done as a means of repudiating the blame assigned to sexual assault survivors (see also Darmon 2014). For example, as one *Toronto Star* columnist wrote:

Being a 50ish woman, my days of slut dress are behind me. It was never a fashion choice of mine, but I will go to the wall to defend a woman’s right to dress any way she wants. The point I would like to make is there is no manner of clothing or dress that will protect me from the misogynist social attitude that “I want it” or “I
asked for it” or “I deserved it.” I am not, nor is any woman or girl, responsible for the behaviour/violence of men who view me and my sisters as objects. (MacKinnon 2011, p. A18)

Although the beginning of the quote perhaps suggests that columnist is merely interested in defending women’s right to dress how she wants (a postfeminist trope), the rest of the quote indicates that her choices should be granted, not because choice in itself is inherently important or a sign of liberation, but because in our misogynistic and patriarchal culture, they have no bearing on whether a man chooses to assault or judge her. Even if she was wearing ‘non-provocative’ clothing, whatever that may be, other excuses will be used to justify why the survivor should be blamed (perhaps she was out late at night, drank alcohol, or was not a virgin). Consequently, the discourse found in articles such as this have some radical potential in challenging rape myths because they attempt to re-direct attention away from the victim to perpetrator, where it belongs.

**Postfeminist Tropes in Feminist Media?**

Unlike my mainstream news sample, which either constructed SlutWalk as a postfeminist movement or utilized postfeminist discourses in a seemingly supportive or celebratory manner, a number of feminist bloggers critiqued the movement for what they saw as its cooptation by postfeminism, and the absence of more radical feminist theories and understanding of sexual assault, victim-blaming and the nature of patriarchy. For example, *Feminist Current* blogger and founder Meghan Murphy was a fierce critic of what she saw as the vacuous, apolitical and postfeminist nature of movement. She wrote a number of anti-
SlutWalk blogs whose titles include: ‘Breaking! SlutWalk is about spectacle, individual empowerment, wearing sexy lingerie, says everyone with eyes and brains’ (Murphy 2012c), ‘The naked protestor (or, how to get the media to pay attention to women)’ (Murphy 2012d), ‘Grasping at Straws: Comparing SlutWalk an Occupy Wall Street’ (Murphy 2011a), and ‘Liberal feminists realize that feminism is a movement after all. Confusion ensues’ (Murphy 2012e).

These posts highlight what Murphy identified as the problematic co-optation of SlutWalk by postfeminist tropes. In her post titled: ‘Breaking! SlutWalk is about spectacle, individual empowerment, wearing sexy lingerie, says everyone with eyes and brains’ (Murphy 2012c), Murphy critiqued an article about SlutWalk LA posted on Ms. Magazine (see Barbato 2012) where the author praised the event for its absence of politics in favour of ‘individualistic empowerment.’ Murphy was also set off by the author’s admission that SlutWalk is about ‘spectacle,’ and responded by asking:

Are we all getting this? Slutwalk is an apolitical, individualistic spectacle about wearing lingerie and having something called “slutitude”… On one hand I’m relieved that Slutwalk [sic] is being upfront about how very lost they are, on the other, I feel like stabbing myself in the eye. (Murphy 2012c)

In another post, Murphy (2011a) explicitly critiqued what she saw as SlutWalk’s neoliberal and capitalism nature, arguing that unlike other truly radical and potentially revolutionary movements like Occupy Wall Street, which is unbrandable, SlutWalk ‘provided exactly what mainstream culture wants and needs in order to sell a product: women’s bodies.’ In a long
explanation, Murphy went on to detail exactly how SlutWalk has been co-opted by capitalism:

Slutwalk bought right into to everything that we are being sold, turned it around and told the world that this was the route to liberation. Most of all, it sold a message of individualism – the key to the success of the capitalist system. Capitalism is all about the message of individualism vs. collectivism, man is an island under a capitalist system, and we are all to believe that if we work hard enough, as individuals, we can be successful. Health care, social safety nets, affordable housing? Those things are all a pain in the ass if you’re already wealthy and privileged. Those things don’t affect you if you aren’t poor or marginalized, so why bother? Other people aren’t your responsibility if you are a capitalist and if something makes you feel good then gosh darn it, you should do it!

Sound familiar? Slutwalk argued, right off the bat, that this was a movement all about individuals and that, if what they were doing, as individuals, was impacting other women negatively, well, too freakin’ bad. If you think sex work is great, then it’s great, regardless of how it impacts and hurts and exploits other women; women with less privilege than yourself. If you want to call yourself a slut and encourage men to call you a slut (because now that’s empowering!), then do it! Even if it throws other women under the bus in the process.

Slutwalk followed the rules. They bought into a patriarchal, neoliberal, capitalist message and tried to sell it back to us as revolutionary. But it wasn’t. (Murphy 2011a)
Although Murphy’s blogs perhaps provided the most detailed critiques of the ways SlutWalk is (at least perceived) to be about ‘me-first power feminism’ (see Genz & Brabon 2009, p. 10), she was certainly not a lone voice. Many other feminist bloggers expressed their discomfort about various aspects of the movement, particularly the focus on individual empowerment which could be derived from either reclaiming the word slut (Hart 2012) to walking down the street in ‘slutty’ clothes (see Ana 2011), or the privilege certain groups have in claiming empowerment from such actions (see Izrael 2011; Petro 2011).

