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Covering nipples: news discourse and the framing of breastfeeding

Mary Angela Bock, Paromita Pain and JhuCin Jhang 

School of Journalism, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Health experts are in widespread agreement that breastfeeding is generally the best option for infants and their mothers. The right to breastfeed in public has been guaranteed in forty-seven states in the US as a means to support nursing mothers and their babies, yet breastfeeding in public remains a controversial act. This project represents a textual analysis of news articles in the top ten newspapers in the United States to study the way breastfeeding is framed. We focus particular attention on the way one word, “nipple,” is treated in news coverage and argue that by using this word in connection with sexuality or pathology, news reports inhibit efforts to normalize nursing. Our findings suggest that because of journalism’s role in framing public discourse, a more frank, frequent and open use of the word nipple might better serve the needs of maternal–infant health.

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The year 2014 might easily have been named the “year of the nipple” in the United States. Released in December 2014, Lina Esco’s film *Free the Nipple* advocated for the de-criminalization of female breast exposure, highlighted gender inequities for exposure laws, and inspired numerous demonstrations by celebrities and everyday women wishing to destigmatize a body part shared by all genders. One of the more clever online protests used a free-standing image of a male nipple that could be “pasted” over a woman’s image online in an effort to expose the gendered nature of body shaming.

At the same time, controversies about a particular type of exposure, public breastfeeding, continued to erupt around the US, even though most states legally protect a woman’s right to do so (Jessica Samakow 2014). Few health recommendations are endorsed with such vigor as breastfeeding for its benefits to maternal and infant health, yet policy details remain devilish and inspire news stories on such topics as accommodations for nursing women at work, subsidies for breast-pump equipment, and the sanctimonious “Mommy Wars.” Here again, social media users playfully interrogated patriarchal admonitions to “cover up” by putting crocheted hats that looked just like breasts with bared nipples on the heads of nursing babies.

This project investigated the way these two related topics, nipple exposure and public breastfeeding, were covered in everyday journalistic discourse in American newspapers.

While nipple exposure is often minimal during breastfeeding, the act does require them to be used and displayed however briefly. Even when not overtly displayed, a nursing mother's nipples cannot be forgotten or ignored. Nipples, therefore, are inextricably tied to the taboo against public breastfeeding, and this intersection of taboo, discursive discipline, and linguistic construction invites analysis. Such an exploration involves consideration of public discourse about breastfeeding and health and women's bodies generally. The word "nipple," and the stigma surrounding the word and what it represents, seem key to this exploration, therefore it is necessary to examine the way language supports social taboo. It is not considered a profane word, and so it does appear in news, but how, where, and in what kind of stories? The contextualization of this word in news can reveal much about the status of women generally. Finally, it seems fitting to subject news discourse about breastfeeding to critique, not only from a feminist perspective but from one of public health and the ethical standards claimed by journalists.

Theoretical foundation

One of the earliest and most important contributions of feminist theory was its focus on the body in society (Simone de Beauvoir 1949; Judith Butler 1988; Elizabeth A. Grosz 1994; Kate Millett 1971). Everyone has a body, but those of marginalized people, whether female, queer, or non-white, are subjected to shaming, problematizing, and regulation. In the existing patriarchal system, a woman's value is tied to her body, whether for the heteronormative gaze or its reproductive function (Susan Bordo 1993; Jana Sawicki 1991; Angela Trethewey 1999). As they pursue equality in the public sphere, women face what Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1995) labeled "double binds," rhetorical strategies that keep them in their place. For instance, if they are sexy, they are said to be stupid; if they speak up about sex they are sluts, if they remain silent they are repressed; if they are professionally successful they must be maternal failures, and so on.

Only women's bodies can nourish an infant, and so this maternal activity is also central to feminist inquiry. The discourse of breastfeeding has attracted research from a variety of perspectives including public health, psychology, and rhetoric (Paula Bylaska-Davies 2015; Melanie A. Wakefield, Barbara Loken, and Robert C. Hornik 2010). Such discourse is part of a larger mediated world of representations of women, which have tended to support and reproduce patriarchy. The proposition that news is a social construction has been fruitful for media scholars for the way it has encouraged inquiry into news practice and the way ideology is embedded into everyday narratives (Robert M. Entman 1993; Gaye Tuchman 1978). Because journalism purports to present the news audience with "just the facts," it is imbued with authority, even while it reinforces the interests of those in power (Eran N. Ben-Porath 2009; Entman 1993).

Breastfeeding in the media

Breastfeeding is newsworthy as a public health issue but also because it highlights cultural tensions about nature and sexuality (Glenda Wall 2001). The topic can be approached as one with legitimate health concerns and headline-generating sex appeal.

