

**Walking Justice:  
Media Power, Domestic Violence and Word Usage  
in the Peggy Jackson Case**

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At the end of March 2013, Peggy Jo Jackson received a grant of clemency from Gov. Pat Quinn after serving more than 25 years in prison. The life sentence she received after the murder trial of her husband was scaled back to time-served, and she walked out of Logan Correctional Facility for the first time in the new millennium.

The Jackson case is an interesting course of media ethics because it embodies how media and society viewed domestic violence across a generation. Where the story ends can begin an interesting ethical discourse about what journalists could do to better coverage incidences of domestic violence.

I plan to analyze the news stories of Peggy Jackson's conviction as they were reported in Mt. Vernon Register-News, her local hometown newspaper to view the information as it was first presented to the public. Using that historical context given from these articles, I intend to also compare and contrast how the Register-News covered the announcement of her clemency against the Chicago Sun-Times' account of the same media story. Through this analysis, I expect to show the power media framing and word choice has in shaping how the public may view issues around domestic violence.

## **Literature Review**

Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, was “discovered” as a social problem by researchers in the 1970s. By the late 1980s, while a better understanding may have been circulated in the academic world, the rest of civilization still had the mindset that the domestic violence was a matter for the private sector, not up for public discourse. “Domestic violence-related deaths and attempted murders – with their elements of impact, timeliness, conflict and human interest – are prime examples of news that should be simultaneously engaging and relevant “(Bullock 2008, p. 6).

Domestic violence may have more than one possible frame, and the victims themselves can find themselves framed in a certain way because the dominant perspectives and then framed as the source of blame for a crime committed by their spouses (Berns 2004, p. 2-3, 6). Most reading and viewing publics rely on the media to learn about social issues, as most people are only exposed to a handful of perspectives. Media can then act as “tour guides,” educating people about the prevalence of certain social problems. If a person has no prior knowledge or experience with social issues like domestic violence, then that person’s experience is shaped by what is viewed or read in the media (Berns 2004, p. 35, 37). Where this information can come from varies on whether the information is based on news, entertainment or “infotainment.” This media information could vary from pseudo-fictional television movies like the Farrah Fawcett vehicle “The Burning Bed,” the pop-country Top 20 hit “Goodbye Earl” by the Dixie Chicks or the investigation leading up to the O.J. Simpson murder trial. A key aspect in determining media

power lies in what Ciaran McCullagh called “the potential to shape the nature of social consciousness and the nature of public opinion” (2002, p. 18).

Public interest does exist in domestic violence issues. The first detailed content analysis of national newspaper coverage of domestic violence (Maxwell, et. al., p. 258, 269) looking at found that a residual effect of the O.J. Simpson trial resulted in increased numbers of non-Simpson domestic violence stories during the trial proceedings, suggesting a shift from incident focused stories to more socially focused information. The surge in domestic violence coverage was only short-lived. After the trial concluded, only the New York Times continued increased coverage while the other two papers in the study – the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Daily News – resumed pre-Simpson trial coverage levels (p. 263).

Women are often viewed differently in society, especially if suspect in a violent crime, because those actions do not match up to societal preconceived notions. Because it is a jury of her peers that decide how credible her story can be, this could be problematic for a “fair trial.” “When a woman decides to stand trial, she enters a legal system developed over the centuries to treat men and women, husbands and wives differently, based on deeply rooted assumptions about appropriate male and female roles and behaviors” (Browne 1987, p. 164).

Those same problems can be found in not only the guilty verdict but also in the judge’s sentencing. “Women charged in the death of a mate have the least extensive criminal records of any female offenders. However, they often face harsher penalties than men who kill their mates” (Browne 1987, p. 11).

## **The Case Against Jackson, 1986-1987**

The rapid succession of articles written by the local newspaper Mt. Vernon Register-News started the day after William Jackson's death. Charges of concealing a homicide were filed two days after William Jackson's body had been found, the same day the family held funeral services. A couple weeks later, Peggy Jackson was also charged with conspiracy to commit murder, and her brother Richard Harshbarger was charged with murder. According to a December 20, 1986 article in the Mt. Vernon Register-News, Peggy Jackson had called to report a domestic dispute in the early morning hours of December 3, and police reported to her rural residence.