While I argue that these critiques of the ways SlutWalk has been understood as a postfeminist movement are important, a handful of articles managed to address concepts of empowerment, choice and liberation emerging from a feminist position. For example, when interviewed by the New Zealand blog The Lady Garden, SlutWalk Aotearoa organizer MJ Brodie was asked what she wanted participants to take away from the march. Brodie responded that she hoped participants would feel ‘empowered,’ but unlike postfeminist tropes which might suggest this could be achieved through dressing in a certain way, she envisaged this to be achieved through the mass coming together and sharing of stories from survivors:

Ultimately, I want people to come away with a sense of empowerment – it can be a huge thing to talk about your own experiences, to hear about other people’s, but I really think that just walking amongst a crowd of survivors and refusing to be shamed or afraid can be an incredible, enriching experience. (Spankhead 2012b)
For Brodie then, SlutWalk wasn’t necessarily empowering because it gave individual women permission to wear what they wanted, but because it was an opportunity for women (and men) who had been sexually abused to come together to speak out against this crime. This move towards ‘anti-victimization’ (Cole 2007) in which individuals transform from sexual assault victims to survivors has been an important mental shift in helping women to reclaim a sense of agency and power over their lives, and to reject the stereotype that women are passive and easily dominated. Discourses of agency, empowerment and survival were specifically identified by one feminist blogger who noted that amongst the variety of speakers at SlutWalk sharing horrific accounts of sexual abuse, ‘were triumphant stories, and the way in which these speakers were able to share their experiences and frame them in terms of their own personal empowerment showed that they were not victims of sexual abuse; they were sexual abuse survivors’ (Hanson 2012).4

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When examining the use of frames and discourses in both my mainstream news and feminist media sample, it is abundantly clear that SlutWalk has achieved a level of support which is historically unprecedented for feminist activism (Mendes 2011a, 2012). And while I applaud both my mainstream news and feminist media sample’s general support of the movement, and the extent to which they employed feminist discourses challenging rape culture, I remain cautious, particularly with the mainstream news media, about the extent to which they are truly capable of challenging patriarchal rape myths. For example, I hope to have highlighted a key difference between articles/posts which report that SlutWalk is a movement which challenges rape culture, and those which go further and critique, explain and analyze rape culture itself. The former involve (superficial) constructions of SlutWalk as ‘part of a
broader, and healthy phenomenon, of ending the silence, stigma and shame around the crime of rape’ (Editorial 2011, A16). While on first appearance such discourses appear to promote feminist rhetoric on rape, such as the harm and caused by victim-blaming, most fail to discuss what causes sexual assault in the first place, or what can be done to end it. In other words, while such articles certainly support SlutWalk, their shallow and superficial analysis of rape culture means renders them unlikely to challenge its patriarchal and misogynist foundation.

And although my feminist media sample was certainly guilty of reproducing these shallow accounts, they were much more likely to provide detailed critiques and explanation of sexual assault and rape culture. These were the texts which not only asked what fosters and perpetuates rape culture in the first place, but demanded attention be spent on destroying it. Because the SlutWalk movement aims to change people’s understanding of sexual assault and rape culture, much of their battle is being waged at the discursive level. As a result, a change in people’s understanding of these issues requires an investment in discursive politics – or ‘speech which intervenes in hegemonic discourses, and that works at the level of language to change political cultures’ (Shaw 2011a; see also Maddison 2013b; Young 1997).

After years of researching mainstream news media’s representations of feminism, and comparing those representations to the feminist blogosphere, I feel confident in arguing that as inherently capitalist and patriarchal institutions, the mainstream news media are by and large incapable of providing critiques, context and depth necessary to foster widespread cultural change. While they may inspire readers to find out more about SlutWalk, rape culture, or the nature of rape, in the words of Barbara Freeman: ‘The mainstream news media are not, given their capitalist nature, revolutionary, and feminist messages tend to be eventually subsumed within the status quo’ (Freeman 2001, p. 5). Although I am not suggesting is that feminists should ‘give up’ on, or ignore the mainstream news media, I do believe they should be (as many already are as we will come to see in Chapter 6) focusing
their attention towards platforms such as the feminist blogosphere. It is these platforms which, unrestricted by journalistic conventions such as objectivity, balance or bias, and which, as mostly non-commercial entities don’t have to worry about alienating advertisers, can provide radical challenges to oppression.

And it was in the feminist blogosphere that I found posts which stood in stark contrast to the often shallow and pithy discussions of rape culture in the mainstream news. Although I certainly encountered a range of superficial analysis and critiques amongst my feminist media sample, I also came across plenty of detailed, theoretical explanations of sexual assault and rape culture. For example, rather than simply stating ‘clothes don’t cause rape,’ many feminist media posts explained the ways various systems of oppression (capitalism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism) fuel rape. Others talked about the ways women experience sexual assault and its aftermath differ depending on various identities (age, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability). These were the type of posts which went beyond merely stating that rape is not a crime of passion or sex, but which explained, sometimes using their own personal experiences, the ways it is fuelled by power, domination and control. These were the posts which explained the ways victim-blaming perpetuated sexual violence and the ones which debunked rape myths. And while none of the theories presented in these blogs are ‘new,’ and just as feminists have articulated critical consciousness around sexual assault for decades through consciousness-raising sessions, zines and other alternative publications (see Maddison 2013b; Peipmeier 2009), the feminist blogosphere has provided a new, online space for the formation networked counterpublics (Keller 2013). These are online spaces in which feminists use to create and disseminate counterhegemonic discourses, in this case about sexual assault and rape culture. And although many blogs are written by individuals, as we will come to see in the next chapter, they make frequent interlinkages with one another to create networked communities (Keller 2013).
Overall then, while the vast majority of mainstream news articles and feminist media posts supported SlutWalk and framed it as a movement which challenged rape culture, promoted awareness of the devastation of sexual violence, and in some cases, as a sign of women’s (sexual) empowerment, other articles were more critical, taking up the frame that SlutWalk was misguided or opposed. These frames, the discourses which comprise them, and the ways they have been contested, will be the focus of the next chapter.