Researchers have focused on women's magazines as a key source for women seeking health information about breastfeeding (Katherine A. Foss and Brian G. Southwell 2006;

Dorothy Warner and J. Drew Procaccino 2004). Studies of breastfeeding in media have found coverage to be generally heteronormative and positive, encouraging women that “breast is best,” for the baby and for the mother (Leah Frerichs, Julie L. Andsager, Shelly Campo, Mary Aquilino, and Carolyn Stewart Dyer 2006). Likewise, breastfeeding has been the focus of considerable feminist scholarly attention that ranges from the ideological and political implications of breastfeeding (Alison Bartlett 2005; Linda M. Blum 1999; Sonja Boon and Beth Pentney 2015) to the relationship between feminism and breastfeeding (Pam Carter 1995; Deborah Gorham and Florence Kellner Andrews 1990; Bernice Hausman 2004; Cindy Stearns 1999). Media campaigns have been used successfully by health education planners to promote breastfeeding at the community level, but breastfeeding in public as a matter of health, convenience, or liberty gets less coverage than social and partner support (Frerichs et al. 2006).

The US Right to Breast-feed Act in 2000 ensured that women are no longer banned from breastfeeding on federal and public property (Donia Mounsef 2005). But the sexualization of breasts and the shame and embarrassment associated with exposing breasts in public places (Alison Bartlett 2002; Carter 1995) prompted Stearns (1999, 322) to write that “the actual labor of breastfeeding is increased because women must constantly negotiate and manage the act of breastfeeding in every sector of society—in public and in the home.” As a result, the breastfeeding women she talked to did their best to achieve invisibility often at significant cost (Stearns 1999).

Blum (1999) and Carter (1995) studied the historical and social constructions within which women’s experiences are framed, and found that a woman’s naked breast raised questions about indecency. According to Jack Newman and Teresa Pitman (2006), breastfeeding mothers in the print media are often portrayed as “brazen harlot” while formula feeding mothers are shown as “innocent convent girl” (31). Research suggests that many Americans believe breastfeeding in a public place, or even presented in the context of television programming, is inappropriate and unacceptable (Bartlett 2002; Wendy C. Budin 2011). Public support for breastfeeding is hindered by its cultural sexualization, and can vary by region according to religious standards (Bylaska-Davies 2015; Urmeka T. Jefferson 2014).

Feminist scholars have noted that discourses of female-body regulation are heteronormative, and that breasts in contemporary Western culture are required to be sexual within this heteronormative framework, and women are expected to manage the scrutiny of their breasts by maintaining an appropriate balance between attractiveness and respectability (Blum 1999; Carter 1995; Wall 2001). Breasts are important expressions of gender and this expression relies on both behavior and the appearance of the performer as male or female (Raine Dozier 2005).

Discursive discipline

Feminist scholarship calls attention to the way language has historically objectified and reduced women to not just their bodies but their parts; their derrieres, thighs, waists, and breasts (de Beauvoir 1949; Millett 1971; Stearns 1999). News tends to reproduce patriarchal norms through a variety of framing practices including the protest paradigm (marginalizing dissent) and symbolic annihilation (ignoring, dismissing, and otherwise diminishing certain classes of people) (Joseph Man Chan and Chi-Chuan Lee 1984; Tuchman 1978; Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Walker Benet 1978) and narrative practices favor conflict

such as the so-called “Mommy Wars,” the “battle of the sexes,” and other binaries that normalize stereotypes (Gina M. Chen 2013; Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Jennifer T. Aberle, Jennifer L. Krafchick, and Achley M. Harvey 2008).

One famous and well-studied example of the way a woman’s body is reduced and problematized in media came in 2004 when viewers of the Super Bowl saw Janet Jackson’s pierced nipple when fellow performer Justin Timberlake pulled off part of her clothing (Shannon L. Holland 2009). The episode became known as “nipplegate,” and gave rise to the phrase “wardrobe malfunction” (Mounsef 2005). The outrage that followed centered on the exposure of Jackson’s breast, with most coverage focusing on Jackson’s highly sexualized persona as a sign of her innate deviance and absolving Timberlake from responsibility (Holland 2009). Jackson was depicted as an anarchic, hypersexual black female; a Jezebel symbolized by the image of the “offending breast”; and the split-second incident as a broadcasting indecency issue rather than an accident to be pitied (Richard Brand 2004; Meredith Levande 2008; Mark Rahner 2004).

As Iris Marion Young (1990) has argued, breasts are assumed to be inherently subversive. Troubling the boundaries between motherhood and sexuality, they disrupt conventional understandings of public and private, self and other, subject and object (Boon and Pentney 2015). The way the mere mention of public breastfeeding inspires concern is indicative of the deep anxiety surrounding breasts in a patriarchal society (Carter 1995). Researchers use the term “socially mediated publicness” to describe the tension over when it is ok to display a breast; it’s not up to an individual woman (Nancy K. Baym and danah boyd 2012; Boon and Pentney 2015). Even the caring professions are affected by these norms. For instance, Jennifer M. C. Torres (2015) found that payment arrangements for doulas and breastfeeding consultants were problematized because caring and nurturing are considered intimate, feminine, and natural—not subject to economic valuation.

