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MEDUSA



REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Preventive Narrative

Professional Learning Suite
For Journalists and Communication Professionals

Section: MEDIA

Module No. 13

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REWRITING MEDIA NARRATIVES
ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



1. Why this subject matter

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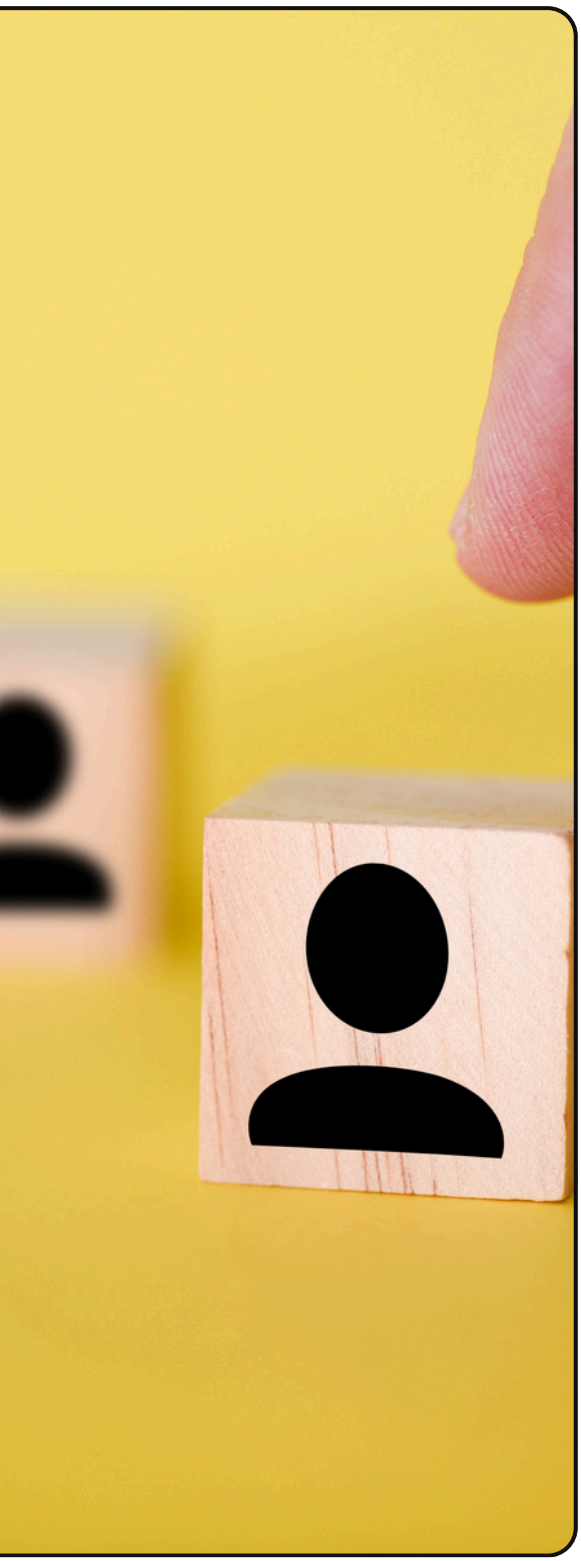
Gender-based violence is not normalised by just one hurtful word, one unethical article or one problematic headline. It is also normalised through repetition. When the same explanations, emotional framing and narrative patterns appear repeatedly in the news, on social media, in comments, in video clips and in algorithmic recommendations, they gradually shape society's perception of what is normal, believable, serious or inevitable.

This module addresses the cumulative impact of repeated media narratives. It examines how sensational reporting, misinformation, disinformation, rumour, information overload and algorithmic amplification can transform violence

into a spectacle, generate emotional fatigue, reduce empathy and undermine public awareness of gender-based violence as a systemic human rights issue.

Preventive narrative practice involves breaking harmful narrative cycles, such as repetition without context, shock without explanation, speed without scrutiny, visibility without accountability and disinformation without correction. This module aims to help journalists as well as content creators understand the long-term impact of repeated media narratives on public thinking, not just to help them write “more correctly”. ”

2. Learning Outcomes



01

Identify how repeated narratives, sensationalist reporting and misinformation can lead to the normalisation of gender-based violence and desensitise society in the long term.

02

Analyse how repetition of narratives can change public perceptions of violence, shifting them from views of violence as a preventable social harm to views of violence as a private tragedy, an emotional drama, an isolated incident or an unavoidable reality.

03

Recognise how sensationalist reporting, misleading information, online rumours and algorithmic amplification can distort public understanding, increase confusion and reduce empathy.