This article would also be the first evidence that there was a history of domestic violence in the Jackson household. During cross-examination by prosecutors, Jefferson County Detective Captain Mike Anthis said in a statement that Peggy Jackson had told him that her husband had been abusive toward her, and she had called her brother to "come and talk to Willie" (Minton 1986, p. 1A). The reason Harshbarger had arrived early in the morning because William Jackson had to report to his shift at General Tire by 7 a.m.

Anthis would later testify that Peggy Jackson's statement was incomplete because he and her attorney had agreed to discontinue questioning because she became "very emotional" during the interview, which was conducted the same day William Jackson had perished (Minton 1986, p. 1A). The conspiracy charge stemmed mostly from testimony that Peggy Jackson had left the door unlocked so that her

brother could enter the home, and that pre-hearing testimony was repeatedly used in the media reports by the Register-News (Minton 1987, p. 1A).

A change of venue request was granted in March 1987 to move the proceedings from Mt. Vernon to Nashville. The same Register-News article that announced the new trial location also announced additional charges had been filed against Peggy Jackson. She was now facing a murder charge and solicitation to murder. Both Peggy Jackson and Harshbarger were to stand trial together (Snyder 1987, p. 1A).

Once the trial began the first week of April, the private lives of the Jacksons were soon made public. A front-page story in the Register News, located above the masthead, depicted how the Jackson had argued over Christmas money before William's death (Snyder 1A). The next day – April 10, 1987 –the front page story “Defense Attorneys Attack Star Witness” lead with the news that both Peggy Jackson's and Harshbarger's lawyers were attempting to discredit sister-in-law Debra Gatons, calling her a liar and insinuating that Gatons herself may had pulled the trigger. In a news report about the “much-anticipated testimony from chief prosecution witness,” Gatons would later tell the jury that Peggy Jackson had known her and Harshbarger were coming over, that Harshbarger had ordered her to retrieve his gun from his truck and later help dispose of the body in the family station wagon along a country road outside of town. “He said he was going to teach Willie a lesson,” Gatons said during the trial (Snyder 1A).

Another story located above the paper's masthead on April 22, Peggy Jackson recounted the months of abuse she and her children had endured before her

husband died. William Jackson would “grab them by the neck, throw them to the ground and kick them” (Snyder 1987, p. 1A). On the morning of December 3, Jackson said she took her children to a neighbor’s house once she had discovered her brother and husband were fighting. It would be when she returned home to find the blood-splattered bedroom that she knew something had happened, and she called the police (Snyder 1987, p. 1A).

It would be Gatons’ testimony and representatives from three insurance companies about the Jackson’s life insurance premiums that would resonate most with the jury. Peggy Jackson and Harshbarger were found guilty on all accounts by a jury of their peers.

On May 21, 1987, just shy of six months after William Jackson’s death, Peggy Jackson and Harshbarger learned that they could expect to spend the rest of their lives behind bars. The next day’s Mt. Vernon Register-News frontpage – exactly one month after Peggy Jackson’s testimony of her abuse went public in the same newspaper –depicted why Jackson particularly received the maximum penalty for her crime. When he sentenced Peggy Jackson, Judge Lehman Krause explained he had extended sentence because “this crime was brutal and heinous. Your actions resulted in the death of a father of four, a good provider who had a good job at General Tire, in the prime of life...” (Snyder 1987, p. 1A).

### **Register-News: Murderer walks**

In the April 1, 2013, online edition of the Mt. Vernon Register-News, the article “Convicted murder walks” announced Gov. Pat Quinn’s decision to release

Peggy Jackson from prison after “serving just 27 years of her life sentence for her role in her husband’s murder in Jefferson County over 25 years ago” (Hayes 1 of 2).

The second paragraph named Jackson’s clemency was among 87 granted by the governor while denying another 135 petitions. The article then quoted archived information about the crime:

“Harshbarger, who died several years ago in prison, was convicted of committing the murder when confronting Jackson’s husband, William, who reportedly abused Ms. Jackson. “Peggy Jo, who was not present at the time, was convicted for not trying to prevent her brother from murdering her husband” (Hayes 1 of 2).

Jefferson County State’s Attorney Doug Hoffman told the Register-News that he was “highly disappointed” in the governor’s decision, saying he personally reviewed case files from the crime and, given the “brutal and horrendous circumstances,” he believed the petition should have been denied (Hayes 2 of 2).