Critics use the term male gaze to discuss the way Western culture considers a woman’s body. It is something to be controlled and displayed for the pleasure of another, not of the woman herself (John Berger 1972; Bordo 1993; Laura Mulvey 1975). Michel Foucault (1979) pointed out the way the gaze imposes identities on bodies that have little or no agency (Geoff Danaher, Tony Shirato, and Jen Webb 2012). Yet it is the male gaze that sexualizes the breast (Bonnie Moradi and Yu-Ping Huang 2008) and the sexualized gaze, reductionism, and objectification complicate news coverage of breastfeeding. In recent years, some feminists have challenged the gaze, baring their breasts as a form of political protest. Boon and Pentney (2015) and Meredith Nash (2014) examined women’s breastfeeding selfies and argued that such images move the boundaries of agency and produce resistant communities.

Health coverage of breastfeeding hails its benefits for babies and their mothers, but not all coverage is positive. An analysis of British media found the subject problematized by sore nipples, leaking breasts, and the “out of control body” (Lesley Henderson, Jenny Kitzinger, and Josephine Green 2000). Generally, research has found a tendency to view breastfeeding as being “dirty” and akin to a sexual act (Budin 2011; Bernard Ineichen, Mary Pierce, and Ross Lawrenson 1997; Antonia M. Nelson 2009). As a result, many mothers, regardless of age, report pressure from significant others not to breastfeed (Lisa Dyson, Josephine M. Green, Mary J. Renfrew, Brian McMillan, and Mike Woolridge 2010). Katherine A. Foss (2013) studied fifty-three fictional television breastfeeding representations, ranging in genre and audience, from *Beavis and Butthead* (1992–2011) to *Criminal Minds* (2005–2017), and showed that while breastfeeding depictions are generally positive, they were limited in scope to educated,

older, Caucasian women breastfeeding newborns. Her study also found that extended breastfeeding and nursing in public were conveyed as socially unacceptable, making other characters uncomfortable, often within the same storylines that sexualized breasts. It is a classic “double bind,” as theorized by Jamieson (1995), because women are expected to be good mothers and breastfeed, but they are punished by norms that expect them to cover up.

In short, media representations of the breast parallel the Madonna–whore dualism of the feminine experience. A woman’s breasts are OK to look at but simultaneously NOT OK for her to display for her pleasure. The breast is good when it’s maternal, enjoyable when viewed by men, but problematic if displayed for a woman’s own enjoyment (Rhonda Shaw 2004; Marilyn Yalom 1998).

Powerful words

Studies of the way journalism constructs reality call attention to the way story selection, word choice, and source-relationships perpetuate the ideologies of the status quo, with patriarchy an overarching ideology that subsumes culture (Millett 1971; Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick 1999; Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet 1978). More to the point for this project, news accounts have been implicated as a factor influencing infant feeding and numerous other health behaviors (Wakefield, Loken, and Hornik 2010).

Framing theory, a “bridging concept,” in Stephen Reese’s terms, builds upon this foundation of constructivism in ways that carefully examine the choices made by media producers in their production of messages (Entman 1993; Stephen D. Reese 2007). The protest paradigm, for instance, which posits that news organizations marginalize dissent, is a type of frame relevant for studying activists who wish to legitimize women’s bodies (Chan and Lee 1984). Framing analyses of news stories reveal how the use of word choice and even punctuation can alter a subject’s credibility (Erving Goffman 1986).

Word choice, however, is one of the most important means by which reality is framed in news, which is generally expected to be written for “polite” company. This means that certain words, usually those representing the body or its functions, are taboo. While Sigmund Freud (1918) attended to the role of taboo in social life from his unique (and today, less accepted) perspective, it was Mary Douglas (1966) who conceived of taboo as a social impurity, and a set of codes maintained from above. “The taboo-maintained rules,” she wrote (xiii) “will be as repressive as the leading members of the society want them to be.” The taboo of public breastfeeding is a matter of public debate, but one of the words associated with it, “nipple,” remains a form of linguistic impurity.

Taboo words are disapproved of or restricted on both institutional and individual levels assuming that some harm will occur if a taboo word is spoken, though the nature of this harm has never really been made clear (Marjorie Heins 2007; Tony McEnery 2006). In everyday language, words like nipples, breast, and others associated with bodily functions like sex and excretion fall into the realm of taboo like swearing (Steven Pinker 2008). Taboo words are defined and sanctioned by institutions of power like religion and media (Timothy Jay 2009).