04

Use preventative editorial strategies to stop the repetition and amplification of harmful content, while strengthening the context to help audiences understand gender-based violence as a systemic and preventable problem.

Definitions

Preventive narrative

A preventive narrative is a communication approach that aims to reduce the normalisation of violence, discrimination, fear, and dehumanisation. When reporting on gender-based violence, it helps to break harmful cycles of repetition, reduce sensationalism and prevent the amplification of misinformation, while directing public attention towards context, accountability, prevention and systemic understanding.

Narrative repetition

Narrative repetition is the process by which the same explanatory framework, emotional perspective, or narrative structure appears repeatedly in different media. Over time, repetition can make a narrative seem familiar, believable and socially acceptable, even if it is incomplete, misleading or harmful.
For instance, if violence is consistently presented as an individual conflict arising from jealousy or an emotional breakdown, society may begin to view it as an inevitable event rather than as an expression of power and control.

Sensational loop

A sensational loop occurs when a violent incident is continuously updated, reposted, commented on and shared, primarily through the use of emotional triggers such as shock, fear, anger, curiosity or humiliation. While each individual update may seem minor or justified, together they create a cycle in which the public repeatedly consumes violence as entertainment rather than addressing it as a social issue.

Sensational loops often include dramatic headlines, frequent updates with little new information, graphic details, speculation, reposted social media comments and emotionally charged content designed to encourage clicks and shares.

Misinformation and disinformation

Misinformation is inaccurate, incomplete or erroneous information that is spread unintentionally. Disinformation, on the other hand, is false or misleading information that is deliberately created or spread with the aim of manipulating public perception, creating distrust or polarisation, or diverting attention from important issues.

In cases of gender-based violence, misinformation and disinformation may manifest as rumours about the victim's behaviour, unverified claims about motives, manipulated images or videos, conspiracy theories, false accusations, or claims that trivialise the violence.

Infodemic

An infodemic occurs when a society is exposed to an overwhelming amount of information, including both accurate and inaccurate sources. This information overload makes it difficult to identify reliable sources and contributes to confusion, making audiences more susceptible to manipulation and disinformation.

In the context of reporting violence, an infodemic can occur when a single incident is widely reported with numerous detailed updates, social media speculation, rumours, fragmented testimonies and emotional commentary, but with no verified explanation, context or responsible editorial selection.

Algorithmic amplification

Algorithmic amplification is the process by which digital platforms, recommendation systems and social media increase the visibility of certain content. Content that evokes strong emotions such as outrage, fear, disgust or curiosity is often clicked on, commented on and shared, and therefore appears more frequently in other users' feeds. This can result in sensational or polarising narratives about gender-based violence becoming more visible than careful, contextual and fact-checked journalism.

Public emotional fatigue

This occurs when people are repeatedly exposed to a large amount of shocking, contradictory or fragmented information, which leaves them feeling emotionally exhausted, confused or resigned. In such situations, violence can begin to seem normal, ubiquitous or inevitable.

This does not mean that society no longer cares. Rather, people may lose the ability to identify causes, assign responsibility, and recognise possible solutions. Therefore, a preventive narrative must not only attract attention, but also build understanding.

4.In what ways do repeated narratives affect public understanding?

Media narratives help the public to understand what has happened, who is responsible, whether the situation was preventable and how to respond to it. However, if an event is presented in a one-sided manner, this can be misleading in a specific case. However, if the same narrative is repeated across many channels and cases, it begins to shape public perceptions of violence in general.

For instance, if gender-based violence is consistently presented as a 'family conflict', a 'private tragedy', or an 'emotional outburst', viewers may gradually lose sight of violence as an issue of power, control, inequality, and institutional failures. If violence is continually presented as a shocking exception, its systematic nature becomes harder for the public to recognise. If violence is continually sensationalised, audiences may become emotionally overstimulated without becoming better informed. Therefore, the deterrent narrative asks the question: “Is this information true?”, but also: “What does the repeated use of such framing teach society in the long term?”

5.Psychological and neurolinguistic mechanisms

Narratives influence how society understands and responds to violence. For example, when the media describe gender-based violence as a 'family conflict', 'jealousy drama' or 'emotional breakdown', audiences may view it as an isolated incident rather than as an expression of power, control and inequality.

This perception is strongly reinforced by cognitive biases related to repetition. The **Illusory Truth Effect** demonstrates that repeated statements are more likely to be judged as true than statements presented once, regardless of their actual validity (Hasher et al., 1977; Schmidt & Heck, 2024). When a harmful narrative frame is repeatedly shared, it becomes familiar and socially accepted. Furthermore, continuous exposure to violence framed as emotional spectacle leads to **Moral Desensitization** (Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Brockmyer, 2022). Repeated exposure to sensationalized violence reduces empathy and increases public permissiveness, transforming a human rights violation into mere entertainment.

