DisHonorRoll: A Reporting Project on Campus Sexual Assault

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Project Description and Objectives:

In October 2017 the Media Consortium was asked to pull together a project centered around campus sexual assault.

The objectives were two-fold:

1. To focus public attention on campus sexual assault;

2. To deepen the public’s understanding of campus sexual assault including:

* Demonstrate that sexual assault pervades all types of campuses (including HBCUs and Christian colleges);
* Research the impacts assault has on survivors;
* Critique the ways in which colleges respond to campus sexual assault, including campus and state judicial systems;
* Investigate means of preventing assault on campus, including what we know about why people commit assault;

To focus public attention on campus sexual assault, we proposed and implemented a Media Drumbeat program designed to maintain public interest in campus sexual assault by publishing two stories a month for ten months from up to ten different outlets. The theory was that having stories come from a variety of outlets would reach a wider, more diverse audience, and that spreading the stories out would keep campus sexual assault in the public conversation for longer.

At the same time, we understood that this background drum beat would be most effective if we could also provoke public interest directly. Achieving a viral moment is the holy grail of all media, and one that can’t be manufactured. Our theory was that investing in an investigative reporter who could dig up and reveal something new about campus sexual assault would give us the best chance of that kind of virality—an effort the drumbeat would prepare for and support.

Project Implementation:

By late fall of 2017, it became clear that the Media Consortium was going to undergo an organizational transformation. In order to ensure this project would receive the fullest attention, we assigned the work of the media drumbeat to Bitch Media. Given their organizational focus on gender, sexuality and power, especially in relation to young women, we knew the Bitch staff would have the journalistic chops to develop stories for the media drumbeat. Even more crucially, Bitch staffers had demonstrated a long-term dedication to collaboration, so were the right choice to organize a multi-outlet project.

To implement the media drumbeat, we drew up a standard MOU for participating organizations. Then Bitch created a resource and style guide to ensure that there would be some continuity among the stories published. Bitch also developed a logo for the project, and a story landing page. Throughout the project, the Media Consortium and Bitch held four editorial meetings with editors at other publications to brainstorm story ideas.

For the investigative reporter, we looked for a news organization that had a proven track record of developing viral investigative stories and a history of reporting on issues around gender and violence. Mother Jones fit those criteria, especially when editor Monica Bauerlein told us the reporter assigned to the work would be Madison Pauly, a journalist who specializes in stories on gender and sexuality. Because we were looking for investigative reporting, we did not put any restrictions on Mother Jones other than the MOU we had them signed which specified that the grant was to be used for investigative reporting.

Project Successes:

* **20 stories, 10 outlets**. Bitch Media did a fantastic job with the media drumbeat. As our attached spreadsheet shows, we ran 20 stories from 10 different outlets over the 10 months of the project. The outlets involved have very different audiences, from Mother Jones, Truthout, Ms. and AlterNet, which reach progressives to Wear Your Voice, Making Contact and Rewire which reach women, especially women of color, to National Catholic Reporter, the main newspaper of liberal Catholics.
* #**MeToo at Christian Campuses**.The story that got the most pick-up was the National Catholic Reporter's piece on Christendom College, and their follow-up on Steubenville College. Evangelical colleges are not used to having a progressive spotlight turned on them in this way, and they pushed back hard. It’s fair to say that these pieces created a #metoo moment in the Christian college world that would not have happened without the DisHonorRoll project.
* **Women at HBCUs speak out**. The media drumbeat also built a significant body of reporting on campus sexual assault at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The hour-long program on Making Contact features alumnae and current students at HBCUs telling their stories, as does the piece by Katie Mitchell for Wear Your Voice.
* **Responses to Assault.** In two different pieces, Truthout provided a look both at the failures of the current legal models within colleges for responding to assault and at an alternative restorative justice model for making survivors whole.

Project Challenges:

* **Trump**. In the Trump era, it is almost impossible to make news. Trump dominates all the airwaves all the time. This caused us two different problems.
  + First, reporters had plenty to write about. Five years ago, it would have been much easier to find more outlets and more reporters to tell campus sexual assault stories. Today, editors have too much to publish rather than too little.
  + Second, in an effort to break through the noise, a number of reporters picked up on the #metoo movement which remained fairly prominent thanks both to Trump’s own actions (#StormyDaniels. Kavanaugh) and the parade of male celebrities accused of assault. However, the #metoo movement and campus sexual assault, while sharing some of the same larger themes (patriarchy, sexual violence) are not the same, and to some extent the need to frame stories as part of #metoo hurt the focus on campus sexual assault.
* **Investigative Fizzle**. We put a lot of our cards—and cash—into a bet on developing an investigative report that would provide a spark for the project. However, Madison Pauly did not find any stories worth investigating during this period. She did travel to a meeting of police officers working to transform sexual assault investigations and wrote a piece on that for the Mother Jones print magazine. She also used the Brock Turner case and the Kavanaugh #metoo moment to do some stories on campus sexual assault survivors. Frankly, however, these were not the kinds of stories we had been seeking.

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| Conclusion:  We are very pleased to have been able to fully meet one of our two objectives, namely, to deepen the public’s understanding of campus sexual assault. The pieces we ran on Christian Colleges and HBCUs were especially ground-breaking. If there is a desire to continue to fund reporting on campus sexual assault, we strongly recommend providing grants directly to National Catholic Reporter to further explore sexual assaults on denominational campuses.  We do not believe, in the Trump era, that it is possible to create a public drumbeat on any topic without millions of dollars and concerted support from leading nonprofits over a multi-year period—that is what it has taken to get climate change into the mass media news. What we do believe is that specific audiences can be energized around particular topics. We saw that with the HBCU stories, which received a significant amount of response according to Making Contact and Wear your Voice. One fruitful next step could be to fund an engagement project designed to solicit reader/listener/viewer input on campus sexual assault and then respond with reporting and resources. For example, Making Contact could benefit from a tool like Hearken to run such a campaign aimed at alumnae of HBCUs (their radio program is heard on almost all the HBCU radio stations).  We thank our anonymous donor (s) and Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick of the Hunting Ground for making this project possible.  Sincerely,  Jo Ellen Green Kaiser  Former Director, The Media Consortium |