Taboo words are invested with power, and so become sites of contention for groups that are affected by their use. Keeping taboo words marginalized is what keeps them dangerous. Cultural scholars use the term re-appropriation or reclamation to describe the process by which groups reclaim terms or artifacts that were previously used to disparage that group

(Adam M. Croom 2011; Helene A. Shugart 1997). Re-appropriation de-mystifies a word; it is the phenomenon whereby a stigmatized group revalues an externally imposed negative label by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label (Adam D. Galinsky, Kurt Hugenberg, Carla Groom, and Galen Bodenhausen 2003). This is an important way to remove stigma, which as Erving Goffman wrote, is an attribute that discredits and reduces the person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (1963, 3).

The word “queer” is a case in point. The word was rarely used before the eighteenth century, but its origins lay in it being used to describe something that was odd, peculiar, or strange (Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner 1995). It later became slang for homosexual and a slur for homophobic abuse (Annamarie Jagose 1996). When activists decided to declare “We’re here, we’re queer, get over it,” the word lost its power to offend. This recent intervention that now places “queer” into polite academic discourses suggests that traditional models have been ruptured (Jagose 1996). Another example involves the Chinese word *tongzhi*, or “comrade,” which was appropriated by gay rights activists in Hong Kong to refer to members of sexual minorities. It now has positive connotations of respect, equality, and resistance (Andrew D. Wong 2005).

The word “nipple” is not considered a swear word, but like its subject, has taboo properties. Efforts to de-mystify this part of a woman’s body seem tied to reclaiming use of the very word.

Summary and significance

The discourse of breastfeeding has attracted considerable study in terms of public health and the rhetoric of women’s bodies. Little of this scholarship, however, has contended with the body part that is taboo, the nipple—a paradox, given that its exposure seems to be part of what makes public breastfeeding so controversial. The Madonna–whore dualism of breastfeeding coverage, the way media have represented women’s bodies as problematic, and the cultural power of taboo words all point to the importance of word choice in news and its perpetuation of the idea that women’s bodies must be controlled. If women’s bodies are to be legitimized then it follows that the journalistic use of the taboo word “nipple” warrants careful study. Our research question, therefore, is posed as follows: *How do newspaper journalists frame the issue of breastfeeding and nipple exposure?* Framing studies can and have used quantitative content analysis with big data, but for a more nuanced examination of language use, words in context, and ideological concerns, qualitative textual analysis is a more suitable choice.

Methodology

This critical exploration of the linguistic strategies used to represent women’s bodies in news discourse employs qualitative textual analysis (David L. Altheide 1996; Teun A. van Dijk 1988). While big data approaches might be useful for finding large trends in the way words are used in context, critical discourse analysis allows for a finer-grained examination of language and the way words are used in context. Multi-modal analysis, which also considers words in conjunction with images, enables a holistic understanding of a particular topic (Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen 2001). Conceiving of language as a construction, one which involves human choices of how to employ particular words and facts, enables the second

Table 1. Preliminary search terms.

Lactation	Breastfeed	Breast Pump
Breastfeeding	Wardrobe Malfunction	Breast-Milk
Free The Nipple	Nude+Breast	Topless
Bustline	Nip Slip	Bust+Breast
Boobie	Nipple	La Leche
Mammary	Nipple-Piercing	Bosom+Breast

Table 2. Project corpus.

Newspaper	Articles from July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2015 containing key words			
	Breast	Breastfeed*ing	Nipple	Nip Slip (or Nip-Slip)
<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	15	15	6	2
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	30	12	10	0
<i>Detroit Free Press</i>	32	8	7	0
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	22	20	5	1
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	70	19	21	0
<i>New York Daily News</i>	34	54	42	6
<i>New York Times</i>	732	70	74	0
<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>	45	6	21	6
<i>Dallas Morning News</i>	39	7	4	0
<i>Washington Post</i>	787	219	73	2
Total: 2,516	1,806	430	263	17

part of this project, its feminist critique (Butler 1988; Price and Shildrick 1999; Karen Ross 2013; Karen Ross and Cynthia Carter 2011).

Method

We developed this project around a corpus composed of word-based news stories. We started with a list of the top-ten local newspaper organizations in the United States based on Sunday circulation as measured by the *Audit Bureau of Circulation*.¹ In contrast to the top newspapers based on *daily* circulation, this list had two advantages, namely a wider geographical range and more newspapers devoted to local coverage, which allowed us to cast as wide a net as possible for stories about breastfeeding controversies around the US.

We developed a list of key words about breasts, breastfeeding, and nipples (see Table 1) and used this list to download stories from each of the newspapers. In some cases, we subscribed to the newspaper in order to access its full coverage; in other cases, we were able to download stories based on the key words using Lexis Nexis. Some of the key words delivered an unwieldy number of stories unrelated to the topic at hand (“bust” for instance, delivered many economic stories from the oil-industry covered by the *Houston Chronicle*) and so some key words were placed in combination with the word “breast.” Nearly all stories pulled for the study were read and analyzed; the only ones disregarded used the key words in non-human contexts, i.e., chicken breasts in recipes or “bosom” used in the context of a forest.