Digital platforms can intensify these effects through algorithmic amplification, which prioritizes high-arousal and emotional content over verified facts. Consequently, gender-based violence is sensationalised and repeated in endless loops, normalizing the violence and inducing public emotional fatigue.

Therefore, preventive communication requires a careful choice of framing, contextualization, and frequency of updates. Responsible journalism breaks the sensational loop by prioritizing systemic understanding over algorithmic visibility, avoiding narrative repetition that trivialises violence.

6. Typical errors in journalistic practice

- **Sensationalised repetition:** The continuous repetition of updates on the same violent incident, the use of graphic images and identically dramatised headlines can create emotional overload. This can overwhelm or desensitise audiences, while repeatedly retraumatising victims and their families.

- **Emotional manipulation:** Headlines and visuals that aim to shock, frighten or arouse curiosity encourage an emotional response rather than an informed understanding. Fear-based communication may increase click-through rates, but it can also reduce the public's ability to analyse what is happening and maintain empathy.

- **Publishing updates that lack new social value:** when every small detail becomes a separate story, the repetition itself becomes the main message. While the incident remains visible, the context, causes and preventive solutions are lost.

- **Repeating rumours and speculation:** even if the media indicate that the information is "unconfirmed", repeating rumours can lend them credibility. This undermines trust, increases confusion and can influence public opinion of the individuals involved in an unfair way.

- **Unfounded urgency and speculation:** The race for speed often results in unverified or incomplete information being published. In cases of gender-based violence, speculation about motives, relationships, or the victim's behaviour can spread faster than verified facts.

- **Reinforcing extremist or misogynistic narratives:** By repeatedly publishing misogynistic statements, online attacks or extremist rhetoric without critical context, media outlets can unintentionally normalise or promote these views.

- **Information overload without explanation:** When audiences are bombarded with fragmented information, it becomes difficult to understand what is really important. Reporting without context, expert explanations and helpful information can create confusion rather than understanding.

- **Algorithm-driven framework:** Media content is increasingly tailored to what works best on social media. This can fuel conflict, polarisation and emotionally simplistic messaging that undermines quality journalism.



7. Impact of media narratives on gender-based violence

Repeated narratives have a long-term impact on how society perceives not only a specific incident, but also violence in general.

When violence is repeatedly presented as a private matter, the public's ability to demand institutional and political accountability is reduced. When violence is sensationalised, audiences can become emotionally exhausted. When many contradictory details are published about each incident, confusion and distrust increase. When rumours and misinformation circulate faster than verified facts, public understanding becomes vulnerable to manipulation.

A preventive narrative shifts attention from sensationalism to understanding, from fragments to context, from rumour to verification, and from emotional reaction to public responsibility.





8. Positive reframing

“

Positive reframing involves shifting the focus from shock, blame and stereotypes to accuracy, respect and public understanding. In practice, this involves using language that respects victims and survivors, avoids blaming the victim, and clearly attributes responsibility to the perpetrator.

8. Positive reframing

A repetitive harmful narrative	*What it teaches society in the long term*	*A preventive narrative alternative*
"It is a private family tragedy"	Violence belongs in the private sphere	Violence is a public and systemic human rights issue
"He lost control because of his emotions"	Violence can seem understandable or even inevitable	Violence is a choice related to power, control and responsibility
"The victim should have left earlier"	The responsibility is shifted onto the victim	The structural barriers that make it difficult to leave an abusive relationship must be addressed
"Online violence is just comments"	Digital violence is being trivialised	Online violence limits participation, security and democracy
"Another shocking case"	Violence becomes a sensation and emotional fatigue grows	Each case must deepen our understanding of the patterns and how to prevent them
"Everyone on the internet is talking about it"	Rumours gain artificial legitimacy	Verification and context are more important than achieving viral visibility
"This case proves that things are getting worse"	One case is used to make a generalisation	Distinguish between facts, trends, data and emotional assumptions
"There is no point in doing anything - violence always happens"	Powerlessness is becoming more prevalent in society	It is essential to demonstrate prevention options, institutional responsibility and support mechanisms



8. Case study

A sensational online loop follows a violent incident

Imagine the following situation: a widely discussed violent incident has occurred. Within a few hours, numerous posts, comments, assumptions and unconfirmed details appear on social media. Some users spread rumours about the relationships of those involved. Others publish emotional comments of condemnation or speculation. Some media outlets start publishing frequent updates to avoid losing their audience's attention.

At first, the public interest seems understandable. However, the flow of information soon becomes fragmented: there is a lot of emotion, but few verified facts; many comments, but little context; and a lot of visibility, but little understanding.