Attorney Erica Nichols-Cook of the Illinois Innocence Project worked on Jackson’s clemency case told the paper that the declaration was “a victory for all innocent women” who have suffered domestic abuse (Hayes 2 of 2).

### **Sun Times: Justice ‘finally’ served**

On March 30, 2013, the online edition of the Chicago Sun-Times ran a story titled “Justice ‘finally’ served for abused wife who killed husband.” The article leads with an anecdotal introduction about Peggy Jackson’s then-public defender Michael D. McHaney, now a judge. Using an affidavit McHaney had drafted for the clemency petition, the Sun-Times wrote how “there is not a month that goes by when I do not think about the miscarriage of justice that occurred in this case” (Sfondeles 2013, p. 1 of 2). Continuing the center focus on McHaney, the report depicts his inexperience



during the trial and adding that her brother was the one who actually committed the crime.

The article later told how the jury that had convicted Peggy Jackson had never learned of the abuse that she suffered from her husband over a 12-year period. In the 10th paragraph, after announcing McHaney “finally got some relief” following “more than a quarter century of remorse,” the story announces Gov. Quinn’s grant of clemency and Jackson’s freedom from prison (Sfondeles 2013, p. 1 of 2).

Quoting Jackson’s clemency petition, the Sun-Times said the night before the murder, Peggy Jackson was dragged into a bedroom and raped by her husband, who then told her he would kill her if she left the bed that night. He also showed her a “loaded gun” he had stashed (Sfondeles 2 of 2).

Attorney Margaret Byrne, director of the Illinois Clemency Project for Battered Women, worked to grant Jackson clemency. She told the newspaper that while she felt Jackson had a strong clemency petition, she called the governor’s decision “brave” and that the advocates had remained “hopeful” (Sfondeles 2 of 2).

### **Discussion**

Both articles in the Register-News and the Chicago Sun-Times presented incorrect or misleading information about Peggy Jackson’s clemency but for different reasons. The Register-News may have used the only dissenting opinion by quoting the Jefferson County State’s Attorney but the headline choice frames the story in such a way to make the reader think that a guilty party (Jackson) did not receive the proper punishment for her crime. This contradicts the statement later in

the story when the report indicated that Jackson was not on the scene at the time of the crime.

The Sun-Times framed its story around “justice” and primarily used two sources for its content. While the Register-News recognized the domestic violence issue in just one sentence with the qualifier “reportedly,” the Sun-Times went into great detail about the abuse Jackson had suffered. The paper erroneously stated that domestic violence had not been introduced at the trial. The Sun-Times article also never mentioned Richard Harshbarger or William Jackson by name, referring them only to “her brother” and “her husband” respectively.

Neither paper used Jackson herself as a source, but quoted rather attorneys who worked on her clemency. It should be noted that Jackson has refused all requests for interviews, including those for academic research.

### **Conclusion**

The term “framed” takes another interesting context in Peggy Jackson’s case as she was also “framed” for the murder of her husband. Berns writes in her 2004 book “Framing the Victim” that there is a “need to create the desire and the opportunities for expanding our understanding of any social problem landscape. This process begins with analyzing the politics and the process that shape how we understand how to respond to social problems” (177).

Society now exists in a chaotic system with “constant flux and perpetual change” that McCullah argued that the media “is where the dynamic of perpetual change “ that is then worked out by post-modernity (188). Through properly investigated and written reports, the media can be the avenue for changing social

perspectives on domestic violence, especially if the news uses more domestic violence advocates and experts to help produce more viable content. Bullock notes: “Coverage that presents domestic violence fatalities and attempted homicides as isolated incidents may contribute to this portrayal in that individual crimes are generally considered the province of the police and courts (17).”

Further research is needed to see how media has changed its framing, but I would like to focus more attention on rural communities. Studies vary on how prevalent domestic violence is in rural areas. In the case of the Register-News, an overreliance on official sources skewed not only the original trial coverage but the story informing the public about Jackson’s grant of clemency. Subsequently, the Sun-Times’ choice of words and reliance on advocates without proper historical context misinformed provided a different stance than Jackson’s hometown paper. A longitudinal media study of smaller local newspapers may present a better idea and help the rural communities garner a better idea and understanding in domestic violence research and solutions.

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