After this first round of analysis the corpus was reduced to articles pertaining to four key words relevant to the research question: breasts, breastfeeding (searched as breastfeed), nipple, and nip slip (or its hyphenated form). Table 2 presents the full corpus of 2,516 articles and the totals from each source based on these four key words.

All three authors participated in downloading the articles and their textual analysis. When photographs accompanied stories (often from online presentations) they were included in the analysis. We used an open-coding system and met frequently to discuss our findings, using an iterative system that gradually distilled the themes we observed. Every article was read with an eye for the contextualization of the word nipple and the characterization of women's bodies. Eventually four themes about breasts and nipples emerged: shameful and naughty; entertaining; nourishing; and sick (usually cancerous). We also noticed a somewhat predictable set of labels for stories about male nipples; they were either embedded in news stories about injuries or jokes, and sometimes these narratives overlapped. Finally, we made note of articles that fell outside the four main themes, which, while few in number, were usually opinion-based columns or blog posts in opposition to the conventional frames. These few counter-hegemonic texts underscored the strength of the larger themes identified.

Findings

Hundreds of stories in the corpus focused on breast cancer, its survivors, medical treatments, and related fundraising efforts. Overall, the non-cancer stories are striking for their consistent presentation of women's bodies as problematic objects that must be carefully regulated and exist for the pleasure or services of others. Stories about breast cancer that contained the word nipple usually reported on reconstruction, that is, ways for a new breast to regain its visual appeal. Otherwise the word "nipple" in news was nearly always tabloid fodder as an entertaining body for someone else's gaze—or in service to babies as the ultimate source of nourishment.

Nipples are naughty

When women show their bodies, especially their nipples, they are shamed and reprimanded for their naughtiness, even when they are making a political statement. For example, in late 2014, the outspoken comedian Chelsea Handler posted pictures of herself half naked riding on horseback (a political parody of a similar news image of Russian President Vladimir Putin) to challenge the unequal and sexist regulations about women's bodies on social media. The tabloid *New York Daily News* (October 31, 2014) reported that "her latest stunt combined two of her favorite pastimes: public nudity and the Russian strongman." The article continued, "She's also flouted her body in exhibitionist fashion." Note the use of the word "stunt," which diminishes the political act, and the way the word "flouted" connotes a sort of petulance instead of serious protest. Similarly, the same paper's coverage (October 9, 2014) of actress Anne Hathaway's 2013 nipple revealing Oscar dress used the word "now-infamous" and led to the creation of a Twitter account called "Hathawaynipple."

Female celebrities' exposure of nipples was depicted as shocking, but with repetition that belied actual shock. Again, Miley Cyrus was a popular topic for such umbrage. The *Chicago Tribune* (June 9, 2015) reported on a fashion shoot in which she was dressed "appropriately," but that "appropriately" in Cyrus' case meant she wore brightly colored makeup that drew attention to her nipples. The tabloid *New York Daily News* (September 7, 2015) took care to describe another outfit: "Cyrus, 21, opted to party topless, only covering her nipples with ice cream cone shaped pasties ... while New York Fashion Week is filled with head-turning

clothing creations, Miley Cyrus has managed to outshine even the most bizarre of runway looks.”

When the paparazzi captured a photograph of pop star Lady Gaga’s nipple when she went out for a pizza, multiple captions (i.e., on *The Atlanta Journal Constitution’s* free site, AJC.com, June 24, 2015) shouted that she “suffered” a nip-slip. Linda Stasi from the *New York Daily News* (November 4, 2014) discussed what seem to be intentional “nip-slips” with the words asking how stars can “suffer’ wardrobe malfunctions with \$20 K couture?” and asked “... can anyone ever forget the tragic nipple slip by Nancy Grace on ‘Dancing with the Stars’? No. Never ... The well-placed nipple slip in fact has become so big among A-listers that celebrity events look like La Leche League meetings” She and other fashion writers seemed oblivious to the ironic possibility that their coverage of such exposures might be the same reason starlets would perpetuate their own wardrobe malfunctions, writing with a consistent tone of admonishment, as with this *Houston Chronicle* (February 23, 2015) fashion critic’s plea to (pop music star) J-Lo in advance of a red carpet appearance: “... we have one simple wish: no nipple slip, please.”

One of the non-tabloid style news stories represented in the corpus covered complaints against social media sites for what activists consider hypocritical policies about the display of women’s bodies on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Several newspapers, for instance, covered Facebook’s clarification of its community standards. *The New York Times* (March 16, 2015) quoted the statement, explaining that the site restricts some images of female breasts if the nipple shows, but Facebook allows “women actively engaged in breast-feeding or showing breasts with post-mastectomy scarring.” Some activists playfully tweaked the policies by posting images Photo-Shopped with male nipples, proving the point of feminist protesters because while male nipples looked the same, they are evidently acceptable. Also in the realm of conventional news, the *Detroit Free Press* (February 12, 2015) reported on the “yoga pants” law proposed by a Montana legislator who wanted to expand the state’s current definition of indecent exposure to include garments that make it appear the wearer is exposing “buttocks, genitals, pelvis or female nipple.”