Platform algorithms amplify content that provokes the strongest reactions. Consequently, audiences are increasingly exposed to shocking fragments but are becoming less and less informed about the causes of violence, responsibility and preventive solutions.
In such a situation, a preventive editorial team does not try to publish every detail. Instead, it verifies information, avoids repeating rumours, avoids sensationalism, explains what is and isn't known, adds context and helps the audience understand why this case is of public importance and not just emotionally shocking. ”

Discussion

- In this case, which pieces of information help the public to understand what happened?
- Which pieces of information only serve to perpetuate shock, curiosity or anger?
- How can rumours become credible if they are repeated across multiple channels?
- In what ways can algorithmic amplification change the public’s perception of what is important?
- How can the media break the sensationalist cycle without losing its function of providing the public with information?
- What information would help the audience to understand violence as a systemic and preventable problem?

9. Practical Exercises

01
Mapping repetitive narratives

Objective: Develop the ability to identify repetitive narratives in various media and understand their long-term influence on public perception.

Procedure:
Participants select four to six media materials or social media examples of one form of gender-based violence, either individually or in pairs. These could be articles, headlines, social media posts, comments, short video descriptions, or editorial updates.

Participants should not just analyse individual words or headlines. Their task is to map recurring narrative patterns.

Analysis questions:

- What explanation of violence is recurring?
- Is violence framed as private, inevitable, provoked, exceptional or systemic?
- Which actors are repeatedly made visible: the victim, the abuser, institutions, experts, platforms or peers?
- Which actors or factors are repeatedly made invisible?
- What emotions are repeatedly activated – fear, anger, disgust, curiosity, empathy or a sense of responsibility?
- What information is repeatedly missing?
- If they saw this frame many times, what might the audience start to believe is true?

Outcome:
Participants will understand that repetition in multiple media can have a stronger influence on public understanding than a single problematic phrase.

02

Breaking the sensational loop

Objective: Learn how to make editorial decisions that reduce harmful repetition, shock and the amplification of speculation.

Procedure:
Participants are given the following scenario: a violent incident is trending online. The media are publishing continuous updates. Rumours, comments and emotional posts are circulating. The editorial team must then decide how to break the sensational loop.

Participants must decide:

- What should be published now.
- What should not be repeated?
- Which details are shocking but do not contribute to understanding?
- Which rumours should be corrected, and which should not be reinforced?
- What context should be added?
- How often should the story be updated?
- How might a headline, image or quote be taken out of context?
- How can the media avoid becoming part of an amplification cycle?

Outcome:
Participants understand that prevention is not just about using better language, but also making responsible decisions about the repetition, timing, selection and circulation of content.

03

Disinformation and Algorithmic Amplification Simulation

Objective: Developing the ability to respond to disinformation without amplifying it and increasing public confusion.

Procedure:
Participants act as an editorial team in a rapidly growing online discussion about gender-based violence. A misleading claim is spreading, influencers are commenting on it and platforms are amplifying emotional posts. The group must prepare an editorial response that does not cause panic, reinforce the harmful narrative or confuse the public.

Questions for group work:

- Is the claim verified, misleading or false?
- Would refuting it not reinforce it even more?
- What should be corrected publicly?
- What should not be quoted directly?
- How can you provide context without causing further confusion?
- In what ways could a headline, image or quote be taken out of context?
- What is the risk of further polarisation?
- How can the situation be explained so that the audience understands both the falsehood of the claim and the mechanism of manipulation?

Outcome:
Participants learn to respond to misinformation without inadvertently spreading it further.

Checklist time!

Preventive Narrative Checklist

Before publishing any material, whether a publication, story, interview or social media post, check the following:

- Are we raising awareness, or are we simply repeating attention-grabbing elements?
- Does this update contain genuinely new, verified information?
- Are we perpetuating shock, fear, rumours or speculation?
- Does repeated coverage of this incident normalise, make inevitable or seem to make unsolvable the violence?
- Are we reinforcing misogynistic, extremist or victim-blaming narratives by citing or reposting them?
- Does the story explain patterns, causes and effects, or does it focus solely on an isolated incident?
- Does the coverage help the audience to understand how to prevent such incidents and hold those responsible to account?
- Could a headline, image or quote be taken out of context on social media?
- Are we contributing to information overload?
- Are we correcting misinformation in a way that makes it more visible?
- Does the publication reduce confusion, or does it increase panic and polarisation?
- Do we repeat details because they have social value or because they maintain interest?
- Will the audience have a better understanding of the causes, consequences and prevention of violence after engaging with this material?
- Does the material encourage us to see violence as a systemic problem rather than just an isolated, shocking incident?

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