When nipples were not discussed in terms of shame or naughtiness, they were sick or in need of reconstruction after cancer surgery. *The New York Times*, for instance, published several articles on nipple reconstruction or cosmetic repairs. “A Tattoo That Completes a New Breast” (June 2, 2014) describes “... a unique specialty in nipple tattoos for women who have undergone treatment for breast cancer.” This was followed by other articles like “Tattoo Therapy After Breast Cancer” (June 3, 2014), which pointed out the taboo nature of the word under study: “Nobody really talks about the areola and nipple area, but it’s so important”

When men’s nipples were covered in news, they were mostly as jokes or were related to injuries. For instance, the *New York Daily News* (October 6, 2014) detailed the way a toddler lost a nipple after an incident with a police stun grenade. A humorous (though also injurious) example came from the final season of the retro cable TV series *Mad Men*, when a deranged character presented a co-worker with his severed nipple in a box. “We’ll miss that nipple,” quipped a writer with the *New York Daily News* (May 13, 2015). Finally, the word appeared a handful of times in the corpus in non-human contexts, i.e., latex nipples on formula bottles. This use of the word was surprisingly rare—even rarer than discussions of male nipples.

The few exceptions to the rule of this theme usually took the form of commentary from opinion writers, such as Ted Rall from the *Los Angeles Times* (April 27, 2015), who argued in favor of a proposal to allow nude bathing at Venice Beach: “It’s time that we declared war

against our infantile societal obsessions with nudity, especially female nudity.” Only a literal handful of articles from the corpus took such a tone when written by journalists. Coverage of the “Free the Nipple” campaign situated the call for bodily autonomy by women as the work of protesters (and therefore marginalized). Women from the entertainment industry who attempted to declare bodily freedom were similarly marginalized. In an article about Instagram’s policies, *Los Angeles Times* writer Nardine Saad used puritanical language to admonish the entertainer who cancelled her Instagram account, calling her “The sharp-tongued ‘Chelsea Lately’; host, who is *wont* to show off her bare breasts ...” (italics added).

Breasts are entertaining

The newspapers chosen for this study are all mainstream news products, so the extent to which women’s bodies are discussed in terms of their entertainment value may seem surprising. *The New York Daily News* (December 21, 2014) for instance, trumpeted, “For a brief moment in time, the pelvis managed to beat out the butt and the nipple for the most over-exposed body part in Hollywood.” Several papers (including the *Detroit Free Press*, January 22, 2015) reported on the decision by British tabloids to stop, and then resume publishing photos of bare-breasted women on “page three.” *The New York Daily News* (May 25, 2015) also provided titillation cloaked in the legitimacy of a review of the TV Show *Game of Thrones* with the observation, “Tyene flashes a nipple at him because I guess the nipple quota was low in this episode.” The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* free site AJC.com highlighted rapper Iggy Azelea’s “admission” that she had breast augmentation (March 24, 2015).

The size of a woman’s breasts was often a topic for tabloid coverage. Actresses who had their breasts enlarged were presented as proud and powerful for speaking out about surgery that essentially made their body more pleasing to the gaze of others. Interestingly, breast size was occasionally celebrated by tying it to breastfeeding, as nursing mothers were quoted as being happy about the size of their breasts. *The Washington Post*, one of the most prolific newspapers regarding breastfeeding, made a note that the *Glamour* magazine photos of Olivia Wilde breastfeeding her son included images of her “flawless, unstretchmarked breast” (August 7, 2014). The *Los Angeles Times* (December 3, 2014) similarly connected breastfeeding to beauty in an article about actress and new mother Eva Mendes:

Mendes, who looked healthy and curvy in a red dress, said that although she’s not planning to “bounce back” immediately, body-wise, she’s been making good choices regarding food and has been breastfeeding. “I’ve always heard it—it really does actually help shrink your uterus back to size. I know it’s a weird thing to say.”

Note the way a woman who was described as appropriately “curvy,” healthy, and providing for her baby, felt it necessary to say that talking about her uterus was “weird.” The conservative *Dallas Morning News* provided a notable exception to breasts as entertainment with its thoughtful treatment of very young transgender people (June 7, 2015) though this still might be considered a pathological treatment since their situation was framed, at least in part, with pity.

Most of the time, however, when non-cancerous breasts were newsworthy, it was because they were large and attached to a celebrity. Discussions of women’s bodies consistently focused on their visual value. A *Los Angeles Times* (November 7, 2014) article about Keira Knightly’s decision to pose without a shirt stressed her desire to push back against photo manipulation: “I said: ‘OK, I’m fine doing the topless shot so long as you don’t make them

any bigger or retouch.’ Because it does feel important to say it really doesn’t matter what shape you are,” the actor said. Again this reflects here another sort of double bind in which women are expected to not care about their shape while talking about it endlessly.

Breastfeeding is ... complicated

News stories about breastfeeding tend to represent one of three topics: its health benefits; its difficulties for women who’ve had cancer or other illnesses; or controversies when women try to breastfeed in public. Several newspapers in the sample (such as the *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 2015) covered the proposal by US Representative Tammy Duckworth that would require medium and large US airports to designate spaces in each terminal where mothers can breastfeed. Those articles usually included a discussion about breastfeeding in bathrooms. The bathroom option was also the subject of an internet meme which according to AJC.com (March 13, 2015) went viral: “Breast-feeding in the bathroom.” The meme shows side-by-side photos; with a woman breastfeeding a baby while sitting on a toilet on the left—and on the right, a man sitting on the toilet while eating pasta—to highlight the ridiculous expectations that babies should have their meal in the toilet. Israeli photographer Tamar Shugert has said she was inspired to create the photo after hearing from friends that they had been asked to leave public spaces to breastfeed.

News editorials supported breastfeeding and public breastfeeding protections. The *Washington Post* (February 6, 2015) asked, for instance, “Are Virginia lawmakers finally ready to stop being boobs?” and focused on how “... Virginia is one of only three states in the nation where public breast-feeding is not protected by law.” The article ended with a tongue in cheek, “Welcome to the twenty-first century, Virginia.”

Many stories exalted breastfeeding as natural and beautiful, though within clearly identifiable boundaries. Photos that accompanied the breastfeeding articles often employed soft lighting and focus, romanticizing the situation. The women in the photographs tended to be white, and when they were beautiful, they garnered even more attention. Actress Olivia Wilde’s decision to pose for *Glamour* magazine while breastfeeding was celebrated at first, then criticized for stoking the fires of the “Mommy Wars.” A blogger for San Jose’s *The Mercury News* complained (August 19, 2014), “Is it too much to ask that mothers who bottle-feed—by necessity or choice—are given the same kind of adoration as gorgeous, breast-feeding celebrities? We love our kids too, you know.” Another *Mercury News* column (August 18, 2014) invoked the taboo word: “... a strategically covered nipple, presents an unrealistic fantasy image of a practice that isn’t always easy for a lot of women.”

Some mainstream news articles covered breastfeeding as difficult, but items that complained or joked about it came from columnists and bloggers, and discourse about breastfeeding as a form of agency was usually the subject of first-person blogs or columns carried by newspapers. A guest editorial in *The Washington Post* (March 16, 2015), for example, joked about a garment she used to cover her body when breastfeeding in public—the “shame apron”—and addressed the tensions surrounding public breastfeeding head on, by asserting her right to do so while acknowledging that those who tried to shame her might have benign motives to protect young people from sexual imagery. Another woman, writing for the *Chicago Tribune* (October 15, 2014), similarly called for individual agency and mutual respect by quoting Rodney King to ask, “Can’t we all get along?”

The most significant finding on breastfeeding comes in the form of negation, and the absence of the word “nipple.” Out of 430 articles about breastfeeding, only four used the word “nipple” and in each case the word is in the context of sickness or injury, never in a healthy or pleasant context. Given that nipple exposure is at least part of what makes public breastfeeding controversial, one might expect that the word would appear once in a while—but even in stories about controversies involving women breastfeeding in public places, the word does not appear in news. The photographs accompanying stories about breastfeeding do not show nipples, but instead portray women’s chests with carefully placed baby heads, often in softly lit, gauzy styles that perpetuate romantic views of motherhood.

Summary

We found differences in the way newspapers covered the issues—in terms of quantity and style. For instance, *The Washington Post* had a high number of articles with the key words, and many of those were editorials and blogs by women discussing their own experiences. The *New York Daily News*, as expected, had a high number of “nip-slip” tabloid stories about celebrity exposures. *The New York Times* had a considerable amount of straightforward, health-oriented coverage. The *Los Angeles Times* carried many stories about nudity and breasts, many of which perpetuated the objectification of women’s bodies—but also had some of the most straightforward coverage on the subject.

Discussion

At its heart, news framing analysis is about journalistic choices about topics, sources, and words. Those choices have impact, and so this project draws from the constructivist literature and ventures into territory less travelled; the corollary to linguistic construction which suggests that changing words can change perception. There is value in drawing attention to the way media have enculturated sexism, but more can be done by examining ways in which language can provide remedy.

This project drew upon more than two thousand articles about breasts, nipples, and breastfeeding, focusing most attention on the way two key words, breastfeeding and nipple, were presented in news. Breastfeeding tended to be presented in healthy, positive terms, occasionally to the point of being romanticized. Nipples were almost always problematic, either sick literally or perverted. “Nip slips” were reported as shocking, but so frequently as to parallel the shock that gambling might be taking place in Casablanca. Large breasts were assumed to be pleasing to the eye; no stories questioned the idea that women exist to be gazed upon, even stories about efforts to legitimize women’s nipples. The themes uncovered in this analysis closely align with the typology proposed by Tuchman regarding the symbolic annihilation of women generally. Nipples are absent from polite discussions of breastfeeding, shamed when displayed, and mocked when displayed by men. The only time they are presented in a straightforward way is when they are sick or injured.

The bifurcated pattern of the use of the word nipple—its absence from articles about breastfeeding, but proliferation in entertainment coverage—seems most significant for any discussion about body legitimation. The “Free the Nipple” campaign and similar efforts to de-sexualize this body part were covered with the usual counter-culture, protest paradigm that framed its advocates as rebellious outsiders. Miley Cyrus was covered as a “bad” girl

(over and over again) for “flaunting” her nipples on Instagram, on the red carpet, and other occasions, but the question she and her supporters raised—namely whether or not her body should be subjected to the sexual gaze—was never interrogated.

This apparent taboo in journalistic discourse is an impediment to women having bodily autonomy. As long as nipples are the stuff of tabloid coverage, they remain shameful, naughty, problematic, and valued primarily for the heteronormative male gaze. If a woman’s nipples are to be for her pleasure, under her control, and for the nourishment of her babies, then the word would need to be normalized and appear in discourses about breastfeeding and maternal–infant health. Professional journalists are in a position to foster this discursive shift, and could do so by altering the language they employ to cover breastfeeding stories. Using the word “nipple” frankly, indeed using it at all, in health care news, could provide linguistic support for women’s efforts to gain control over their own bodies. Clinicians and activists have long encouraged the frank use of words like vagina and penis to de-stigmatize natural human sexuality. De-stigmatizing the word “nipple” in public discourse can similarly serve to remove the shame from public breastfeeding.

Changing journalistic word choices is not unheard of, and in fact, there are recent precedents from journalism’s language guide, the *Associated Press Stylebook* (2017). In 2013, the Associated Press announced that writers should no longer use the phrase “illegal immigrant,” with this explanation:

... Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use illegal only to refer to an action, not a person: illegal immigration, but not illegal immigrant. Acceptable variations include living in or entering a country illegally or without legal permission. (Andrew Beaujon and Taylor Miller Thomas 2013)

AP managers explained that the organization was working to eliminate language that disparagingly labels human beings. Also that year, the *Associated Press Stylebook* was changed to reflect changing norms about gay marriage. Writers were instructed to use the terms husband and wife for all marriages, and not marginalize gay unions with terms like “same-sex-spouse” or partner (unless the story subjects used and requested such a title).

Constructivism teaches that language shapes our understanding of the world and within this paradigm exists the possibility for change. Words can be rendered powerful through taboo, and reclaimed and rendered commonplace. One of the first steps toward true equality for women must surely be in changing the way they and their bodies are talked about in news. Journalists tend to be pragmatic and perpetuate linguistic tropes, but if they are made aware that this particular trope works to the detriment of women and babies, they might be more likely to change their practices.

Conclusion

As with any discourse study, this project is limited by its corpus and the theoretical dimensions of the analysis. Nevertheless, the full year used for the sample and the centrality of the “Free the Nipple” campaign provided a useful set of materials for this inquiry. Moreover, the geographic spread of the newspaper list generated a wide variety of stories. The size of the corpus and strength of the themes located within it support the overall argument of this paper and, we assert, its larger critique. Subsequent studies using quantitative content analysis or big data techniques might take this inquiry further. Subsets within the corpus, such as free-websites (AJC.com) in comparison with printed products, or articles with images, offer possibilities for studying taboo in other mediated contexts. Further investigation into

the ways marginalized groups might work to reclaim language to their benefit might also serve both activists and scholars.

Women cannot be equal members of society if their value remains reduced to what their bodies can do for others. As long as nipples are said to “slip,” they are a problem. For breastfeeding to be common, accepted, and ordinary, the word “nipple” needs to be moved from the tabloids to the health pages. As long as journalistic discourse normalizes the notion that a woman’s body exists to be regulated by others, no part of them, not their breasts, their nipples, their hearts, or their minds, can be free.

Note

1. <http://www.auditbureau.org/>

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Mary Angela Bock PhD, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, is an assistant professor in the University of Texas at Austin School of Journalism. She is a former journalist turned academic with an interest in the representations and justice, photographic practice, and the relationship between words and images. E-mail: mary.bock@austin.utexas.edu

Paromita Pain a graduate from the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Southern California, is a doctoral candidate in the School of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin. Deeply interested in epistemological concerns raised by ideas of new institutionalism and cultural sociology, her work examines new media and the rise of citizen journalism through gendered lens. E-mail: paromita.pain@gmail.com

JhuCin Jhang is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on the issues faced by LGBTQ individuals and their families using qualitative methods through a critical lens. E-mail: ritajhang@utexas.edu

ORCID

JhuCin Jhang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7068-379X>

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